



**Focal Sopra N°2**  
floorstanding loudspeaker

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It took the Focal R&D team three years to come up with a range of loudspeakers to fill the gap between the Electra and the Utopia series. That's six to eight engineers full time; a costly pursuit, one that only companies with Focal's scale can afford. The result certainly looks like it was worth the effort, it's a refreshing speaker that's big on innovation, looks and driver technology. Focal hasn't done anything radical, rather they looked at the Electra and Utopia, used proven solutions, did a lot of research, improved and listened over and over. Sopra was kept secret until the Munich High End show this year and by July the first samples were available in the Netherlands. But demand was so high that I had to visit a well equipped dealer for an extended private listening session in order to make this assessment. I heard the floor standing Sopra N°2, the only other speaker in the range thus far is the Sopra N°1 bookshelf.

This impressive loudspeaker with its Utopia style bend looked small in the huge listening room, until that is I stood next to it and realised that 1190mm is bigger than average. Maybe it's for the best that we didn't try to get them to my 3<sup>rd</sup> floor apartment, even without packing material they weigh 55 kilos each. The drivers look familiar on the outside, a 'W' cone is used for both the 7inch woofers and the 6.5inch midrange, the beryllium tweeter is already well known. The beauty and improvements are to be found inside the box behind the drivers. The midrange now uses a Tuned Mass Damper, this consists of ridges on the suspension that damp unwanted resonances and make cone and surround movement more linear. Focal borrowed this idea from racing car suspensions and earthquake protection for skyscrapers. You can't see the improved magnet system inside the drivers, but the Neutral Inductance Circuit (NIC) is a sort of Faraday ring that ensures that neither the position of the voice coil, the current inside the coil nor the signal frequency influence the magnetic field. The result is claimed to be lower distortion, more detail and improved dynamic behaviour. The two woofers look rather simple compared to the midrange, however they make use of NIC technology too.



Focal has its own cabinet factory in France where it builds the complex Gamma Structure enclosure for Sopra. The limited output of this factory is the main reason why samples were in short supply in the first months of production, but it saved my back on the stairs! The Sopra N°2 bass system has its reflex port opening on the bottom above a glass base. Inside the cabinet Helmholtz resonators damp unwanted resonances, which is often a better solution than adding components to the crossover. The tweeter enclosure behind the inverted dome is a wide horn filled with damping material that's designed to match the air resistance in front of the driver. This is said to result in 30% lower distortion. The bend in the cabinet is designed to provide the correct phase angle between drivers, albeit this can only be true at a specific listening distance. Time alignment of drivers could also have been done in the crossover, but that reduces efficiency and masks detail and/or dynamics. Focal prefers to solve problems acoustically rather than electrically. More information: the glass base takes the spikes that couple the Sopra to the floor and covers for the drivers are held in place by small magnets. The electronics used for listening came from sister company Naim Audio. Source was a CD5 XS player, using the DAC inside a NAC-N272 preamp with XPS power supply. The power provided by a NAP300 power amplifier and its external power supply. The loudspeaker cables were by AudioQuest and all other cables were Naim's own.

That's enough info for now, it's time to listen, albeit in what seemed to me to be a rather over damped room. First up was a live concert of Katie Melua from the O2 Arena. Her tender 'Kviteli Potlebi (Yellow Leaves)' is accompanied by the tiniest podium noises. Her loving voice is very convincing, you can hear all the intonations and microphone plops. In the mix the piano is placed in the background, when Katie continuous with 'If You Were A Sailboat' the accentuated low end comes alive. Changing position on the couch shows that keeping the tweeter on ear level is very important, but there's no real hotspot in the horizontal plane. The Sopra didn't win me over completely at this point. However I enjoyed the feeling of being at a live concert, maybe because this speaker doesn't cover up any shortcoming in the mix. Mary Black *Live* also adds that special feeling of being a bit messy on stage. Whenever the public applauds it does not end up in noise, the audience clearly contains individuals. Tracks like 'Katie' create a party in the room and as soon as the audience joins the singer, you can pick out many voices. This CD sounds nasty on many speakers, it is rough with an unpolished top end and powerful bass notes, however the Sopra shrugs of these shortcomings and delivers 'Ellis Island' in quick and lively fashion. The drums in the background are subtle and rich in detail, the polyphony is separated into individual voices.



Two studio recordings: the first by singer Mor Karbasi who's work has strong Spanish and Middle Eastern influences. Her 'La Hija De La Primavera' is spread out wide, while the loudspeakers disappear to let the music flow. The clarity of her voice could be better but instruments are able to mix and match while remaining individual, maybe the damping in the room has this effect on the voice. At home I never overdamp the room in an attempt to create a lively sound, but this is a matter of taste. Piano is tonally well balanced, transparent and fast. The bass notes show this is a big, physical sounding system. The following track is clear and razor-sharp on most systems, the delicacy of the tweeter shows that the time when Focals had bright treble is now light years behind us. Belgian singer Micheline van Hautem differs from Mor Karbasi in every respect. On her CD *Crème De La Crème* she sings Dutch hits translated into French. The Sopra shows how outstandingly well the guitar is recorded. The sound is rich, full, has body and the instrument is the correct size in both strings and body. The voice of Micheline gets better and better from track to track, this despite the rows of unused loudspeakers along the walls of the listening room.



