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PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 457

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# Focal hero

Introducing the new entry-level range with innovative cone material. **David Vivian** reckons it's something to sing about

**F**rench loudspeaker maker Focal pours a lot of time and money into R&D – probably more than most of its competitors. Originally known as Focal-JMLab, the company was founded in 1979 in Saint-Étienne by the engineer and hi-fi journalist Jacques Mahul and, from the very beginning, a restless desire to stay ahead of the curve fuelled innovation. The mission could easily be subtitled “...and the search for the perfect driver diaphragm”. It's a continuing (and presumably never-ending) quest, but Focal's track record thus far in bringing new materials and composites to market is impressive. Since the early eighties these have included titanium, titanium dioxide, poly Kevlar, polyglass, flax and, for its premium lines, beryllium and the mysteriously named ‘W’ composite.

Now slatefiber makes its debut, not as a state-of-the-art proposition later to be trickled down to more mainstream fare, but a ready-to-roll game changer at ground level or – as described by

## It projects a spacious soundstage with a strong sense of height and depth

Focal – “a new standard in affordable loudspeaker design and performance”. What it means in practical terms is that Chorus, its long-established entry-level speaker range, is replaced by Chora with the new and unique slatefiber drivers, more on which in a moment.

It's a clever strategy, neatly tying together Focal's notional pre-eminence in driver innovation and a price point where its benefit will be for the many and not the few, to borrow a recent political slogan. This sort of thing has a tendency to drum up a fair bit of excitement in a highly competitive sector traditionally teaming with players angling for an edge by any and all means possible.

Unlike the sprawling Chorus range it supplants, the Chora family for now

has just three members, all solidly constructed bass-reflex designs. The 806 (£600) is a two-way standmount and is joined by a brace of floorstanders, the three-driver, 2.5-way 816 (£1,100) and the four-driver, three-way 826 on review here. The lineup will start to expand next year (see Q&A). First up, however, is the flagship tower and it's something I'm particularly glad about as large-ish three-way floorstanders selling for around £1,300 have been doing great things in my listening rooms of late. The 826 comes hard on the heels of the £1,250 Bowers & Wilkins 603 (HFC 448) and the only slightly pricier KLH Kendall (HFC 454), at £1,400 – both guilty of nudging the bar and daring any newcomer to do better.

## Secret to its success

They might be on shaky ground with the Chora 826. Focal notes that its aim has always been to make high quality accessible and cites the popularity and acclaim afforded Chorus as a measure of its success. It suggests Chora is on another level altogether. Its objective with the new range has been to capture something of the sonic character and visual appeal of its most advanced and expensive speakers for the keenest price possible. If accomplished, that's quite some prospect.

Mid and bass drivers built around slatefiber cones (the name refers to the attractive slate-grey colour, not an ingredient) seem to be the key. The 826, being a three-way design, has a 165mm unit dedicated to the midrange and two 165mm bass drivers, low-frequency output augmented by a large, aerodynamically profiled, front-facing port to help the system reach down to 48Hz at  $\pm 3$ dB and 39Hz at -6dB. The challenge to optimise lightness, rigidity and damping is the same as for any speaker cone material, but as with Focal's previous ‘solutions’, this one comes at the problem from a slightly different angle. After the woven flax fibre and glass fibre sandwich used in the drivers of its Aria and Kanta

► DETAILS
<b>PRODUCT</b> Focal Chora 826
<b>ORIGIN</b> France
<b>TYPE</b> 3-way floorstanding loudspeaker
<b>WEIGHT</b> 21kg
<b>DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)</b> 303x1,053x388mm
<b>FEATURES</b> • 1x 25mm TNF Al/Mg inverted dome tweeter • 1x 165mm slatefiber midrange driver • 2x 165mm slatefiber bass drivers • Quoted sensitivity: 91dB/1W/1m
<b>DISTRIBUTOR</b> Focal-JMLab UK Ltd.
<b>TELEPHONE</b> 0845 6602680
<b>WEBSITE</b> focal.com/uk

**The front-facing bass port helps the Chora achieve impressively low frequencies**



models, slatefiber teams thermoplastic polymer with unwoven non-recycled carbon, again as a layered composite. The upshot of having all the carbon fibres point in the same direction, according to Focal, is truly exceptional damping, lightness and rigidity resulting in superb efficiency, a spacious soundstage and midband with minimal colouration, unfettered dynamic expression and rich, textured tonality.

