

Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor

Compact Italian two-way speaker for the AV generation

PRICE £2150/pair

SUPPLIER Absolute Sounds

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If it bothers me when this happens, it will probably bother you. It's just that there's no escaping the need to remind you of earlier Sonus Faber products, and earlier reviews. Without wishing to make this read like the Old Testament — 'And Electa Amator begat Minima', *ad nauseum* — there is no way you can appreciate what has been achieved with the Cremona Auditor unless you recount the evolution of the Homage series and its relationship to the Cremonas. Bear with me, though, because this speaker is going to save

🔗 Unmistakable hallmarks of Sonus Faber in evidence: boat-tailed cabinet and string grille

some of you around £3000.

Its predecessor is the Cremona, a floorstander which has charmed the hell out of everyone who has seen and heard it. Why? Because it's as gorgeous as the nearly-like-sized Amati Homage at twice the price, it sounds fantastic, and even the most fearsome Bitch Wife From Hell will hesitate for a fraction of a second before she finally says, 'You're not putting *those* in my lounge.' (Notice the use of the word 'my', despite the fact that you pay the mortgage.) She may not even be moved by the bottle of cleaner which Sonus Faber now supplies, to keep the leather-covered baffle in top condition. *Porca miseria!*

When I reviewed the Cremona, I was baffled by the speaker's non-inclusion in the Homage series. 'Please, guys,' I implored, 'tell me this is an Homage model!'

'Kennino,' they told me, 'wait and all will be revealed.'

And it was: the Cremona was the first in a

series of new speakers which, while bearing Homage looks, would take Sonus Faber into high-end home cinema, with performance and price above the Concerto range. This explained the slightly different voicing, the less-threatening load, the slightly less-critical positioning demands than the Amati or Guarneri exhibit. So, while the physical resemblance to Homage is undeniable, the speakers must be regarded as a different range, in the way that, say, Krell differentiates between Showcase and its 'normal', high-end line.

Your first reaction will be that the Auditor is a three-quarter scale model of the Guarneri; aside from the finish, the relationship is *that* close, like the MartinLogan Descent and Depth subwoofers: peas in a pod. Also, like Guarneri, this is a compact two-way system, the cabinet being a vented enclosure with the patented lute shape. Behind the 'violin strings' grille, as first seen in the Guarneri and now also found (with permission) on Krell speakers, is a 29mm Scan-Speak ring radiator tweeter, as per the first Cremona. Below it is a 150mm mid/bass driver with Symmetric Drive motor system and selected hard paper 'sliced' cone; the 'slices' improve resolution and control cone break-up.

Sonus Faber eschewed bi-wiring for the Auditor, access to the speaker being through a pair of handsome, proprietary screw-terminals with large spinners so you can tighten them with ease. Although fully EC-compliant, they can accept banana plugs through the terminal pillar, as the hole for bare wire insertion is quite large. These connect to a crossover described as a 'non-resonance acoustic first-order design, optimised for acoustic phase response.' The Auditor is rated as having a sensitivity of 88dB/W — slightly below average these days — with a nominal impedance of 4 ohm. Needless to say, this will not threaten even mundane A/V receivers in the £1000–£1500 bracket.

This is confirmed by a power range of 50–250W. Although I used it mainly with the Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 300, it also sang beautifully with the Quad 909 and even the 303. Frequency response is given as 46Hz–40kHz;



you'll notice upon first hearing that this speaker delivers such convincing bass that you'll feel you need never again to pay attention to specifications.

Then there's the look. Measuring only 190 x 320 x 350mm (wdh), the Auditor is truly compact, even dainty. I thought the Guarneris were smallish speakers, but they seem enormous in comparison. The Auditor is available in natural maple, made up of solid and laminated sections and finished in multi-coat, medium gloss, 'ecologically sensitive' lacquer. First seen at the London show was a breathtaking alternative, graphite grey, which polarised opinions. I adored it and can see it



being the choice of those who want Sonus Fabers, but who live in modernist surroundings devoid of much wood or fabric. But I loved the natural finish, too....

Unlike the Cremona, and, for that matter, the Homages, the Auditor is relatively unfussy about set-up. After years of using small Sonus Fabers, I've gotten used to experimenting with toe-in and positioning relative to the wall. These worked wonderfully even before I 'fine-tuned' them. I eventually settled on toe-in with the baffles facing the hot-seat, but it's far less than I use for Guarneri. Once set up and run-in, they created a soundstage of such magnitude that I sat there stunned: height width and depth were all of a scale I haven't heard since the time of Apogee. And — *mamma mia!* — it was even wider than that of the Guarneri. And, to my relief, the hot seat was wide enough for an Italian *mamma's* bottom.