Moving to classical and starting with the Holland Baroque Society and Rachel Podger, performing the *De La Cetra* violin concertos by Antonio Vivaldi. Without doubt the solo violin gets all the attention it deserves. It's very pure, sometimes with velvet notes, or strong, even snappy as violins can be. The staging is excellent, making it easy to imagine how the recording was made. Although power comes from the lower notes, the mids and highs are never suppressed. With my favourite violin player, Janine Jansen, playing parts of the works of Sergei Prokofiev, specifically his *Violin Concerto No. 2 in G, Opus 63*, together with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, I can hear even more of the high end qualities of this system. The violin comes alive as if it were in front of me, the orchestra is more defined and the instruments are better separated from each other than I'm used to. Which proves that the Sopra N°2 doesn't change the recording with a romantic balance, but shows exactly what it is offered. A lesser recording will result in lesser high fidelity, full stop. The music rolls out of the speakers before my eyes and of course my ears, making me more and more enthusiastic about this fabulous system. This is natural violin character we hear, standing free in the room with sound ranging from subtle to powerful. This CD has not been enhanced in the lower notes, which is why it sounds so balanced over the frequency range. *Dance Macabre*, composed by Saint-Saëns and captured by Reference Recordings is a popular recording, it shows how much power the Sopra can handle. Beginning quietly the music takes your mind away from daily sorrows and gets more and more threatening, with great imagine in all dimensions. When the tempo goes up and the volume increases the orchestra blasts into the room. Heavy percussion, basses, cellos and violins, but the system retains its composure. This is physically BIG and sonically outstanding majestic power.



Expecting some rest with Beverly Craven's *Change of Heart* I found a singer who rocks alongside imposing drums in the background. I had to wait for the next track where her voice is more tender and caressing to get my break. The result is a lovely performance from this beautiful British singer, her distinctive voice seems made for the Sopra N°2, or the other way round. The reason I can distinguish so many details must be also due to the influence of the heavy wall and ceiling damping which leaves no room for disturbing reflections. A close mic'd saxophone suffers less from the room damping and explodes into the listener's face. As the music gets more diffuse, the harder it is for the Sopra to keep you on the edge of your seat. Have you ever experienced the *Lush Life* Jacintha sings about? Get a pair of Sopras and find out. Or play her 'Summertime' to warm your heart and bones. As soon as the intro starts you get a summertime feeling, percussion softly ticks in the background and dynamic music is filled with the sun. Sweltering heat with air turbulence is so easy to imagine on this track. I find my mind on a couch in the shade, a drink with a lot of ice in hand. Suffice to say that Sopra likes jazz.

I took some other notes while listening to STS Digital's *Groove Into Bits Vol.1* compilation. 'Golden Brown' by The Stranglers is lively, clear and the voice is bright. 'So Strong' by Labi Siffre delivers a male voice that's just as good as any female one that I heard that afternoon, it's a nice recording without over enhanced bass and contains impressive percussion. 'Come Di' by Paolo Conte is rhythmically strong within an excellent stage and smaller sounds that keep the music alive and exciting. Voices over the Sopra N°2 are typical of many French loudspeakers: emphatic without exaggeration. The Sopra does not tend to enhance bass notes or highlight treble, it is voiced neutrally. 'Wade In The Water' shows once more why Eva Cassidy is famous for having the best voice in pop. Every nuance is laid out and a second voice is clearly positioned behind the singer, there's lots of space for the instruments around her too. The final track is 'Money Money' by The King's Singers, and it splashes from the cones in a way that I could never complain about.



I chose my own grand finale with Dee Dee Bridgewater's *Live At Yoshi's*. 'Slow Boat To China' explodes at very high volume but this doesn't bother the Sopra. It's a pity that such high volumes will damage my ears if I continue so I turn the volume down again, but not before the Sopra N°2 convinces me of its dynamic capabilities.

Let the music flow for I find no limits. No nasty compression, no roughness, ultralow distortion, hardly any coloration, in truth I can't detect its 'signature'. The Sopra N°2 is neutral and never overstates things, that said it's a true Focal with its roots firmly in the Utopia range, it does have French (=Focal) character. A word of wisdom for anyone considering a pair, do not overdamp your listening room, this is a loudspeaker that should be free and alive. Use a dynamic and rhythmically strong source and powerful amplifier behind it. This has proved to be the best and only way to experience how much effort the Focal R&D team has put into this remarkable product. Is this a new statement in its price range? Even when you cannot find a place in your house for them, find them too expensive, dislike the cabinet design or come up with another reason not to buy a pair, you will always marvel at their performance. The Sopra N°2 is literally and figuratively an impressive loudspeaker.

**SPECIFICATIONS:**

Type: Three-way Bass-reflex floor standing loudspeaker

Drivers:

Two 7" (18cm) "W" woofers

6 1/2" (16.5cm) "W" midrange with "TMD" suspension, "NIC" motor

1" (25mm) "IHL" Beryllium inverted dome tweeter

Frequency response (+/- 3dB): 34Hz - 40kHz

Low frequency point- 6dB: 28Hz

Sensitivity (2.83V / 1m): 91dB

Nom. impedance: 8 Ohms

Minimum impedance: 3.1 Ohms

Crossover frequency: 250Hz / 2200Hz

Recommended amplifier power: 40 - 300W

Dimensions (HxWxD): 1190 x 358 x 540mm

Net weight: 55kg

Finishes: black lacquer, Carrara white, Imperial red, Electric orange, walnut veneer

**PRICE:** £9,599

**MANUFACTURER DETAILS:**

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[www.focal.com](http://www.focal.com)

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