



Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor loudspeaker

Sonus Faber is Vicenza's, and Italy's, best-known hi-fi firm. But, founded in 1980, it's still a relatively young company. It wasn't until 1983 that the company really got going, with its first stand-mounted monitor, the Parva. This was quickly followed, in 1984, by the Minima FM2, a speaker that stayed in production for almost 18 years. (You can find the year-by-year history of Sonus Faber on the company's website, www.sonusfaber.com.)

Sonus Faber established its reputation with stand-mounted monitors: the Parva, the Minima FM2, the Electa Amator, and the Guarneri Homage, introduced in 1993 and still very much in production. Cabinet colorations are less of a problem with small monitors, which can image precisely, throw a deep, wide soundstage, and almost "disappear."

By the way, you should hear the soundstage at the Teatro Olimpico. Inspiring? Vicenza's hi-fi makers think so.

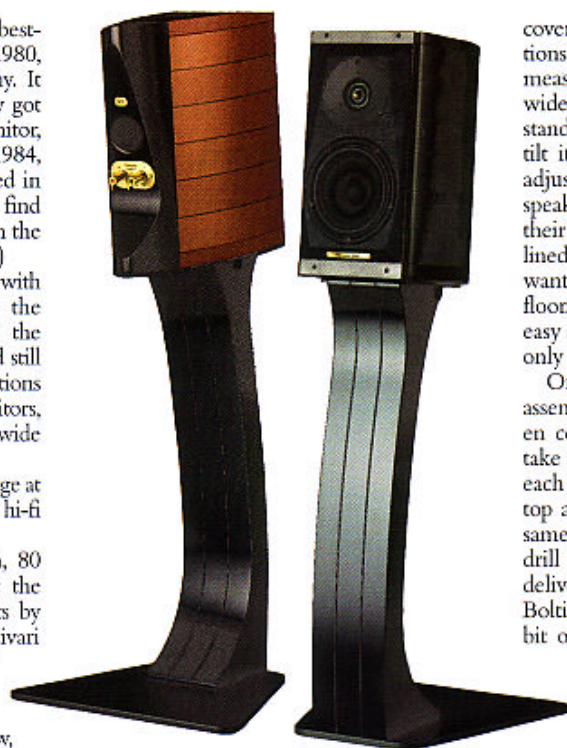
Inspiration comes also from Cremona, 80 miles to the west. There you can visit the Stradivarius Museum and see instruments by such masters as Guarneri, Amati, and Stradivari himself. And those speakers playing ever so quietly? Guarneri Homages, by Sonus Faber: \$10,000/pair with integral stands. If your purse strings allow, the Homages are definitely worth considering, especially if classical music is your favorite.

But, of course, not everyone can afford \$10,000/pair. Not everyone wants a small stand-mounted monitor. (They may need deep bass, for instance.) And some folks need speakers that are as well-suited to home theater and surround sound as to music and two-channel.

Enter the Cremona line.

The terminology is confusing. We caught up with the floorstanding Cremona speaker—called, simply, the Cremona—last January (Vol.26 No.1). It retails for \$7495/pair, and is complemented by the stand-mounted Cremona Auditor (\$3595/pair plus \$650 for the almost obligatory stands, or \$4245/pair), and the Cremona Center (\$3995/pair plus \$450 for stands).

When I visited the Sonus Faber factory, owner-founder Franco Serblin stressed that he'd designed the Cremona and Cremona



Sonus Faber Cremona Auditors: custom stands are almost obligatory.

Auditor first and foremost for music. The Auditor is no mere brand extension, he implied. He also suggested that some audiophiles might prefer the stand-mounted Auditor to the floorstanding Cremona.

Like its floorstanding sibling, the Cremona Auditor features Sonus Faber's patented lute-shaped cabinet, inspired by Giuseppe Guarneri, greatest of the Guarneri family of stringed-instrument makers. The Auditor also features the same stretched-string grille. Yes, that's patented, too.

