



# Sonus Faber Cremona

Italian speaker with looks based  
on the Amati but at a slightly  
more approachable price point

<b>PRICE</b>	£4998
<b>SUPPLIER</b>	Absolute Sounds
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**Down in East Kent,** we have a 'sad bastards club' which meets Saturday mornings. We discuss hi-fi, cars, music, cameras, watches — and anything else that isn't young and female because we're all 40-plus alter cockers. We number among us a member whose wife so loathes hi-fi that it borders on the pathological. In 34 years as an audiophile, I have never met a person who detests harmless, innocent hi-fi equipment with such all-consuming vehemence.

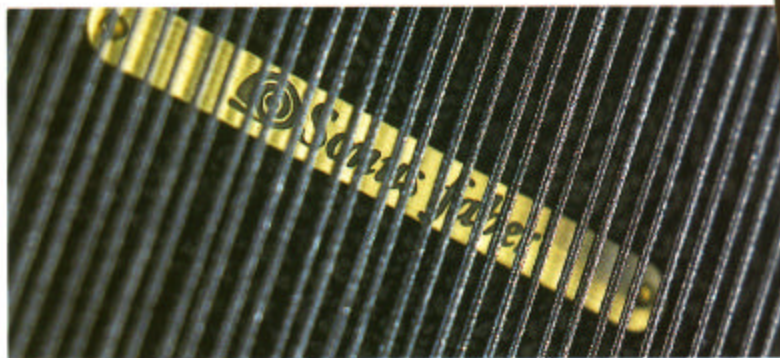
But she loves the Sonus Faber Guarneri.

Why? Because the Guarneri delivers sublime performance while acknowledging that people have to look at/live with the equipment. Among the world's covetable toys, only hi-fi equipment manages to be both expensive and hideous. Every other form of luxury commodity addresses the item's presence as well as the performance. Think about it: There are very few hideous supercars. Furniture, jewellery and clothing are by definition 'styled'. Pens, cameras and watches are too small and fundamentally functional to offend the eye. So the Guarneri is regarded as a

is different, the specification is different — even the wood is not the same, the Cremona being fashioned from 32 staves of solid maple. Moreover, the finish is medium-gloss rather than full gloss, a hand-applied, multi-coat surface described as 'ecologically sensitive lacquer' giving the look which so appealed to the anti-audio spouse mentioned above.

As with the Amati and Guarneri, the cabinet shape is more than a mere aesthetic statement: the lute shape was developed to control resonances and internal standing waves. This isn't high-end mumbo-jumbo, but an approach to dealing with a problem which has always affected box-type loudspeakers. The resultant 68kg-per-pair design is as seemingly dead as any cabinet fashioned from the myriad mineral composites, and *Homage* models are notably free from smearing or imprecision. Even the diminutive Guarneri exhibits bass which belies its size, due in no small part to the cabinet integrity and rigidity. The much larger Cremona? Its said to cover 32Hz–40kHz.

At the very top of the Cremona is a Vifa unit which looks a whole helluva lot like the



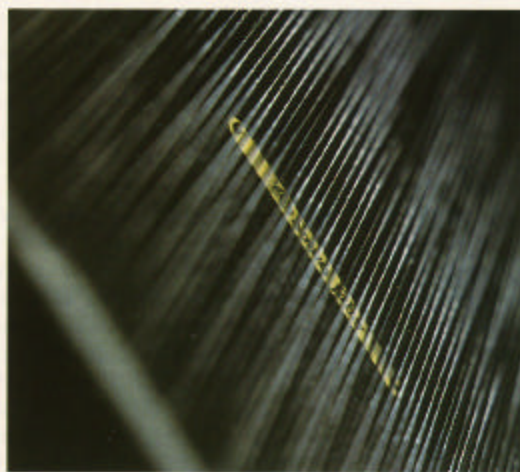
milestone for what it did to the way we regard the appearance of hi-fi speakers, like the less-radical but equally revolutionary-in-effect Sonus Faber models before it. And this occurred prior to 'custom-install' becoming an established audio subset.