The TNF tweeter, set in a shallow waveguide, is unusual, too. As well as sporting an inverted 25mm aluminium/magnesium dome (concave rather than convex to make it less directional), the suspension between the dome and its bracket incorporates Poron, a material with what Focal refers to as ‘shape memory’. It's a similar arrangement to the one Focal employs for the famous beryllium tweeter in its high-end Utopia range. The benefit of this suspension, claims the company, is that it makes it possible to reduce distortion by a factor of three to around 2.5kHz where the human ear is at its most sensitive, but the 28kHz frequency ceiling is impressive, too.

With so much effort and ingenuity devoted to the drivers, it wouldn't be too terrible to find evidence of cost-paring elsewhere. True, the Chora aesthetic isn't a conversation piece like the Kanta, Sopra or Utopia ranges would be, but it is smart and stylishly finished (in black with piano gloss baffle, light wood with cream baffle or dark wood with grey baffle) and holds



its own with the more expensive Focal Aria line, positioned one tier up.

A magnetically attached grille covers the mid and two bass drivers, leaving the tweeter (protected by a gleaming steel mesh cap) and reflex port on show. But I reckon Focal is right, the slatefiber drivers look too good to hide away. If you agree, you'll notice that the midrange driver has a conical dust cap while on the bass drivers it's flattened out over a greater surface

## The music ebbs and flows with a fluency and cohesion that's easy to relax into

area of the cones. The reason is that they have different functions. On the midrange driver, it is shaped to put the squeeze on interference and so reduce distortion, but on the bass drivers caps are flattened to enhance cone rigidity and improve definition and impact at the bottom end.

Normally, I steer clear of screw-on plastic plinths as, while undoubtedly increasing the stability of the loudspeakers to which they're attached should a Great Dane or over excited toddler rugby tackle them, I find they usually inflict some harm on the sound. Those supplied with the Chora would have been treated no differently

but for the fact that, as well as locating the 826 more securely, they also tilt the enclosures back by a few degrees to time-align the drivers – essential for properly focused imaging, says Focal.

### Sound quality

I wish I could claim that I undertake extensive plinth on/off comparisons to be able to hear the effect, but the speaker sounds so good with them fitted, I don't feel inclined to doubt Focal's word on the matter. Any experimentation that does take place is confined to discovering whether the tall and slightly tilted-back Chora prefers my small or large listening room (surprisingly, it works equally well in both without the need to be pulled especially far away from boundaries), and how it fares with a selection of classy integrated amps. Again, the Focal remains coolly agnostic, effortlessly and enjoyably revealing the differing abilities of a Cambridge Audio CXA61 (see full review next month) and a Hegel H90 (HFC 427), despite their nominally identical 2x 60W power outputs which, even in the larger room, proves more than enough to drive the sensitive 826 (rated at 91dB) to very healthy levels.

As has become increasingly clear with my recent reviews of the B&W 603 and KLH Kendall, there are some things a well-designed and engineered

three-way floorstander of a certain size can do that are simply beyond even the best standmounts or smaller floorstanders with fewer drivers. It's a kind of easy-going generosity that unpacks a recording more completely for appreciation. The B&W excels through the midrange and treble with stunning clarity, resolution and openness, while the KLH has a warmer tonal balance and deeper bass without being quite so transparent. Both exhibit that appealing three-way unconstrained largess.

If anything, it's even more apparent with the Chora 826. For instance, that lovely walking double bass that introduces Simply Red's *Sad Old Red* breathes rather than feeling as if it's being squeezed out of a constriction. Sarah Jane Morris singing John Martyn's *Sweet Little Mystery* happens in a soundstage with believable scale and solidity, her soul-drenched huskiness portrayed with a richness and depth that tugs hard on the emotions. No, the Focal isn't quite as resolute as the B&W or as tonally warm as the KLH, but it does chart a very comfortable path between the two that, straight away, gives it fabulous listenability.

