

Sonus faber Guarneri Tradition loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom

Whenever you think of Sonus faber, you tend to think of standmount loudspeakers. The company has made some good (make that 'outstanding') floorstanders and most of its range today is made up of extremely good sounding and elegant looking tower designs, but if any company is defined by its standmount designs, it's the Italian Sonus faber brand. Classics like the Minima, Elector Amator, and the Extrema came to represent what happens when style meets substance, and that the size of a loudspeaker was an unreliable indicator of performance. Then, in 1993 came the Guarneri Homage, the first in a series of loudspeakers named after classic Italian instrument makers, and it would be followed by Amati and Stradivari floorstanders. 24 years on, the Guarneri is reborn (as are the Amati and Stradivari), in the new 'Tradition' line.

The Guarneri has gone through several iterations in the past, but all have similar intent – a two-way ported speaker on its own dedicated stand that combines the richness and depth of finish required of a product bearing the name of a master Cremonese violin maker, but that delivers the sonic goods in that distinctive "Are you sure that's just a standmount?" manner. If you look at the original Homage, the Evolution, the Memento, and now the Tradition side by side, you can see the commonalities, but you can also see where changes have been made. Fortunately, each successive generation of Guarneri has managed to improve on the sound of its predecessor. That Tradition continues here. ▶





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Also inherited from the Il Cremonese design, the speaker system is mechanically decoupled from the floor by what Sonus faber calls 'Silent Spikes'. These are coaxial metal/elastomer/metal spikes, which are a direct trickle-down effect of the company's patented Z.V.T. (Zero Vibration Transmission) system, albeit scaled down for a standmount.

Having devoted a considerable amount of time and R&D budget on developing drive units for the whole Sonus faber range, the Tradition series largely draws from this portfolio rather than require new drivers for their own sake. This means the tweeter is the company's own H28 XTR-04 silk dome 28mm 'Arrow Point' Damped Apex Dome, with neodymium motor system and a natural wood acoustic labyrinth rear chamber. If that name or technology rings a bell, it's because it's the self-same tweeter used in the Lillium. The midwoofer, meanwhile, is something new: the W15 XTR-04, a Sonus faber-designed 150 mm dynamic driver with a neodymium magnet system designed to produce an "ultra dynamic linearity midrange". Given the 'W' prefix, we are given to believe that this is one of the company's lightweight 'sandwich' cone designs, with a syntactic foam core and two external surface skins of cellulose pulp.

This system substantially reduces transmission of spurious vibrations to the listening room, also acoustic feedback phenomena are inhibited.

Crossover is a non-resonant design, with an amplitude/phase response optimised for the best balance of spatial/temporal performance. This is known as 'Paracross topology' in Sonus faber speak, and the speaker has a crossover point at 2.5kHz. This too is derived from the big guns, although time alignment is less of an issue here.

► What is incredibly clever about today's Sonus faber is that word 'Tradition' is not a throwaway. There are visual and sonic calls to the company's past, without being hide-bound by history. There is almost a sense of seamless handover from the late Franco Serblin to the current design team, headed up by Paulo Tezzon on the engineering side, and the industrial design team run by Livio Cucuzza. Between them, they have acted as custodians of the original Sonus faber ethos while striving to bring that ethos up to date. Given the seemingly inherent conservative nature of audio enthusiasts, that's a big 'ask', but one that is met in the Tradition range.

The loudspeaker shape remains very similar to its predecessors and owes much to that violin-making of Cremona. However, the boat-backed shape of the speaker cabinets is also the fruit of careful research and major restyling, and owes as much to classic Riva motor launches as it does to violins and cellos. Given these classic boats are the stuff of legend, the kind of launch you can imagine a young Sean Connery stepping out from, or a young Sophia Loren climbing into. Those lines are echoed here, blending the curves of previous Homage models with those inherited from the company's current top Lillium model and in the process giving these speakers larger volume than before.

The single largest change is that the cabinet is actually no longer a conventional cabinet. It's more a series of highly tuned panels fitted to a Guarneri-shaped exoskeleton. The top-plate is perhaps the most clear expression of this sophisticated design, in that it's effectively two wing-shaped inserts, sitting in a metal top plate. This construction also allows for 'dampshelves' derived from The Sonus Faber and Il Cremonese models.

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Common to all three members of the new Tradition, the extruded aluminium back panel, is actually the external part of what Sonus faber calls its Stealth Ultraflex system. This is a laminar tuning system (derived from the Olympica collection) and acts as a vent favouring the flow of air through the duct, while controlling its speed and reducing any turbulence. This means the air itself is contributing lower distortion to the sound of the loudspeaker itself.

The speaker itself arrives in two medium sized boxes, the smaller of which contains a crate within the box for the loudspeakers. The loudspeaker box comes complete with owner’s manual, recommended gold-coloured cleaning cloth, an alcohol-based cleaning fluid that evaporates fast and leaves no stain, and a lovely, perfect-bound ‘Everyday Luxury’ coffee-table ‘bookazine’ dedicated to the Homage Tradition line. This might seem like a strange add-on, almost like shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted – who needs a high-end brochure about a product you already own? That misses out on the single biggest sales force Sonus faber has – its existing clients. This isn’t just a ‘proof of purchase’ thing, or a ‘reinforcing your buying decision’ thing. This ‘brochure’ is what you have on show when you are showing off your loudspeakers to your friends. Who will be the next customers of Sonus faber. And you won’t care about being a free spokesperson for the brand, because the product looks so damn great.

