

grace, space,

Sonus Faber's Cremona Auditor high end standmounting loudspeakers offer a classic blend of desirable qualities, says Channa Vithana...

If the eighties was the age of small, two-way standmounting mini-monitors (Acoustic Energy AE-I, Linn Kan, etc.) then the nineties begat the modern floorstander. Round about 1993, the fashion took off with a vengeance, and suddenly a tall, narrow-baffle, small footprint box full with a healthy complement of drivers was the only thing to have in your living room. Everything from Mission's 752 up to KEF Reference Series 4s got rave reviews, and all of a sudden the idea of the standmounter looked mightily unappealing.

In showrooms of course, floorstanders were an easy sell. Their proportions, allied to some nice, light, crisp modern wood finishes (thankfully black didn't last too long into the nineties), allied to the promise of all that bass, and even a small fillip for the efficiency figures, made many buyers wonder why folk bothered with small boxes sat on ugly metal columns anyway.

However, it was something of 'the Emperor's new clothes'. Nothing in loudspeaker design is for free, and that extra bass could often be a liability. Of course, mini-monitors often have small bass peaks engineered in around 100Hz, to give them extra apparent 'punch', and this was something that floorstanders usefully did without. But the extra octave of low frequencies that the floorstander's larger internal volume brings made for problems elsewhere.

Standing wave suppression was harder, and the often substandard, poorly braced cabinets could resonate like nobody's business - inadequacies in the design and build of any speaker are exacerbated when it's twice or three times as long.

Result: muddy sound with the bass about half a beat behind the treble. So there is actually a lot of sense in going for a high quality standmounter after all.

At 190x320x350mm, the Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor is no eighties-style mini-monitor, however. Rather, it walks 'the third way' of being a largish standmounter - and a thoroughly modern one at that. The design is quite exquisite. Obviously, they're premium priced, so you'd expect something special, but they really are quite exceptional with their beautifully finished, solid wood, Lute-shaped cabinets, sleek grille system and elegant swept-back stands.

A two-way, rear-ported bass reflex design, the speaker boasts a 29mm dome tweeter and 150mm 'hard paper' mid/bass unit, separated by a first order crossover. Sonus Faber claims a 46-40,000Hz frequency response, with a nominal impedance of 4ohms allied to a sensitivity of 88dB. Although a largely conventional design - no ribbon tweeters, electrostatic panels or strange cabinetry here - the Cremona Auditors impress with their superlative attention to detail.

SOUND QUALITY

Compared to most floorstanders, the Cremona's impedance/ sensitivity numbers aren't terribly user-friendly - they'll need a serious transistor amplifier to aspirate them, but then anyone who doesn't possess such a beast shouldn't contemplate buying high end standmounters anyway! For this reason, the first part of the listening was undertaken at *Phonography* [see box].

Intriguingly, an unexpected match was formed between these loudspeakers and Alison Goldfrapp - now there's an odd coupling, if one recalls previous Sonus Fabers as being characterised as

sounding collectively polite, smooth and good for jazz or classical! As the review unfolded, I tried them with source material ranging from Metallica's 'Master of Puppets' and The Balanescu Quartet's 'Possession' to Star Wars 'Episode 2 OST' and Death In Vegas 'The Contino Sessions', with interesting results...

First, The

THE NAME

Sonus Faber has something of a penchant for naming its loudspeakers after classical musical instrument makers, but Cremona is actually the northern Italian town from which some of that country's finest hail, including Amati, Guarneri and Stradivari.



pace

POSITIONING

Being rear ported, you can't slam these speakers back against a rear wall as you might do with sealed baffle mini-monitors. Rather, they work best about one metre out into the room, although you can always push them a tad further back for more bass reinforcement if need be. They also respond well to toe-ing in, but only ever so slightly. Their light weight (relative to floorstanders) means it's vital to ensure that they're as stable as possible - by applying the weight of your body to the top of the speaker

as it sits on the stand and pressing down - once you've positioned them correctly in the room, of course. It's easy to tell that you've got them right, as the Cremonas' soundstage should dissolve into space.



VERDICT

Superb all rounder, works fine using high quality mid price separates but excel with the high end.