Also, better than both those speakers is the Focal's ability to project an extraordinarily huge and spacious soundstage with a strong sense of height as well as depth – maybe a result of that backward tilt. It works to stunning effect when I cue up jazz pianist and composer Chick Corea's

**Slatefiber is named after its colour, not its properties**



### IN SIGHT



- 1 25mm TNF Al/Mg tweeter
- 2 Single-wire binding posts
- 3 Forward-facing bass port
- 4 2x 165mm slatefiber bass drivers
- 5 165mm slatefiber midrange driver

### A DRIVING FORCE

In Focal's quest to create the best drive units for its various speaker lines many new materials have been introduced over the years, including titanium, titanium dioxide, and even beryllium, which is used for the tweeters of its Utopia speakers.

In the mid-eighties, the French company developed a poly Kevlar sandwich cone for its midrange and bass drivers. This was constructed from two layers of aramid fibres placed on either side of a hollow micro-ball structure. This design optimised the cone's

weight, rigidity and damping ratio in pursuit of improved driver responsiveness.

In 2015, it introduced flax cone drivers (previously the preserve of the more expensive Kanta) for its more affordable Aria speaker range. This sandwich cone features a thin layer of flax linen in between two layers of fibreglass. Flax was chosen for its mechanical properties, the hollow fibre combining neutrality and lightness while its low elasticity and high rigidity are similar to that of carbon and Kevlar.

latest live set with bassist Christian McBride and drummer Brian Blade on the album *Trilogy 2*, capturing not just the electricity of the performance but more than an inkling of venue space and ambience. Time and again, the Chora displays a knack of handling heavy duty with a light touch. At dazzling full tilt, the Corea trio gives any speaker a lot to think about and organise, but the 826 neither blurs the detail nor labours the action. The sense of realism over exaggeration is stunningly impressive.

The same applies equally to Van Morrison's latest album, *Dark Night Of The Soul*, which sounds gloriously rich and unprocessed, Van the man's voice in fine, growly fettle. The music ebbs and flows with a fluency and cohesion that's easy to relax into. The feeling of textural shading and the finely graded palette of tonal colours and sumptuous yet effortlessly deep and supple bass are a simple joy to behold.

### Conclusion

The Chora 826 swiftly resolves any debate about whether to go for a standmount or floorstander, and it's bad news for the standmount. That it can deliver the myriad advantages of a three-way tower in a small room makes it all but irresistible ●

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

##### VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

##### BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

##### EASE OF DRIVE

★★★★★

#### OVERALL

★★★★★

**LIKE:** Exceptional sound; style; unfussy about placement and partnering equipment

**DISLIKE:** Nothing at the price

**WE SAY:** This is Focal right on top of its game. The Chora 826 isn't just fine value, but a great speaker full stop



As already mentioned, B&W's 603 and KLH's Kendall, while sounding quite different, set a sizzling sonic standard at the £1,300 price point, but in some ways the Chora 826 has the jump on both of them, rivalling the B&W for sheer transparency but delivering it with a richer balance and more sumptuous bass. It's certainly the one I'd go for.

## Q&A

**Mégane Montabonel**  
Product manager, Focal



**DV: How do the properties of a slatefiber cone differ from flax?**

**MM:** Slatefiber is made of recycled carbon fibres and thermoplastic polymer and has some very interesting acoustic properties: good rigidity, high damping (close to flax and 'W' membranes) and extremely lightweight. The upshot of this is that the sound characteristic of slatefiber offers excellent clarity in the midrange, which represents a huge upgrade in performance over the previous polyglass technology used in the Chorus. At Focal, we tend to find our speakers have a "Focal sound signature" and slatefiber delivers a sound characteristic that we feel is very reminiscent of our more premium models.

**How did the slatefiber cone material come about?**

The idea behind slatefiber was to create a new cone-material technology, exclusive to Focal, for our entry-level range of speakers. Historically, we have used a polyglass cone. For Chora, we wanted to have a product that was totally developed and made in France, so we created a new industrial tool (a semi-automated machine to make the cones) to be able to produce slatefiber cones in our factory at Saint-Étienne, yet still remain competitive.

**Are any further models likely to be introduced to the Chora range?**

In 2020 we'll be introducing some exciting new members of the Chora family, to cater for a range of multi-channel setups. Watch this space!