The lute-shaped cabinet consists of 32 pieces of solid and laminated maple, with a multi-coat, medium-gloss clear finish. Or you can have the speaker in the "graphite" finish for a more high-tech look. The front baffle, hidden behind that stretched-string grille, is

covered with leather to soften sound reflections off the hard wood surface. Each speaker measures 13.75" high by 7.625" wide (at its widest point) by 17.875" deep. The matching stands raise the speaker 25" from the floor and tilt it back about 15°, the exact angle being adjustable via threaded floor spikes. The speakers bolt to the stands from underneath their top plates (the speaker's underside is lined with felt)—nice, because you wouldn't want these beautiful cabinets to land on the floor. The high-quality binding posts allow easy and secure finger-tightening—but there's only one set, which rules out biwiring.

One complaint: I found the stands a bear to assemble because the drill holes in the wooden center columns were too small. I had to take out my trusty Black & Decker and drill each hole a little wider in order to attach the top and bottom plates. If you have to do the same, be careful—you wouldn't want to over-drill or use too big a bit. Your dealer should deliver the speakers and assemble the stands. Bolting the speakers to the stands can also be a bit of a hassle, but once it's done, it's done.

Your dealer should also set them up for best sound. Even more than with the Cremona floorstanders, tweaking the Auditors' positions enhanced their soundstaging in our living room.

I initially used a Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista SACD player and matching Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 300 integrated amplifier. That was lotsa power: 350Wpc into 8 ohms. Later I substituted the Pathos Logos and Pathos Classic One integrated amps, to achieve an all-Vicenza system. Along the way, I tried Conrad-Johnson's combination of Premier 16LS Series 2 preamplifier and Premier 140 tubed power amp, which I wrote about last month. Gosh, I was so busy I hardly had time for summer vacation. Speaker cable was Triangle Silver Ghost.

The Tri-Vista 300 offered more power than I needed, and showed me that the Cremona Auditor is an excellent handler of power. In some applications, it'll have to be (I'm thinking home theater). Sonus Faber rates the Auditor at 88dB/W/m, its nominal impedance at 4 ohms, and recommends powering it with

50–250Wpc. Flea-powered single-ended triode (SET) amps need not apply. Ha! But I *did* find a way to get that SET sound with the Auditors. Read on.

The drive-units are from ScanSpeak, of Denmark: a 1" ring-radiator, fabric-dome tweeter and a 5.85" doped-paper bass/midrange cone (crossover point not specified). These are similar to but not quite the same as the drivers in the Cremona floorstander. The Auditor is ported at the rear, where the sides of the cabinet almost come together.

Pasquale Maggiordomo (aka Patrick Butler), of Sumiko, US distributor for Sonus Faber, lives nearby and helped tweak the setup. This time he moved the speakers only slightly in our shoebox-proportioned living room. They ended up 58" out from our narrow back wall and 31" from the sides. Did I mention that the Cremona Auditor's frequency range is specified as 46Hz–40kHz?

The Auditor's tonal balance was very similar to what I recalled from the Cremona floorstanders last winter: crisply articulated but not bright, detailed but not sterile. The speaker could play very, very loud, so I imagine they'll serve well in—and withstand—home theater

applications. If your home theater system does double duty for music, you're in luck. You can have your *Terminator* and Tchaikovsky, too. Come to think of it, I was able to play Tchaikovsky full-tilt—minus deep bass, of course.

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My, my, this speaker did respond to quality amplification and quality source material. The Conrad-Johnson pair exhibited its virtues. Ditto the Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 300 integrated—faster, with more power, more punch, a little less body and a tad less bloom than the tubed amp.

As for the Pathos Acoustics amps, you'll hear in a moment.

The deepest notes were missing, of course, but I thought the Auditor delivered surprisingly strong mid- to upper bass. More important, the bass, midrange, and treble seemed seamless—rather like listening to a full-range electrostatic. Of course, the floorstanding Cremona, with its dedicated bass driver, dug deeper.

But don't assume you'll necessarily like the floorstander more. Being minimonitors, the Cremona Auditors seemed to image better, placing soloists and instruments even more precisely across and into the soundstage. Keep in mind, too, that the Auditors, even with stands, cost \$3250/pair less than the floorstanders.

If you have deep pockets, you might audition Sonus Faber's Guarneri Homage. Yes, it's been around for 10 years. Yes, its drivers are older designs. (Once he puts a speaker in production, Franco Serblin isn't one to change things.) While I'm not sure the Guarneri Homage would stand up to heavy-duty home-theater use (abuse?), it has an exquisite musicality, especially with strings and voices. You can own a pair for a mere \$10,000, with integral stands.

That should empty your wallet. ■

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