SONUS FABER CREMONA

AUDITOR £2,149

STANDS £399

Absolute Sounds

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THE LISTENING ROOMS

Two listening rooms were used. First, the *Phonography* room was 5x7m with block/brick walls, carpet, and bookshelves. The Auditors were spaced 2.5m apart and 1.5m away from back wall with 15° toe-in. Here a combination of Dynavector L300 pre and Hx 1.2 (180w!) power amps were used with a Densen Beat B - 400 XS CD player - £11,000 of serious equipment. Then a more modest set-up at home using a 4x6m room with block/brick walls and floating wood floor over concrete. Placement was 2.2m apart and 400mm from wall with 10° toe-in.

Balanesco's chamber version of Kraftwerk's 'The Robots' was beautifully rendered, its array of strings coming out so well, especially the rhythmic breaks, where solidity and colour issued forth from the Auditors. 'Dirge' by Death In Vegas, a tricky rock piece, grooved menacingly, but the Auditors controlled the recording's complexities, proving just able to grip the bass as this difficult piece crashed and burned.

Up next was Metallica's 'Orion' - an eight-minute leviathan and a curious piece, what with its lush drum and bass progression mixed with brutal guitar and a gorgeous jazz-folk interlude! Amazingly, the Auditors illuminated every strand of the mix, with some wonderful guitar texturing. 'Orion' sounded a tad slow initially, although this could be attributed to carpet/stand interaction and/or speaker running in.

Then came the drama. Starting with track 3 from Star Wars, this broodingly atmospheric piece builds up in many layers then suddenly you get a slap to your senses with brilliant percussion whizzing by, with huge immersive strings and horns panning from left to right. As the track gains momentum, bass swells magnificently, flying out of the speakers at an incredible rate, dispelling polite notions instantly. The Cremonas captured this in its entirety, and after recovering from that slap, I got the Ali 'butterfly and

bee' uppercut in form of a deliciously finessed pulsating bass from Goldfrapp's Crystalline green. Punch drunk, one cannot believe hearing a vocal as sexy as this! Goldfrapp's unique spectral style was staggeringly well intimated. Head back and eyes closed throughout, I thoroughly enjoyed this song.

At home [see box], the sound was leaner and faster - probably because there's no carpeting. The use of modestly priced Naim electronics was no deterrent; relatively speaking, surprisingly good performances highlighted the Auditors' enthusiasm. They adore strings, whether acoustic or abrasive electric guitar - and good synth compositions too.

Sonus Faber's Cremona Auditors are excellent achievers, even at this price. Although extremely detailed, faithful and transparent, they're not as critical of their source equipment as one might expect.

They retain elements of the traditional SF sound, but offer great speed and punch, making them truly able with a wide variety of music from rock to classical. Yet they retain the brand's characteristic delicacy, subtlety and grace. Overall, they're living proof how capable the 'large standmounter' can be, and how it can actually offer better value than equivalent floorstanders, providing subterranean bass isn't your thing. A Sonus Faber experience quite unlike past perceptions.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

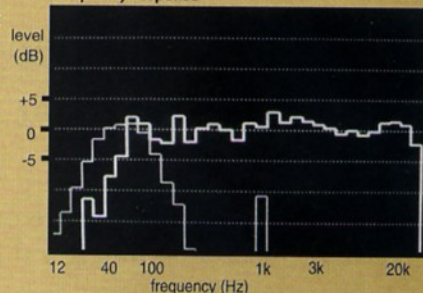
The Cremona has some midrange lift centred around 1kHz, just enough to give clearly enunciated speech and vocals, and a good sense of projection, without sounding unbalanced. Most speakers have an innate 'balance', part of what some designers term the 'voicing' of the speaker, and in this case it differs from many, so the Cremona will likely have its own sound and its own appeal. With smoothly extended treble it will be both clear and tonally well balanced. Measurement shows some bass undulations though, with strong forward output around 63Hz likely to give emphasis to these frequencies. The port was lower so deep bass will be apparent in larger rooms.

Sensitivity was normal at 86dB from one nominal watt (2.8V) but with an impedance of just 5ohms in fact the speaker is drawing more

(1.6W). All the same, the Cremona will seem fairly loud at any particular volume control setting, holding its own against rivals. So as a load it is fairly normal, needing 40W-100W or so.

The Cremona measures well enough. It will have some high bass emphasis and may sound a little enthusiastic here; it will also have good vocal projection. NK

Frequency response



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