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Sonus Faber "The Sonus faber" Loudspeaker

Italian Seduction

Robert Harley

It's common in the automotive world for manufacturers to create concept cars that allow designers freedom to develop new ideas and pursue "dream engineering" unrestrained by the need to make a product that can be manufactured and marketed. The automakers throw huge amounts of money at concept cars because that's how new technologies and innovative thinking are born.

The audio world seldom has this luxury given the relatively small size of our industry. But once in a while, a company with the resources, technical chops, and passion pulls out all the stops to create a new platform that explores uncharted territory in audio design. The new \$200,000 flagship loudspeaker from Sonus faber reviewed here, called simply "The Sonus faber," is as much a concept product as anything I've seen from the audio industry. But unlike concept cars that rarely go into production, The Sonus faber was realized in a limited production run.

Description

The Sonus faber makes a powerful visual and aesthetic statement just sitting in the room. This is a monumental loudspeaker, with its audacious technology, sheer size and weight, stunningly sensuous shape, and a fit 'n' finish commensurate with the world's finest luxury goods. Standing nearly six feet tall and weighing 676 pounds each out of the crate, The Sonus faber could easily have looked like another huge imposing box of a loudspeaker. But Sonus faber, the Italian maestros who already have a reputation for wrapping audio technology in high style, lavished on this statement product an elegant shape coupled with over-the-top finish quality to create a work of visual art. The speaker's overall shape was inspired by the lyre-shape of opera



houses, specifically La Fenice in Venice. (The Sonus faber was originally called The Fenice.) Sonus faber's 106-page (!) brochure includes this statement by the loudspeaker's designer: "The 'lyre' shape is also the shape of 'opera' houses, such as 'La Fenice' in Venice. The 'Phoenix' element, along with its analogies with the sphinx, were important sources of inspiration. The 'Phoenix' is a recursive myth in all global cultures. I was fascinated by the idea of the 'chant of the phoenix.'"

Seen from the top, The Sonus faber is shaped like a lyre, replete with gentle ridges suggesting the instrument's strings. This top

"The Sonus faber" Loudspeaker - THE CUTTING EDGE



piece, a 240-pound hunk of machined avional (an aluminum alloy), plays a crucial technical role, as we'll see later. The sides are flanked by inset panels of curved wood that are lacquered and polished to a degree that must be seen to be appreciated. The front baffle is covered in luxurious black leather. More than any other audio product I've reviewed—or even seen—The Sonus faber merges form and function in a breathtakingly beautiful statement.

The Sonus faber is a 3.5-way dynamic loudspeaker in a rear-ported enclosure. The driver complement is a 15" side-firing "infra-woofer," two 10" front-firing woofers, a 7" midrange, and a 1" ring-radiator tweeter. In addition to this driver array, The Sonus faber features the patented "Sound Field Shaper," a tiny two-way loudspeaker mounted in The Sonus faber's rear

panel. The Sound Field Shaper can be continuously rotated over 45° laterally via a large rear-panel knob (marked "Soundstage Azimuth"), and its sound-pressure level adjusted over four discrete steps via a second knob ("Soundstage Depth"). In essence, The Sonus faber is two loudspeaker systems in the same enclosure, one forward-firing and the other rear-firing, with the ability to adjust the directionality of the rear-radiated wave as well as the ratio between the direct and reflected soundfields. The Sound Field Shaper does *not* make The Sonus faber a dipole in the traditional sense. Rather, the rear-firing system reproduces ambient information, and its radical equalization curve and unusual dispersion pattern were designed specifically for its purpose of expanding the soundstage. (A third knob on the rear "Soundscape Control" panel, marked "Deep Low Level," adjusts the 15" woofer's output level.)

Input is via two sets of triple binding posts, allowing The Sonus faber to be bi-wired, bi-amped, tri-wired, or tri-amped. The multiple posts give you several connection choices. In one bi-wire/bi-amp configuration (selected by jumpers), the 15" Infra-Bass cone is driven by one amplifier, and the rest of the system with a second amplifier. In another configuration, the 15" Infra-Bass driver and the two 10" woofers are driven by the same amplifier, with a second amplifier dedicated to powering the 7" midrange and 1" tweeter.

It is impossible to overstate the sheer physicality, the elegance, the engineering depth, or the materials and finish quality of The Sonus faber—or of the passion with which its creators must have been filled.

