Focal Kanta No.1

Celebrating its 40th anniversary, Focal continues to diversify and expand – its Kanta range now three-strong.

Review: Nick Tate Lab: Keith Howard

Sitting smack-bang in the middle of the company’s vast loudspeaker range, the Focal Kanta series is described as ‘a new vision for a premium speaker’, no less. Personally I’m not entirely convinced that this is so revolutionary, but the £6999 Kanta No.2 still makes a fine case for itself. It’s attractive, very well finished and sports some novel technologies. I also like its compactness, which will satisfy modern life’s growing need for serious sounding small boxes – just perfect for your compact riverside apartment, of course. The Kanta No.1 is the smallest in the range, its design trickled down from the £6999 No.2 (FHN Jan ’18) and £8999 N.3 floorstanders.

The Kanta No.1 is actually one of Focal’s most expensive standmounts, aside from the company’s truly esoteric and £8999 No.3 floorstanders.

Alas, I had to face the doors open in the Focal factory in Saint-Étienne, celebrating 40 years in 2019. Circuit” technologies, all developed to improve the behaviour and bass response of Focal speakers, have been incorporated into the Kanta No.1 via ‘Horn Loading’, both techniques improving the absorption of sound waves to reduce the resonant frequency of the tweeter. ‘Two and a half times lighter than titanium, but seven times more rigid, ‘beryllium is the only metal able to match glass’, he points out. Meanwhile the flare sandwhich coned mid/bass claims low mass, high rigidity and excellent damping. ‘It has our “Tuned Mass Damping” and “Neutral Inductance Circuit” technologies, all developed to improve the behaviour and bass extension of the driver.’ All drive units are custom-designed and made in the Focal factory in Saint-Étienne, celebrating 40 years in 2019.

I appreciated the smooth tone, good low-level detailing and fine tracking of dynamic accents offered by the Kanta No.1, even if there was little sense of boxiness to the presentation compared to that of a cost-no-object high-end design. And, if I was to be super critical, the bass was not as extended or as powerful as perhaps I had expected.

This speaker’s general smoothness and even and the treble detailed but refined. Here too, while the midband sounded appropriate and very smooth, I thought back to hearing this track on Focal speakers of yore, before the flare cone was introduced, and remembered how things could sound a tad glassy and hard. Not so here. As I already suggested, despite its couthness, this speaker doesn’t without much marketing into it isn’t.

The indie pop of Prefab Sprout’s “I’ll Tell The Cows Come Home” [Potter Songs Kitchenware Records kwcd 4] is by no measure an audiophile recording, and sounds quite dry. Yet the Kanta No.1 proved its ability to cut through the mush and show what’s really buried on that master tape.

This it does thanks combinations of a delicate and open-sounding tweeter, a well-executed crossover and that surprisingly capable flax mid/bass unit. It carried the texture of the backing keyboard beautifully, alongside the lively drum kit work and incidental harmonic playing. Hi-hat cymbals sounded realistic and metallic without grating, while singer Paddy MacLin’s voice had a real accuracy and timing to it. On some speakers, there are moments when his lead vocal is unendearing, but the Kanta No.1 carried the day with a consistent and seemingly reliable phase.

Focal Kanta No.1

Drivetrain

Nicolai Debard, Audio Home & High End Headphones Product Manager for Focal, says the Kanta series is more than just about snazzy paint jobs. It’s the first time any of the company’s loudspeakers have run the beryllium tweeter and flax mid/bass drivers together. ‘It represents the continuation of the innovations launched with Utopia, Evo and Sopra,’ he explains. ‘The new pure beryllium IAL 3 tweeter is used, combining our principles of “Infinite Acoustic Loading” and “Infinite Horn Loading”, both techniques improving the absorption of sound waves to reduce the resonant frequency of the tweeter. Two and a half times lighter than titanium, but seven times more rigid, ‘beryllium is the only metal able to match glass’, he points out. Meanwhile the flare sandwich coned mid/bass claims low mass, high rigidity and excellent damping. ‘It has our “Tuned Mass Damping” and “Neutral Inductance Circuit” technologies, all developed to improve the behaviour and bass extension of the driver.’ All drive units are custom-designed and made in the Focal factory in Saint-Étienne, celebrating 40 years in 2019.

I appreciated the smooth tone, good low-level detailing and fine tracking of dynamic accents offered by the Kanta No.1, even if there was little sense of boxiness to the presentation compared to that of a cost-no-object high-end design. And, if I was to be super critical, the bass was not as extended or as powerful as perhaps I had expected.

