Hi-fi Choice
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IN-DEPTH FOCAL ARIA 926 FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKER £1799

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THE SPIRIT OF SOUND

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**Flax works**

The secret's in the ingredients says **David Price**, who finds the Aria 926 floorstanding loudspeaker a most appetising listen.

Why is it that some steaks seem like sun-dried cardboard, while others are dripping with flavour? It's not that difficult a question to answer, is it? The secret food ingredient is the best quality, prepared in a skillful way that doesn't hide the natural goodness. And so is the one that goes for loudspeakers too – no one ever made a great one with sub-par drive units and cabinets that weren't fit for purpose. But just like steak, a good speaker can be raised if it isn't cooked properly, or is badly soldered. Of course, if it doesn't use the right raw materials in the first place, it can never be right.

That's why Focal's announcement that it is using a different cone material in its new Aria 926 speaker is more significant than you might first think. This French company has spent much time looking into different cone materials over the years, and has used markedly different formulations to many of its rivals as far back as the eighties. The material that a cone is made from is critical, as it's the contact point between the speaker and the air it is to move. It affects the transient response of the driver (the ability to accelerate quickly to catch the leading edge of a note), its rigidity (the cone needs to behave like a piston, moving in and out without flex) and the response or lack thereof (the cone needs to be well damped so the radiation doesn't colour the sound).

Focal has traditionally used polyglass for its lower-end designs and vinyl sandwich cones for its premium Electra and Diosa ranges. First launched back in 1985, the former comprised a cellulose pulp cone for good damping, together with a layer of glass microspheres in order to increase the rigidity. But the 900 Aria showcases a new recipe – the French speaker specialist has cooked up a sandwich of glass fibre, a special type of textile fibre called flax and glass fibre again. Flax is said to have been around since the fourth century BC, and used by the Egyptians as a protective cloth for mummies, no less. As luck would have it, France is the main cultivator in Europe of flax fibre – principally in Flanders, Picardy, Normandy and the Pas-de-Calais region – and it is thought to be among the very best in the world. The use of flax brings two major changes: a clear and crisp to the upper register, whilst the midrange and bass drivers are driven from an option and a glass top, this new loudspeaker presents itself well visually – as well as feeling rather classier than previous mid-price Focals. Although not as conservative as a Spendor ABR, for example, they're a lot more grown up and

The new cone material gives a smoother and more subtle sound less obviously 'woofed' than before. The finish is very good, if not quite super-audio, meaning these boxes will look classy wherever they are.

Inside the shell’s a combination of 18mm and 24mm high-density fibreboard, with non-parallel sides and careful bracing. The cabinets are fitted with a single bottom-mounted reflex port, and this works correctly when the supplied aluminium grilles are fitted. Inside, the
midrange and treble sections have their own sealed enclosures with non-parallel walls to minimise internal standing waves. Round the back, single-wired binding posts are to be found. Overall, the new Focal presents itself as a thoroughly modern and sophisticated speaker, and also proves easy to drive with amplifiers of fairly modest power – including tube designs.

Sound quality

The Focal family sound is generally very fast, sharp and engaging; these speakers go loud without compression and punch hard on transients, making them lively listeners. And the new 926 doesn’t lose any of these good things, but it seems to do everything with a little more class than you’d have got from the earlier 800 series. There’s a sense that the new cone material gives a smoother and more subtle sound, yet it’s no less detailed – indeed it’s quite the reverse. I find the 926 to be a fine advertisement for its maker’s new driver technology. Sounding as it does ‘all of a piece’ and really rather natural. Certainly it’s never soody – as some rivals can be – or dull. Instead, it strikes a considered balance that preserves all those key characteristics we know and love from Focal, yet seems to do things in a more nature and even-handed way than the company’s past offerings at this price point.

