

Focal Kanta N°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 £4499 Kanta N°1 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 N°1 is the smallest in the range, its design trickled down from the £6999 N°2 [*HFN* Jan '18] and £8999 N°3 floorstanders.

The Kanta N°1 is actually one of Focal's most expensive standmounts, aside from the company's truly esoteric high-end designs. Although its drive units – the beryllium tweeter and flax mid/bass – will be of most interest to audiophiles, in the 'real world' its pièce de résistance is the wide range of colour combinations. The cabinet comes in a choice of high gloss black lacquer and walnut veneer. For the former you can specify one of four baffle colours – Carrara White, Gauloise Blue, Solar Yellow and Black Lacquer. With the latter you get to choose between Gauloise Blue, Ivory, Warm Taupe and Dark Grey. Très chic!

TECHNOLOGY TOO

This bookshelf/standmount speaker is still a good size at 422x234x391mm (hwd) and certainly substantial enough at 13kg to stay put on your choice of stand or shelf. Focal sets great store by its drive units [see boxout, p65], with a new 27mm inverted dome tweeter and single 165mm mid/bass driver crossing over here at 2.4kHz.

The crossover itself features large tracks to minimise circuit resistance with direct paths from input to drivers, and selected film-type capacitors and low distortion air-cored inductors among its components. The drivers are set into a high-density

polymer front baffle, which is apparently some 70% denser than MDF, 15% stiffer and gives a quarter as much again in terms of damping. It is profiled to offer time alignment between the drivers. The rear baffle is made of MDF, and has a largish bass reflex port for which a foam bung is provided for use close to rear walls.

The top plate, meanwhile, is glass, and what Focal charmingly describes as 'beret-type' magnetic grilles are supplied to protect the bass/mid driver. Matching stands are available for a somewhat lofty £899 per pair. The result is a speaker that is said to be, 'the perfect solution for rooms measuring under 270ft² (25m²).'

I found the Kanta N°1 easy enough to set up and the aforementioned foam bung is best used if the speaker is situated not

'J Benitez's production was unwrapped before my ears'

far out into your listening room. Downwind of a very capable Cambridge Audio Edge A integrated amplifier [*HFN* Nov '18], these little speakers proved both reasonably sensitive and able to play pretty loud [see KH's Lab

Report, p67]. Best results were achieved with them positioned half a metre out from boundary walls, toed in at an angle of around 10°. They also take a bit if running in before they start to give of their best...

WINDOW SEAT

This latest Focal miniature is self-evidently a high quality loudspeaker. It confers a degree of insight into the recording that's befitting of a product of this price, giving a more open window into the mix than you might hope for from a more affordable design. This makes it an enjoyable listen, in a number of ways. However, as with every loudspeaker ever made, it's not entirely flawless and so

RIGHT: A 165mm flax-coned bass/mid unit with TMD suspension and NIC motor is joined by a 27mm IAL 3 pure beryllium inverted dome tweeter. A total of eight cabinet/baffle colourways are available



DRIVE TIME

Nicolas Debard, Home Audio & 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 scratch glass,' he points out. Meanwhile the flax 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'll begin with the usual caveat about personal priorities and home demonstrations.

I appreciated the smooth tone, good low-level detailing and fine tracking of dynamic accents offered by the Kanta N°1, even if there was some slight 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 anticipated, cabinet volume notwithstanding. But this speaker does have a certain 'snap'...

CUT THE MUSH

This speaker's general smoothness and easy-going delivery of detail is a major plus point, and this should not be confused with blandness. Essentially, you can feed the Kanta N°1 a half-decent recording, sit back and enjoy its subtly warm and inviting tone just as its all-pervading suaveness means you never tire of listening.

Squeeze's 'Tempted' [*Singles – 45's And Under*; A&M Records – CD 3338] illustrated this to great effect. It's a spacious analogue recording with a strong bass groove, a 'big' drum sound overlaid by a thick electronic organ, over which vocalist Paul Carrack does his stuff. This speaker delivered all the elements of the mix in good proportion, with no hardness to the vocals that, with lesser loudspeakers, have been known to sound brittle.