This speaker’s general smoothness and even and the treble detailed but refined. Here too, while the midband sounded appropriate and very smooth, I thought back to hearing this track on Focal speakers of yore, before the flare cone was introduced, and remembered how things could sound a tad glassy and hard. Not so here. As I already suggested, despite its couthness, this speaker doesn’t without much marketing into it isn’t.

The indie pop of Prefab Sprout’s “I’ll Tell The Cows Come Home” [Potter Songs Kitchenware Records kwcd 4] is by no measure an audiophile recording, and sounds quite dry. Yet the Kanta No.1 proved its ability to cut through the mush and show what’s really buried on that master tape.

This it does thanks combinations of a delicate and open-sounding tweeter, a well-executed crossover and that surprisingly capable flax mid/bass unit. It carried the texture of the backing keyboard beautifully, alongside the lively drum kit work and incidental harmonic playing. Hi-hat cymbals sounded realistic and metallic without grating, while singer Paddy MacLin’s voice had a real accuracy and timing to it. On some speakers, there are moments when his lead vocal is unendearing, but the Kanta No.1 carried the day with a consistent and seemingly reliable phase.

PERFECT TIME

This track relies somewhat on the energetic cymbal work to give it rhythmic impetus, and Focal’s new standmount communicated this really rather well. There’s a slight feel to the way it goes about making music – a certain spring in its step. It’s all the more enjoyable on heavier, best-driven programme material such as Madonna’s ‘Holiday’ [Madonna; Sire 9 23867-2]. This is a stick production from Jellybean Benitez and this speaker unwraps it with no hardness to the vocals that, with lesser drivers, have been known to sound brittle.

Jellybean Benitez and this speaker unwraps it with no hardness to the vocals that, with lesser drivers, have been known to sound brittle.

Focal Kanta No.1

Celebrating its 40th anniversary, Focal continues to diversify and expand – its Kanta range now three-strong.

Review: Nick Tate Lab: Keith Howard

Sitting smack-bang in the middle of the company’s vast loudspeaker range, the Focal Kanta series is described as ‘a new vision for a premium speaker’, no less. Personally I’m not entirely convinced that this is so revolutionary, but the £6499 Kanta No.2 still makes a fine case for itself. It’s attractive, very well finished and sports some novel technologies. I also like its compactness, which will satisfy modern life’s growing need for serious sounding small boxes – just perfect for your compact riverside apartment, of course. The Kanta No.1 is the smallest in the range, its design trickled down from the £6999 No.2 (FHN Jan ’18) and £8999 N.3 floorstanders.

The Kanta No.1 is actually one of Focal’s most expensive standmounts, aside from the company’s truly esoteric and £8999 No.3 floorstanders.

Alas, I had to face the doors open in the Focal factory in Saint-Étienne, celebrating 40 years in 2019. Circuit” technologies, all developed to improve the behaviour and bass response of Focal speakers, have been incorporated into the Kanta No.1 via ‘Horn Loading’, both techniques improving the absorption of sound waves to reduce the resonant frequency of the tweeter. ‘Two and a half times lighter than titanium, but seven times more rigid, ‘beryllium is the only metal able to match glass’, he points out. Meanwhile the flare sandwich coned mid/bass claims low mass, high rigidity and excellent damping. ‘It has our “Tuned Mass Damping” and “Neutral Inductance Circuit” technologies, all developed to improve the behaviour and bass extension of the driver.’ All drive units are custom-designed and made in the Focal factory in Saint-Étienne, celebrating 40 years in 2019.

I appreciated the smooth tone, good low-level detailing and fine tracking of dynamic accents offered by the Kanta No.1, even if there was little sense of boxiness to the presentation compared to that of a cost-no-object high-end design. And, if I was to be super critical, the bass was not as extended or as powerful as perhaps I had expected.

This speaker’s general smoothness and even and the treble detailed but refined. Here too, while the midband sounded appropriate and very smooth, I thought back to hearing this track on Focal speakers of yore, before the flare cone was introduced, and remembered how things could sound a tad glassy and hard. Not so here. As I already suggested, despite its couthness, this speaker doesn’t without much marketing into it isn’t.

The indie pop of Prefab Sprout’s “I’ll Tell The Cows Come Home” [Potter Songs Kitchenware Records kwcd 4] is by no measure an audiophile recording, and sounds quite dry. Yet the Kanta No.1 proved its ability to cut through the mush and show what’s really buried on that master tape.

This it does thanks combinations of a delicate and open-sounding tweeter, a well-executed crossover and that surprisingly capable flax mid/bass unit. It carried the texture of the backing keyboard beautifully, alongside the lively drum kit work and incidental harmonic playing. Hi-hat cymbals sounded realistic and metallic without grating, while singer Paddy MacLin’s voice had a real accuracy and timing to it. On some speakers, there are moments when his lead vocal is unendearing, but the Kanta No.1 carried the day with a consistent and seemingly reliable phase.