The result is a big, expansive and open-sounding box that’s smooth and detailed from bottom to top. Being a three-way, it feels like it has a lot to resolve, so when crunching crescendo arrives – such as that powerful electric guitar noodling by Bill Nelson in Be Bop Deluxe’s Modern Music – there’s no sense of the speaker sounding breathless and lapsing into stodginess. At the same time, those flux cones invest the midband with a transparent feel, meaning it is better able to show the differences between recording studios than many other similarly priced boxes. The Be Bop Deluxe disc sounds a little bright and bracing, whereas Isaac Hayes’ Star-recorded Shaft is a whole lot warmer and more sumptuous – it’s good to know the speakers aren’t adding too large a sonic huepette.

Totally the 926 is a real gentleman, then. Cafe Reggio’s, which is as beautifully rich analogue track, is every bit as warm as it should be, yet shines along nicely without the sense that the speaker is losing the rhythmic snap. Although a little softer sounding, those flux cones are just as fast at capturing the attack transitions of a snare drum rim shot or the dull pounding of the bass drum, and the result is an extremely enjoyable yet most unfatiguing listen. In absolute terms, there’s just a little bit of warmth in the upper bass, which is always an issue with larger floorstanders that aren’t fern from granite. It’s far from an unpleasant effect and indeed careful room placement minimises it further; but you’ll hear tighter bass guitar sounds from chunkier speakers further up the Focal range.

You might think that with a slightly sweeter midband sound, the metal tweeter will stick out a little more than with previous Focal boxes, but it proves enjoyably smooth. Age of Love’s ‘luminous single’ is an exquisite slice of trance/dance music, from the grey’s hazy days back in the nineties, and the 926s jump in with aplomb. At high volumes, this speaker is quite superb; distortion is so low that you can push it right up to the point that you flares start flattening, the Aria slamming out vast tracks of full, tuneful bass without the merest hint of complaint. Across the mid, the 926 is excellent – fast and poised and wonderfully engaging – and treble glints away with a lovely crisp yet smooth hi-hat sound.

The fact that all four drive units are matched up to one another so well makes for a very convincing stereo soundstage. Whether it is the epic rock of Genesis’ Los Enudos or the baroquely acoustic Aerial Boundaries by Michael Hedges, the Focals cope superbly for a sub £2,000 speaker system in the tricky job of reproducing the spatiality of the original recording. Of course, higher-end designs – and particularly panel speakers like Quad’s 2005 – do better, but the 926 is still very convincing. It seems to push forward beyond the planet of the speakers quite easily, but doesn’t ram the music down your throat. And it can hang instruments back very convincingly.

The finish is very good and the Arias will look classy wherever they are.
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**Q&A**

Raphael Triomphe
Home audio product manager, Focal

**DP:** Why did you decide to use flax in your new cone?

**RT:** A driver cone has to comply with three criteria — lightness in order to accelerate very quickly and then obtain a good sound definition, rigidity to minimise the distortion in the bass and finally good damping to obtain a neutral sound. Very quickly in the research, our engineers concluded that a mono material solution could not be used to reach the performance requested. So the composite solution in a sandwich construction was the only one to follow and flax as the core material was the ideal choice. It has anesthetic structural properties, being naturally light because the flax is very low, and equal to 1.34. The rigidity of flax is very high, indeed the tensile elongation of the flax is very low (0.3%) and the Young's modulus is similar to kevlar. Flax is made of 80% cellulose, which is great for damping. This technology allows us to manufacture different types of cone for the midrange/high and bass (stiff) units.

**Why was aluminium/magnesium chosen for the tweeter?**

Aluminium is a light material that provides good damping while the magnesium brings rigidity. This is three and a half times more rigid than titanium, the previous material used by Focal to make tweeter domes.

**What’s the thinking behind the styling of the 900 series?**

The ‘techno design’ is over. For Aria we wanted to get rid of all the unnecessary touches and create a highly desirable acoustic object. That’s why the driver screws have been covered by brushed metal rings and the front grille is now magnetic. Aria has been conceived as an elegant piece of home furnishing; simple, with great stature, quality materials and soft shapes, which will resist the passage of time. Few used glass on the upper face because it is a very resistant material, and it brings a nice contrast with the matt-like finish of the flax baffle.