With Cremona, Sonus Faber has taken the highly-coveted *Homage* look (see sidebar, *What's In A Name?*) down to a slightly more approachable price point. It is not, by any stretch of the imagination, an affordable speaker; to most people, £4998 per pair is way past 'obscene' and well into 'vulgar'. Still, in terms of the *Homage* line, it undercuts the much smaller two-way Guarneri by £300 while offering an extra fistful of drivers and cabinetry, and it is nearly £7000 less than the floorstanding Amati which it so resembles.

But looking like a scale model of the Amati at 226 x 460 x 1090mm (wdh) is as far as it goes, the shape and grille being the only common links. Every driver

➔ Distinctive boat-tail cabinet design uses 32 sections of solid maple





◉ Ring radiator treble unit (far left) from Vifa in Denmark ensures high-frequency extension to around 40kHz, aided by Vifa's patented wave-guide centre plug; stretched strings (left) provide practical answer to the acoustically transparent grille

treble unit favoured by Krell for its LAT models. Described as a '1in high-resolution Ring Radiator with copper cap motor system', it's notable for a tiny phase plug in the middle — not too common for tweeters. Immediately below it and intersecting with its surround (to bring the drivers' centres as close together as possible) is a 5in mid/bass cone with 'Symmetric Drive' motor system, the diaphragm made from hard paper. In the lower half of the enclosure are two 6in woofers, also paper-coned and with the same drive system.

Crossover points aren't stated, but bi-ampers needn't cogitate: Cremona uses single-wiring, not bi-wire, via custom-made gold-plated terminals fitted at the very bottom of the back section. This portion of the cabinet is sculpted like that of the Amati's and it contains the apertures of two separate ports, one each for the mid/tweeter section and the bass elements. Completing the package is a sturdy metal plinth with adjustable feet, the correct set-up providing the Cremona with a severe rearward-leaning slope for time alignment.

Like the Amati but unlike the amplifier-taunting Guarneri, Cremona is an easy drive at 90dB/1W sensitivity and with 4 ohm impedance [manufacturer's figures]; the company recommends amplifiers in the 50–300W range, which includes their sorely underrated Musica integrated.

If you read my two-part coverage of the Audio Research SP16 pre-amp and VS55 power amp, you'll recall that I 'lucked into' a dream combination which I just didn't anticipate. And yet much mitigated against it. Despite the 90dB/1W spec, I

expected the Cremona to behave atypically for a speaker of that rating, simply because a near-decade's use of the Guarneri has conditioned me to feed Sonus Faber's top models with ample wattage; my session with the genuinely efficient Amati failed to 'un-condition' me despite its easy driveability.

While I tried the Cremonas with amps ranging from 35W/ch up to 300W/ch, I kept returning to the 50W/ch VS55. It was immediately apparent that the package formed a synergy to match such legendary pairings as the early Krell/Apogee marriages (and — I suppose — early Linn-plus-Naim if your idea of wedded bliss is Mr & Mrs Alf Garnett). But I must caution those of you for whom this review is a guide to a possible purchase: my room measures 12 x 18ft, and I do not have any desire to burst my eardrums.

## High resolution stereo SACD recordings in particular sounded more obviously different from the equivalent stereo CD

Let's just say that it was loud enough to convey the majesty of Kodo drumming, with no signs of amplifier fatigue, nor of speakers begging for more juice. And it was tickled pink with the sheer grunt of the Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista M3.

Completing the sessions were the SP16 pre-amp, the Marantz CD12/DA12 CD player, the SME 10 turntable with Series V arm and a Transfiguration cartridge feeding an Ortofon step-up device. Wiring was Transparent Ultra throughout, while the mains ring was Kimber for the amps, Siltech for the phono and Transparent for the CD player. No other tweaks were used, the supplied feet ensuring that the speakers were mated rigidly to terra firma.

Blissfully, it was one of those sessions in which the first 20 seconds set the pattern for the rest of the test, a case where the running-in period improved matters audibly without revealing any changes in overall character. What is heard the first time out of the box remains consistent for the first few weeks, the gains



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afforded by running in the speakers affecting almost solely the lowest octaves. And while it stings me deeply to admit it, I can almost understand why Sonus Faber wants to distance this speaker from the Guarneri and the Amati: it is a rocker's and home theatre buff's speaker, not a fragile, delicate, refined instrument for the sort of person whose life begins with chamber music and ends with opera.

