

Focal Kanta N°2 floorstanding loudspeaker

by Eric Neff

The 2017 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest in Denver was due to start in a couple of hours. Audio fans were already queueing up at the door waiting to wade into the annual milieu of many of the audio world's top companies. For us media types there was an early treat in store. Focal, the French speaker giant was about to unveil the first product in a new line of speakers called the Kanta N°2 in the main floor Cottonwood room. As we filled the room there were a number of fabric covered floor standing speakers waiting to be discovered. At the appointed hour, the Focal team pulled the literal cover off the new Kanta N°2's and we all got our first look at the newest member of the Focal family. The first to combine their flax driver technology with their Beryllium tweeter.

The Kanta line occupies a place below the Sopra, which is currently held by the Electra series. Coming in at a height of 112cm and weighing in at 35kg, the Kanta N°2's have a fairly compact floorstanding footprint. Focal has brought in the full breadth of design options for its new three-way offering. Four high-gloss front panel colour options with a high-gloss black rear shell including Carrara White, Gauloise Blue, Black Lacquer, and Solar Yellow. There are also four matt colour options including Ivory, Warm Taupe, Gauloise Blue and Dark Grey, with a Walnut wood finish shell. All colours complimented the subtle tan/white shades of the flax drivers. Magnetic grilles are included but not required for best sound. The overall aesthetic was very refined and struck a great pose. The Solar Yellow was by far the most visually striking making the other colour options more laid back and less likely to dominate the eye in a living room space. Clearly Focal was seeking to have the Kanta N°2's integrate successfully with a wide number of interior décors.

Taking some time with the pair closest to me in bright Solar Yellow, I was struck by the modern style of the Kanta N°2's. First there is a clear family resemblance to the higher end lines. The bend near the top to facilitate the Focal Focus Time alignment while not adjustable like the Utopia line was similar to the Sopra's. The new IAL3 tweeter is similar to the Sopra's IAL2 utilising the same principles of infinite acoustic loading and infinite horn loading that, according to Focal research, "helps with the absorption of waves, thus

lowering the tweeter resonant frequency." Focal's stated goal is to reduce distortion in every register and their continuing research toward this end has, in their view, moved one more step forward with the new IAL3 tweeter.

I was certainly happy with my first impression at the show and was anxious for them to be delivered for review. Six weeks later I received a phone call from the shipping company to meet them for pickup. After removing the speakers in their boxes from the shipping pallet in the back of the Semi-trailer truck, we were able to just fit them both into my Ford Explorer for the ride home. After some maneuvering with the hand truck with my indentured servants (a.k.a., son and godson) we had them installed (Yes, they were the Solar Yellow pair from the show!) and ready to begin optimal adjustment.

The Kanta N°2's Zamac base offers a very firm support while not taking up too much space. Each of the four feet has an adjustable spike that allows users to choose how they want to anchor the feet to the floor while also enabling them to level the cabinets. You also have a goodly amount of front/back adjustment via the feet to refine and to level the angle of the IAL3 tweeters. I made the decision to not toe in the speakers. In the end, they did not require it to throw a wide and accurate soundstage or a pinpoint image.

Sitting in my listening room with my black PS Audio BHK 300 monos in between the Solar Yellow Kanta N°2's made the room look like an audio bumble bee. The black lacquered bodies and glass cover top were very attractive combined with the high-gloss Solar Yellow. The Focus Time tilt near the top of the Kanta's to me gave the speakers a rakish look I liked. My wife's reaction was they looked like big bananas! If so they are certainly the best sounding ones I have heard and a tribute to the fruits (I had to go there) of Focal's labours. The single pair of multi-way binding posts on the back made connecting my AudioQuest CastleRock banana plug (naturally!) speaker cables a snap. The magnetic speaker grilles were an attractive dark grey that complimented the Solar Yellow, and they take up similar space to my reference Vandersteen Treo CT's.

I decided to go vinyl for the start of critical listening. First up on the VPI Prime Signature was Billy Gibbons and the BFG's album *Perfectamundo* [2015 Concord Music Group]. ▶





► The first cut is a James Moore arrangement of 'Got Love if You Want It'. This bluesy rendition begins with a strong drum beat with Billy on his Telecaster throwing a classic twangy sound between the solid rhythm of the drums and bass guitar. Enter the Hammond B3 organ as a counterpoint to the guitar and it is a fabulous performance. The Kanta N°2's offered up the crispy twang of the Fender Tele, delivering every bend with perfect tone. The whirling sound of the Hammond came through in classic style. The supporting pace of the drum kit was accented by the crisp click click of the drumstick on the snare drum edge. Bass notes descended into the mid 30Hz range and the Kanta's delivered them with authority via the twin 16.5cm flax woofers with the Focal staple NIC Motors (Neutral Inductance Circuit). For those new to Focal the goal of the NIC Motors is to enhance definition by stabilizing the magnetic field. This promotes bass that is better controlled while remaining authoritative or subtle as needed.