Bass was pretty fulsome here too, while the midband sounded even and the treble detailed but refined. Nothing grated, and the result was very pleasant indeed to behold. I thought back to hearing this track on Focal speakers of yore, before the flax 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 airbrush every recording into something it isn't. The indie pop of Prefab Sprout's 'Till The Cows Come Home' [*Protest Songs*; Kitchenware Records kwcd 4] is by no measure an audiophile recording, and sounds quite cloudy. Yet the Kanta N°1 proved its ability to cut through the mush and show what's really buried on that master tape.

This it does thanks its combination 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 harmonica playing. Hi-hat cymbals sounded realistically metallic without grating, while singer Paddy MacAloon's voice had a clean and accurate timbre to it. On some speakers, there are moments when his lead vocal is unintelligible, but the Kanta N°1 carried the day with a consistent and seemingly reliable poise.

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 sprightly feel to the way it goes about making music – a certain spring in its step. It's all the more enjoyable on heavier, beat-driven programme material such as Madonna's 'Holiday' [*Madonna*; Sire 9 23867-2]. This is a slick production from Jellybean Benitez and this speaker unwraps it before your very ears.

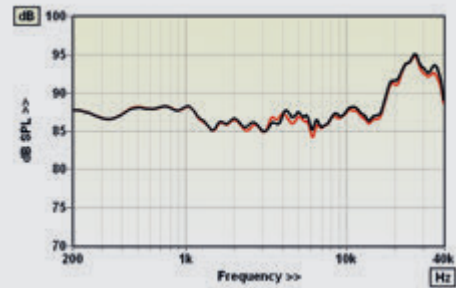
The bass synthesiser modulated in an appropriately animated way, powering

LAB REPORT

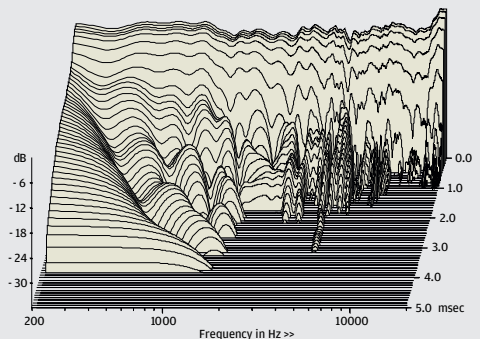
FOCAL KANTA N°1

As the smallest model in the Kanta range, the N°1 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 2ohm, recorded at 20Hz. This suggests that the N°1 is a little easier to drive than some competitors but further EPDR dips to 2.1ohm at 134Hz and 2.2ohm at 358Hz 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 ± 3.3 dB and ± 3.5 dB as a result, but within ± 2 dB up to the 16kHz climb. Pair matching is OK at ± 0.9 dB 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 (-6dB 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 necessarily well-damped but some (cone) driver modes are visible

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms - Mean/IEC/Music)	87.7dB/87.2dB/86.7dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	3.8ohm @ 201Hz 32.5ohm @ 5.2Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	-51° @ 98Hz 50° @ 29Hz
Pair matching/Response Error (200Hz-20kHz)	± 0.9 dB / ± 3.3 dB/ ± 3.5 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	48Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.9% / 0.2% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (Each)	422x234x391mm / 13kg

LEFT: A single set of 4mm speaker terminals means no bi-wiring but the large reflex port comes with a foam bung if the N°1 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 N°2 or N°3...

Nevertheless, the N°1 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 N°1 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 N°1'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 N°1 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%



the song along. Above this there was a wealth of percussive detail to take in, all delicately rendered. The lead synthesiser stabs were superbly syncopated to the backing percussion, with congas and woodblocks easily discernible, alongside the funky rhythm guitar and programmed drum machine snares and handclaps. Everything arrived in perfect time, alongside a clean and smooth portrayal of Madonna's vocals. This track can really sound like a dog's dinner through some speakers, yet here it sounded completely at ease.

SUPERSIZED ACOUSTIC

With its excellent detailing and fleetness of foot, you'd expect the Kanta N°1 to track dynamics well – and so it proved, up to a point. The soulful, soft rock strains of Steely Dan's 'Babylon Sisters' [Gaucho; MCA Records MCAD-37220] were a real pleasure. The music sounded vibrant and alive, with brooding saxophone breaks and a catchy, walking bass line playing off the drum kit. It unlocked a wealth of expressive detail, highlighting the subtle accents of the brass section.