Setup

John Hunter of Sumiko, Sonus faber's U.S. importer, flew out to my home for the setup. Each speaker is shipped on a pallet wrapped in cardboard. Remove the cardboard and you'll see an ingenious custom wheeled trolley beneath the speaker that makes moving these 676 pound behemoths relatively easy. You simply turn the trolley's crank handles to lower the wheels, unbolt the loudspeaker from the pallet, and it's ready to roll into position. After screwing in the threaded isolation feet (the feel of the machining is superb, by the way), you lower the speaker to the floor. The trolley comes apart so that it can be moved underneath the second speaker once the first is in position. Although this system works well, you should know that moving the speaker or adjusting toe-in requires that you put the trolley back under the speaker, raise it up with the crank handles, move the speaker, lower the speaker with the crank handles, and then remove the trolley.

The rear panel offers so many adjustments that it takes quite a bit of experimentation to find the right settings of bass level, soundstage-depth adjustment (the level of the rear-firing Sound Shaper), and angle of the Sound Shaper.

The Sonus faber needs a fairly large room, both to accommodate its prodigious bass output and to fully realize the rear-firing Sound Field Shaper technology, which dictates that the loudspeaker be placed at least 4.5' from the rear wall (6' is better). Even though my room is fairly large (22' x 18' with a ceiling that slopes from 13' to 18'), I felt that it was not quite big enough to realize The Sonus faber's full potential. That's why I flew to Sumiko's headquarters in Berkeley, California, to listen to

THE CUTTING EDGE - "The Sonus faber" Loudspeaker

The Sonus faber in a larger room, augmenting my two months of daily listening at home. In Sumiko's system it was driven by a pair of Pass Labs X600.5 monoblocks, an Audio Research Reference 5 preamplifier, ARC CD8 CD player, and an SME 30 turntable. This room was 31' x 21' x 10', which allowed The Sonus fabers to be positioned well out into the room with plenty of space behind them. My description of The Sonus faber's sound is an amalgam of my impressions at both locations.

Listening

Sonus faber has developed a certain sonic character for its products over the company's long history, a character extended to some degree in The Sonus faber. I say "to some degree" because this new flagship hews to the company's deep traditions while also incorporating elements of what I would call a more contemporary, resolving, and transparent presentation. The traditional Sonus faber virtues were in abundance—a tonal balance that favors ease, intimacy, and involvement rather than analysis or dissection; a warmth and "roundness" of tone that rendered instrumental timbres with deep saturation and rich liquidity; and a full-bodied midbass. Yet within this overall voluptuous aesthetic, The Sonus faber is, by a wide margin, the most highly resolved, detailed, and transparent loudspeaker the company has produced. It's as though Sonus faber's traditional sound has been updated to reflect the remarkable advances that have been made in recent years in dynamic loudspeakers, particularly in transparency and lower levels of colorations from the drive units and cabinets. The best modern cone loudspeakers now approach the transparency and resolution of planar designs, a trend that Sonus faber has advanced in The Sonus faber without straying from the company's core sonic values.

To give you an overall idea of how The Sonus faber sounds, a list of adjectives of what the loudspeaker was *not* is illustrative: lean, analytical, thin, ruthlessly revealing, forward, clinical, vivid, skeletal, sterile. The Sonus faber studiously avoided the kind of presentation that one can admire on an audiophile level, yet not enjoy on a musical level.

A brief listen to The Sonus faber can easily foster a misleading opinion of the loudspeaker; by eschewing a "spectacular" sonic presentation one can be led to the wrong conclusions. The Sonus faber doesn't fully reveal itself in a brief demonstration while listening for specific sonic attributes. Rather, you can understand this loudspeaker's remarkable qualities best during a long session, preferably at night, during which you turn off the audiophile criteria and find yourself immersed in the music with no thought of the sound conveying the musicians' expression. The Sonus faber subtly made its way into consciousness in such an understated way that late into the listening sessions I found myself surprised at how deeply I had been drawn into the music.

The Sonus faber's presentation was an "impressionistic" interpretation rather than a literal one. Jonathan Valin has perspicaciously identified three types of listeners; those who value fidelity to the sound of instruments in a concert hall ("the absolute sound"); those who value fidelity to the mastertape; and those who just want the music to sound beautiful and are less concerned about strict adherence to some "higher" truth (the "as you like it" listener). If you're in this third category, The Sonus

faber will likely be for you the ultimate expression of musical beauty. This was a loudspeaker that pursued beauty unabashedly, bringing to bear unprecedented passion, design, technology, and execution in the realization of that goal.