While Cremona handled with kid gloves my favourite female voices — Alison Krauss, the Corrs and Juice Newton were as cosseted as could be desired — the speaker was also noteworthy for its behaviour at the frequency extremes. It is the antithesis of the LS3/5A or the Quad ESL, a speaker which boasts full-range prowess without any need for apologies related to composure at either the frequency extremes or when playing loudly. In this respect, it shares more with Amati than with Guarneri, which reinforces the notion that it just may be a true high-end bargain.

Even with its potential deliberately limited by a small-ish amplifier, the Cremona never wavered when faced with bombastic material, or when asked on occasion to play louder than my norm. I do have a tendency to whack up the volume when I play Wheatus' modern classic, 'Teenage Dirtbag', or mid-period J Geils Band; at times like that, the Cremona belied its northern Italian roots and acted with the animalist force of a New York/New Jersey thug. It was magnificent.

But coarse, stadium-grade rock is not an arbiter for performance quality, only for robustness. When fed material of a more Guarneri-friendly nature, the Cremona revealed a soundstage as wide but not quite so deep as the Guarneri, the musical images positioned within the sonic space to degrees of precision which will impress LS3/5A users. In this respect, you get a glimpse of what the Cremona could do doubling as a home cinema speaker; like the middle-level MartinLogans, it's the kind of speaker which can serve both masters, and

should be considered for any 5.1 channel system which will be seeing a lot of two-channel action. The resolution is superb, the atmosphere suitably airy, and the spread almost as open and enveloping as a dipole. In fact, the only like-sized, full-range dynamic speaker in my experience which betters the Cremona for the recreation of a sonic space is the WATT Puppy System 6... at four times the price.

If any trait distinguishes the Cremona from its classier siblings, it can only be the harder, sharper edges at the frequency extremes, minor personality quirks exacerbated by solid-state amps and reason



Finishing touches include custom-made binding posts

**While it stings me to admit it, I can almost understand why Sonus Faber wants to distance this speaker from the Guarneri and the Amati...**

enough to use Cremona with valves. In this sense, it's more 'hi-fi', more exciting, but slightly less realistic. Even the a cappella vocals of the Persuasions revealed this; you don't have to feed it house music or lots of sampled effects to excite the extremes. And for many, the sparkle will be preferable to the almost laid-back attitude of the Guarneri.

What we have here is a Sonus Faber model that is hard to categorise. While my eyes identify it as a Homage model, my ears do not. The Cremona is a speaker for those who worship the Amati/Guarneri look, but who prefer a vibrant, bold sound to the refinement and subtlety of the Homages. We must be clear about this, however: the Cremona is very much a Sonus Faber, but it is more of a grown-up's Concerto than a poor man's Amati.

Because of an amplifier match with the Guarneri about which I will be reporting later this year, I now believe the Guarneri rather than the Amati to be Serblin's masterwork. Along comes the Cremona, which gives you a taste of the Amati sound and all of its looks and finish for less than the price of Guarneri, so I have to add the following: the Guarneri may be the finest speaker Franco Serblin has ever devised, but the Cremona is the real bargain in the pack.

Man, I'd hate to be a speaker manufacturer selling anything within a grand of £5k. If looks could kill, the corpses would be the Cremona's rivals.

#### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Sonus Faber does not count the Cremona as part of the Homage series. Yet the speaker's name is that of the city which is being honoured through the Amati, Guarneri and (the forthcoming) Stradivarius models, it uses the same 'violin string' grille, it looks exactly like a baby Amati and the catalogue itself states that 'The Cremona Project is a tribute to the city that is the custodian of the art and tradition of lute making'. So it's an Homage model, right? Uh, no, and here's why: the Cremona is actually part of a new series, one which Sonus Faber wants to be distinguished from Homage, which is their flagship range. Suffice to say, the range of which Cremona is a part will address more than two channels. But if it's not Homage, why call it 'Cremona'? Why not Vicenza, or Brooklyn or Peoria? Where I come from, if it looks like a duck, sounds like a duck and walks like a duck, it's a duck. So, to me, the Cremona is 'entry-level Homage'. Sorry, Franco.

WORDS: KEN KESSLER