Perhaps the biggest visual change from previous Guarneri models is in the stand. Older models used solid blocks of stone and metal. The Tradition dispenses with that in favour of a slimmer, single column of carbon fibre. This makes the stand both lighter and less resonant, and it gives the speaker a modern look. While this might upset some of the traditionalists who loved the look of the previous stand (the string-like grille is still supplied with the loudspeaker and this is extended down to the floor in previous designs), it still has a timeless appeal, is easy to affix to the speaker, and is so much a visual and sonic part of the design, there’s no point looking elsewhere.

The other big change to the Homage Tradition series is the addition of a whole new finish! While the review pair came in the classic rich red veneer with black accents, there is also a darker wenge finish with silver accents. While the red will appeal to all Sonus faber traditionalists, the more open-minded will love the look of the wenge finish. Both are given a high gloss finish and they have an appeal to which no magazine photo can do full justice. In print, they look remarkable, but in the flesh, they look a whole lot better! As with all the best Sonus faber designs, you’ll spend the first few hours prowling round them like a jungle cat eyeing up its next meal, and everyone you invite to see them will do the same. Where some expensive loudspeakers in the audio world are best described as falling into the “they’d have to sound good to get away with looking that bad” category, the Guarneri Traditions are a fine expression of the requirements of a man of wealth and taste. Where have I heard that line before?

My first recording to evaluate the Guarneri Tradition was therefore an obvious one: ‘Sympathy for the Devil’, by The Rolling Stones [*Beggars Banquet*, ATCO SACD]. These albums are not known for their high-grade recording quality (although the ATCO SACD and subsequent LP transfers are the best of a bad lot), but even here it’s clear we are on to something above the norm. Jagger’s voice is taut and centre-stage, underpinned by the other half of the Glimmer Twins chunky open-G tuned rhythm, and backed by the rest of the band at its peak. This is a track that cries out for a loudspeaker that has a powerful bass, good articulation, and an ability to play both restrained and ‘wig out’ when the guitar solos kick in. Add to this the slow build of volume, complexity, and speed that permeates the track, and it’s deceptively difficult to play, as well as being apposite in those first two lines.

Sonus faber has long managed to make small loudspeakers sound big, and it has often managed to make small loudspeakers sound rich and inviting, but the Guarneri Tradition adds in another factor (while not undermining either of these two important performance aspects): it manages to make it sound accurate, too. In a way, the Guarneri Tradition sounds more like the Extrema than the Guarneri of old, save for the fact the Guarneri’s less-demanding installation and electronics requirements are met. The Guarneri trades some of the lushness of its older versions and goes for accuracy, dynamism, and sheer energy instead. It’s a heady and seductive mix.

Even before the Tradition, Guarneri models were always beguiling, thanks to the way they managed to make music sound so, er, musical. It seemed you got past the studio and managed to direct inject yourself into the intent and talent of the musicians playing. ▶



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, ported standmount loudspeaker

Drive unit complement: 1× 2H8 XTR-04

Damped Apex Dome 28mm silk

tweeter, 1× W15 XTR-04 180mm

cellulose/foam sandwich bass driver

Frequency response: 40Hz–35kHz

Sensitivity: 87dB SPL (2.83V/1m)

Nominal Impedance: 4Ω

Amplifier power handling: 30–250W

Finish: lacquered natural walnut or wenge

Dimensions (H×W×D): 38 × 24 × 37.5cm

Weight: 16kg each (stand 13kg each)

Price: £13,600 per pair (inc. stands)

Manufactured by: Sonus faber

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Distributed in the UK by:

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► However, with the Guarneri Tradition, that ‘closer to the musicians’ element takes on a palpable sense of ‘thereness’. There’s no denying the presence of the studio now, and the overall sound is not just some magic spell cast over the sound. It’s more direct and precise, now, yet – which may seemingly appear at odds with this precision – loses none of the older Guarneri magic. This presents itself with the simplest of music such as the lilting melodies of Laura Marling’s *Once I Was An Eagle* [Virgin], where her voice takes on a texture and grace that is often missing. But it also scales up to a large piece, such as the expansiveness of Domingo singing and Giulini conducting the LA Phil playing ‘Una Furtiva Lagrima’, from Donizetti’s *L’elisir d’amore* [Opern Gala, DG]. This highlights precisely what the Guarneri Tradition does so well. On the one hand, it presents Domingo’s voice with all the passion and power required. On the other, it presents a sense of orchestral scale that is hard to do with any standmount. And on the, ah, third hand, it manages to summon up the drama and intensity of the piece. If you didn’t listen to opera before, hearing this on the Guarneri Tradition might change your mind.

At no time does the Guarneri Tradition show up that it’s a two-way standmount, unless you have the room and the other loudspeakers to compare. Even then, in many cases you would be getting ‘more’ (bass depth, volume headroom) while also getting less (refinement, musical integrity). It’s a trade-off few of us would honestly take!

I started this review praising Sonus faber standmounts, and there’s a reason those classic speakers are so beloved. That reason has translated directly to the Guarneri Tradition. It has a beguiling sound that manages to encapsulate the studio-monitor accuracy required of today’s loudspeakers with the refinement and musical insight of loudspeakers of a generation ago. That’s no mean feat, and makes the Guarneri Tradition not only the latest, but also the best of that Homage range to date. Recommended! +