Getting to specifics, the treble balance favored ease and relaxation over extracting every last measure of detail. Overly bright recordings, of which there are many, were flattered by The Sonus faber. Vocals were notable for their lack of sibilance and bleached whiteness in the top octave—artifacts of microphones with rising top ends. The human voice as reproduced through The Sonus faber was stunning, not in a hi-fi sense of a larger-than-life, overly present image projected out in front of the speakers, but in the feeling of humanness and intimacy. The classic "reach-out-and-touch-the-singer" sense of presence was supplanted by the feeling of *the singer* reaching out to me, but emotionally and expressively rather than sonically. In fact, when it comes to reproducing the human voice, The Sonus faber was the most organic and believable transducer I've heard.

String tone, solo or massed, was absolutely gorgeous—liquid, lush, warm, and completely lacking in artificial sheen. I heard

SPECS & PRICING

Type: 3.5-way vented-box loudspeaker

Driver complement: One 15" subwoofer, two 10" woofers, one 6.5" midrange, one 29mm ring-radiator tweeter (front-firing); one 4.5" mid/woofer, one 1" dome tweeter (rear-firing "Sound Field Shaper")

Frequency response: 18Hz-36kHz

Sensitivity: 92dB

SPL/2.83V/1m

Impedance: 4 ohms

Power handling: 1000W

Dimensions: 29.5" x 68.9" x 30.9"

Weight: 676 lbs. each (net); 816 lbs. each (shipping)

Price: \$200,000/pr.

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THE CUTTING EDGE - "The Sonus faber" Loudspeaker



more of the body of violins and less of the wiry sound of the strings. The glassy, glazed, chromium patina that often overlays strings was completely absent, replaced by velvety smooth textures. The period instruments on Peter McGrath's wonderful recording of Handel's *Water Music* (recently re-released by Harmonia Mundi—a great performance and superb sonics) had rich palpability of texture and a complete lack of electro-mechanical artifice. The Sonus faber's rendering of strings was made more compelling by the banishment of grain in the midrange and treble. Instrumental timbres were richly textured and deeply saturated, unencumbered by the layer of fine grain that dilutes musical realism. I have not heard a more sensuous liquidity or voluptuous rendering of instrumental timbre than from The Sonus faber. It's the kind of sound that caused me to melt into the listening seat, absorbing the music holistically.

Cymbals were rendered with a rich, burnished, brassy shimmer that emphasized the gong-like lower-order harmonics rather than top-octave sizzle. The top octave was smooth and sweet in a way that never affronted my ears. Think of the tonality of a flugelhorn compared with that of a trumpet and you'll have a good idea of The Sonus faber's fundamental character. The flugelhorn's burnished golden glow is contrasted with the brighter and more incisive trumpet.

The flip side of this presentation was a somewhat subdued sense of top-octave openness and a dilution of energetic drive in some music. The intricate, high-energy Latin percussion on the track "Samba Del Gringo" from *Swinging for the Fences* by Gordon Goodwin's Big Phat Band, for example, took on a less prominent role through The Sonus faber, both sonically and musically. The

low-level transient attacks were less sharply defined than I've heard from other world-class loudspeakers, sounding slightly muted by comparison. One could argue that many of today's loudspeakers are a little hot in the treble, which tends to hype such transient detail and add an artificial etch to the music. The Sonus faber is definitely not one of these loudspeakers.

There are areas in which The Sonus faber was both sonically and musically spectacular by any measure. These were large-scale dynamics, the ability to reproduce music at any listening level without a hint of strain, congestion, or compression, and the lifelike reproduction of the sheer physicality of music. This is a massive loudspeaker, and it sounds like it. Many loudspeakers suggest that they offer full-scale dynamics and bass extension from a mid-sized enclosure; The Sonus faber needs no such qualifications. This loudspeaker was absolutely unfazed by low-bass content, the most massive of orchestral climaxes, or high sound-pressure levels—even when occurring simultaneously. The Sonus faber moved air in a way that only a big loudspeaker can, enveloping my entire body in the experience rather than just my ears.

The bass power was seemingly limitless, with no hint of dynamic restriction, strain, port chuffing, or other artifacts—and this was true no matter what the listening level. Not only did the bass extend into the regions where you sense the room being pressurized rather than hearing a pitch, but it was reproduced with staggering dynamic contrasts. Even as dynamically challenging a disc as *Däfos* was brought to life with absolutely no compression of peaks. Moreover, The Sonus faber's reproduction of bass transients was superb. Despite its size and

THE CUTTING EDGE - "The Sonus faber" Loudspeaker

bass extension, The Sonus faber started and stopped on a dime. Big bass transients jumped to life, and then instantly died away. I heard no contribution from the enclosure, either tonally or dynamically. Vinnie Colaiuta's massive kick drum on the great new Jeff Beck disc *Performing this Week... Live at Ronnie Scott's* was reproduced with its full propulsive power. For the loudspeaker to put that much bass energy into the room so suddenly, and then disappear just as quickly with no overhang or cabinet coloration, is a remarkable achievement.