Speaking of powerful well controlled bass I next went SACD via the PS Audio DirectStream memory Player and Grover Washington Jr's *Prime Cuts The Columbia Years 1987-1999* [1999 Columbia]. There are a number of great renditions of the jazz classic, 'Take Five'. Grover's 'Take Five (Take Another Five)' is quite singular in its approach to the classic tune. This version showcases the exceptional tenor sax talents of Mr. Washington as well as seemingly added arrangements by a Foley artist as well as musicians. The EDM style background delivers almost infrasonic depth to the bass. The Kanta's definitely rolled off from this subterranean assault yet the twin woofers behaved in a wonderfully controlled manner offering up tremendous low-end power with nary a wobble or strain. They delivered what they could and let what was beyond them roll off in an effortless and smooth transition. I began to really appreciate the development of the flax drivers. The combination of the woven flax between two thin layers of glass fibres had achieved a light and highly rigid driver. This results in an ability to move at high velocities while maintaining their structure. Resulting dynamics were very impressive. The single 16.5cm flax mid-range was treated to the best of Mr. Washington and took full advantage of the vaunted Focal TMD (Tuned Mass Damping). I was enthralled with the Kanta's ability to deliver this thoroughly modern take (no pun intended) on the jazz classic.

I went back to my show notes from RMAF at this point and perused my initial thoughts around the Kanta N°2's sounds from that show. Keeping in mind that this pair, when I listened to them there, were basically straight from the factory new and now had over 150 hours of listening time on them here at my home. Early impressions at RMAF suggested a speaker a bit bass shy. Perhaps some thin sound through the ►

“The Kanta N°2’s will provide. Give them a good listen and maybe a good home.”

- ▶ mid-range. Of course, virtually every speaker is going to be underwhelming out of the box. Clearly the Kanta N°2’s bloom beautifully with 100+ hours on them. Both the mids and lows were impressive with seamless crossover work throughout this 3-way design. The beryllium tweeter provided incredible top end air far beyond what I was capable of hearing. The seamlessness of the presentation was quite enjoyable.

Speaking of that presentation another room at RMAF featured the Sopra N°3’s using the same electronics as I use. At twice the price the Sopra’s are also much larger. The Kanta’s ability to offer a similarly powerful (if not as deep) presentation had me researching their new High-Density Polymer cabinet material (HDP), which Focal explains is 70% denser than MDF, 15% stiffer, and provides 25% more damping. Combined with their PowerFlow technology pairing a front and rear port to limit bass compression gives a smaller volume cabinet the ability to perform at a very high level. Given the amount of driver rigidity being paired with the new HDP material and PowerFlow tech the Kanta’s truly perform at a standard unexpected for their price.

Returning to listening it was time for some female vocals. A first hit single is always exciting and Sofia Carson’s ‘Ins and Out’s’ [via Tidal] showcases the outstanding talent of this latest Disney vocal ingénue. So, you want to test your midrange and tweeter? Try a soprano voice and listen for sibilants. There were none here as the vaunted Beryllium tweeter and Flax midrange drivers combined to let her lovely voice soar cleanly. This track also has the ultra-lows that EDM offers and a variety of claps as well as clicks and other fills that emerge around the soundstage. There is a nice three-dimensional space with Sofia in the centre as a focus for the sonic action. This is a track that will give your system a workout without it being so busy you get a headache from the session. It will give you some insight into your speaker’s capabilities and see how they can show off female vocals without using the usual options.

I wrapped up with a track that combines sweeping orchestral work with guitar, mandolin, and male vocals; ‘The Last Goodbye’ performed by Billy Boyd from the soundtrack to *The Hobbit: Battle of Five Armies* [2014 Warner Bros]. Once again vocals were incredibly smooth and natural. Billy was front and centre and sized appropriately. After a strong EDM track, it was fun to hear massed double basses creating powerful bass from string and bow. Mandolin and guitar had great tone

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way floorstanding dual ported speaker

Driver Compliment: 1 - 27mm “IAL3” pure Beryllium inverted dome tweeter

1 - 16.5cm flax midrange driver with TMD suspension and NIC Motor

2 - 16.5cm flax woofers with NIC Motor

Frequency Response (+/-3dB): 35Hz–40kHz

Low Frequency Point: 29Hz

Crossover Frequency: 260Hz–2,700Hz

Impedance: 8Ohms – Minimum 3.1Ohms

Sensitivity (2.83V/1M): 91dB

Dimensions (H×W×D): 111.8 × 47.7 × 32.1cm

Weight: 35kg with Grille

Finishes: High Gloss Carrara White, Gauloise Blue, Black Lacquer and Solar Yellow with Black enclosure. Matt Finish in Ivory, Warm Taupe, Gauloise Blue and Dark Grey with Walnut enclosure.

Price: £7,000 per pair

Manufacturer: Focal

URL: www.focal.com

Telephone: 0845 660 2680 (UK only)

and resonance. The sense of scale from the orchestra was sweeping and a true delight. This recording offers a nuanced vocal performance in the midst of orchestral grandeur and the Kanta N°2’s were able to serve it up in as good a presentation as I have heard for this song (I have played it with every pair of speakers I’ve had in the room, some far more expensive than the Focals). That the Kanta N°2’s could deliver music as enjoyable as this is a true testament to the skills of the designers and engineers at Focal.

The creativity of designers continues to amaze. What is especially heartening is to find a leading company clearly not resting on their laurels. Focal has been around since it was founded as JM Labs in 1979, and is vying for top spot of Euro-makers with B&W and KEF. Focal has the facilities to create and manufacture all of its own drivers and it builds all of its cabinets as well. With that size and success has not come complacency. The company continues to strive and innovate, and the new Kanta N°2 as the progenitor of a new line proves. If you cannot afford or accommodate the flagship Utopia’s, if the Sopra’s are a touch too far, you can now rest easy. The Kanta N°2’s will provide. Give them a good listen and maybe a good home. Very highly recommended! +