PERFECT TIME

This track relies somewhat on the energetic cymbal work to give it rhythmic impetus, and Focal’s new standmount communicated this really rather well. There’s a slight feel to the way it goes about making music – a certain spring in its step. It’s all the more enjoyable on heavier, best-driven programme material such as Madonna’s ‘Holiday’ [Madonna; Sire 9 23867-2]. This is a stick production from Jellybean Benitez and this speaker unwraps it with no hardness to the vocals that, with lesser drivers, have been known to sound brittle.

Jellybean Benitez and this speaker unwraps it with no hardness to the vocals that, with lesser drivers, have been known to sound brittle.
LEFT: A single set of 4mm speaker terminals means no bi-wiring but the large reflex port comes with a foam bung if the N1 is used on a bookshelf.

However, at high listening levels there was a touch of compression evident. As the chorus kicked in, with backing vocals competing for attention alongside the Fender Rhodes keyboard and brass, the ensemble lacked the power and poignancy possible from a larger loudspeaker. Of course, if it did, then there’d be no need for the Kanta N2 or N3...

Nevertheless, the N1 need make no excuses for its soundstaging as it proved well able to project the song’s supersized, ‘stereo wide’ acoustic while performing a convincing disappearing act. This was particularly enjoyable with a classy recording like Haitink’s reading of Vaughn Williams’ Symphony No 2 [EMI CDC 749394 2]. Here the Kanta N1 placed orchestral instruments in space accurately with convincing depth perspective too.

This little loudspeaker obviously laps up a goodly amount of power, casting a soundstage that belies its diminutive dimensions. The Vaughn Williams recording also benefited slightly from the Kanta N1’s subtle upper bass warmth, which added to the sensation of scale. The overall result was a beautifully spacious sound that only made me want to keep on listening. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Premium-priced standmount speakers have much to prove, with few excuses made. The Focal Kanta N1 meets the challenge head on – it’s a highly enjoyable listening companion available in a wide choice of colourways to enhance its charm. Its mixture of smoothness, insight and rhythmic dexterity makes it an essential audition for any audiophile looking for an able all-rounder for duty in a bijou listening space.

Sound Quality: 83%

| 100 | 90 | 80 | 70 | 60 | 50 | 40 | 30 | 20 | 10 |

As the smallest model in the Kanta range, the N1 would be expected to have the lowest sensitivity and it does. Focal claims 88dB SPL for 2.83V at 1m but we weren’t quite able to confirm that, our pink noise and music figures of 87.2dB and 86.7dB, averaged for the review pair, suggesting that 87dB is a more realistic figure. As with many modern loudspeakers, low impedance helps achieve this. Focal quotes a nominal 8ohm but also a minimum of 3.9ohm, which conventionally makes it a 4ohm design. Our measured minimum was slightly lower at 3.8ohm but impedance phase angles are sufficiently well controlled that EPDR (which takes into account both modulus and phase) never falls below 20ohm, recorded at 20Hz. This suggests that the N1 is a little easier to drive than some competitors but further EPDR dips to 2.1ohm at 13kHz and 2.0ohm at 35kHz complicate the picture.

Forward frequency responses [Graph 1, below] were measured at 1m on the tweeter axis and reveal an obvious ‘BBC dip’ of about 2dB between 1.3kHz and 8kHz, with the extreme treble output rising above 16kHz. Response errors are ±3.3dB and ±3.5dB as a result, but within ±2dB up to the 16kHz climb. Pair matching is OK at ±0.9dB over the same 200Hz-20kHz. Diffraction-corrected nearfield measurements show a classic reflex-loaded bass response, with a flat output to about 60Hz and 4th-order (24dB per octave) roll-off below that. Bass extension is 48Hz (-4dB re. 200Hz) or 87Hz with the optional port bung fitted (2nd-order roll-off). The CSD waterfall [Graph 2] reveals treble resonance activity resulting from cone breakup in the bass mid driver, despite the sandwich construction. KH

ABOVE: Forward response shows a slight mid/presence dip with a high treble peak above 16kHz.

ABOVE: Small cabinet is almost necessity well-damped but some (cone) driver modes are visible.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Specification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity (PL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)</td>
<td>87.7dB/87.2dB/86.7dB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)</td>
<td>3.8ohm @ 20Hz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)</td>
<td>50° @ 29Hz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair matching/Response Error (200Hz–20kHz)</td>
<td>±0.9dB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LF/HF extension (-6dB ref. 200Hz/10kHz)</td>
<td>48Hz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (Each)</td>
<td>422x234x391mm / 13kg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>