The Sonus faber's soundstaging was jaw-dropping, and different from other reference-quality loudspeakers. Very often, a loudspeaker will throw a soundstage in which the images are sharply defined with pinpoint precision. Such soundstages tend to be a bit dry, lacking a sense of bloom around image outlines, and are not the last word in soundstage depth. At the other extreme is the loudspeaker that produces a big, billowy stage with lots of depth and space, but with fairly indistinct imaging. The Sonus faber's soundstage combined the best of both worlds, conjuring up a defined sense of instruments in space, but within a huge acoustic. The impression of the wall behind the loudspeakers disappearing, replaced by a cavernous acoustic (on a select few recordings that managed to capture this quality) was stunning. Compared with the other loudspeakers I've had recently, however, The Sonus faber's soundstage didn't have razor-sharp delineation of instrumental outlines—which one could argue is a hi-fi artifact. Image outlines tended to be less "sculpted" and

not thrown into such sharp relief against the recorded acoustic. Imaging was somewhat soft, gentle, and "round" rather than sharply defined when compared with the Rockport Altair and TAD Reference One. This quality, however, was dependent on the setting of the Sound Field Shaper, the small rear-firing two-way. Adding more contribution from the Sound Field Shaper resulted in greater bloom and spaciousness; reducing the Sound Field Shaper's output produced a more incisive and immediate soundstage perspective. The soundstage was also notable for its portrayal of height information; the soundstage didn't just extend laterally, but vertically as well, with differentiation of image height. This quality was enhanced by the soundstage's massive size in every dimension.

The bass was extended and powerful in my room, but not quite to the degree I thought this speaker was capable of. One of the side-firing 15" woofers was located next to a hallway that intersected a second hallway, the bass energy effectively driving a large volume of air adjacent to the listening room rather than the room itself. Perhaps by juxtaposition, the midbass was rich, full, and generous, the antithesis of a lean, overdamped sound that favors taut pitch articulation over timbral warmth. This character lent a big, round, "purring" sound to electric bass that added to The Sonus faber's overall warm tonal balance. Pitch definition, however, suffered as a result of this congestion in the midbass.

The midbass richness and the lack of deep extension, however, turned out to be the way The Sonus faber interacted with *my*

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room. When listening in Sumiko's larger space, the midbass, while still on the full and warm side, was decidedly more articulate and defined than in my listening space. Any reservations I had about the midbass articulation and overall tonal balance were completely allayed by hearing The Sonus faber in the different environment. Moreover, The Sonus faber's bass in Sumiko's room went as low as I've heard from any loudspeaker.

Conclusion

The Sonus faber is an enormously ambitious loudspeaker that succeeds on many levels. For starters, it is a technological *tour de force*, breaking new ground in vibration control and cabinet construction, and in the use of the Sound Field Shaper rear-firing drivers. This loudspeaker is also stunningly gorgeous visually, and built with exquisite fit 'n' finish.

Sonically, The Sonus faber offers ease, grace, and delicacy, a warm rich liquidity of timbre, massive dynamics, and the ability to play at any level without strain. The Sonus faber departed from many other state-of-the-art contenders in that it took a somewhat impressionistic approach rather than serving as a literal translator of the music. This resulted in a gorgeous, voluptuous, even sensuous presentation that did indeed sound breathtakingly beautiful. If you are Jonathan Valin's "as-you-like-it" listener, I can think of no more gorgeous-sounding loudspeaker.

The presentation I've described is very different from that of the Rockport Altair reviewed in Issue 214, as well as that of the



TAD Reference One, which I received the day after The Sonus faber left my listening room. The Rockport and TAD are more literal, "technical," and less romantic, appealing more to the brain and less to the heart. The Sonus faber takes a different approach to connecting the listener to the music, finding music's beauty in emotional expression rather than through pursuit of ever-greater sonic analysis. If you find that your hi-fi system sounds great by all the audiophile criteria but fails to involve your heart, Sonus faber's remarkable new achievement represents a path to a different realm of musical intimacy. **tas**



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