'Uncanny' is the only way to describe one specific aspect of this speaker's '3D' performance: no speaker I can recall delivered as much sound past the outside edges of the cabinet. It makes the Auditor 'disappear', and I kept forcing myself to listen with eyes closed to ensure that I was hearing sounds beyond the boundary of the baffles' outer limits. One track in particular exploited this to the full: if you have

a copy of Eddy Grant's 'Do You Feel My Love?', play it through the Auditors while listening to the percussion — cymbals, tambourine and the like. If you've never believed that a speaker could vanish, this track will ram the point home with a vengeance. They float in the air, away from the speaker.

But don't take the album out of the player yet: that track will also show you how the Auditor defies logic when it comes to both bass weight and extension. The lower reaches are palpable, with a potency that smacks of a subwoofer, or a 10in driver at least. No unwanted overhang, no buzzes — just plenty of lower-octave energy suggesting a far larger transducer. While my own hierarchy of the Auditor's merits puts the soundstage at the top, for many it will be the absurdly convincing bass from what can only be deemed a 'mini-monitor'.

There there's the midband, so warm and vocals-friendly that you'll find yourself — as I did — digging out rich, textured voices full of character such as Livingston Taylor's or Dr John's or Nat 'King' Cole's, just to hear how the Auditor deals with breathing, sibilants and chest. I was so taken with it that I even listened to some interview tapes I'd just made on my Walkman Pro. I was back at the Bridge in Huntingdon. (And even the bar's espresso machine was in the right place — as much praise for the Walkman as the Auditors!)

Now we come to two trickier parts, much harder to assess...especially if you have a woody ear for Guarneri. As with the Cremona, the Auditor has a sparkly rather than silky upper register. It exaggerates transients a bit, adds some bite to fast guitar work or punchy brass, but also imparts a trace of the metallic to some acoustic instruments. It is, however, so minor that it strikes me as a trivial anomaly, the sort which can usually be corrected by cable choice. I thought the Auditors sounded sweeter with Transparent than DiMarzio, Kimber rather than Siltech. You can but experiment.

The second puzzler? Playback levels. This speaker loves to go loud. I'm not saying that it was unsatisfactory at low or background levels. It's just that it encourages turbo-nutter behaviour, like being handed the keys to a fast car. Don't ask me why: this is not the audio equivalent of an RS Ford. It's too refined and capable of subtlety to be thought of as a 'lad's speaker' — the Auditor will never be mistaken for a Cerwin-Vega. But every time I fed it more juice, it responded with glee. Back to Eddy Grant: I cranked up the Tri-Vista way past the 1 o'clock mark and the Auditor just took it in its stride. Which tells me that this speaker will laugh at Jurassic Park, U-571 and a battlefield full of orcs.

As for this review's preamble, here's why I

laboured the point about knowing That Which Has Gone Before: you can now see that the Cremona Auditor is to the Guarneri Homage what the floorstanding Cremona is to the Amati Homage, and in every respect — sonic as well as physical and financial. Y'see, the Auditor sells for only £2149 per pair, with the stands costing another £399. As a result, even if you never plan on relegating these to the rear channel role of a surround-sound set-up, the Auditor is precisely the speaker you should buy if you have long-coveted but simply could not afford the Guarneri Homage. Another analogy: the Cremona Auditor is to the full-size Cremona what Porsche's Boxster is to the 911 — less than half the price, nearly all of the performance.

If, as I suggested in the first Cremona review, it is the real bargain in the range, then that has to be modified. Now I know that the Sonus Faber Auditor is an even bigger bargain.

WORDS KEN KESSLER

TECHNOLOGY

The Cremona Auditor has a rear-ported body with a cross-section like a lute (or a boat-tail, if you're of a nautical bent), as first seen in the Guarneri, then the Amati. The shape is intrinsically superior to a box with parallel sides, for it minimises internal standing waves and produces a more rigid enclosure. The gorgeous looks are a by-product of both the shape and the use of staves of solid wood in the speaker's construction, and leather-covered MDF for the front baffle.

According to Sonus Faber's Cesare Bevilacqua, the Cremona veers from Homage practice 'in the driver array, crossover and the finish. Although both ranges use the same concept of multi-layer maple, the Homage models are hand-finished like a violin with the "brilliant" varnish which owes its character to the luthiers of centuries past.' The drivers in the Homage models, in addition to being older designs than those in the newer Cremona range, are heavily modified, the crossovers use higher-grade components and connectors, and the spikes are different. The Homage models have a sound balance that is less in-your-face, more pensive.

So, the two ranges are *not* mutually exclusive. But I have a sneaking suspicion that those who choose between Cremona and Homage will base their selections on budget constraints rather than any other consideration.

KEY FEATURES

- Surround-sound loudspeaker
- Very wide audio bandwidth
- Elegant finish