

Rearguard Romeo

SONUS FABER CREMONA AUDITOR ELIPSA (£2498)

Designed to complement the Cremona range in a rear surround role, these compact two-way speakers may be deserving of a front-of-house spotlight



Tested by Ken Kessler

Some years ago, Magnepan produced a tiny panel for in-store display as a point-of-sale item. It was a miniature Maggie, maybe 18in tall, with sections cut away to show the technology. I asked Jim Winey, 'Why not make them functioning speakers?' But, alas, my first visit to Magnepan took place well before home theatre and Dolby Surround would deem small speakers desirable. But I loved the idea of a pair of 'mini Maggies' for the desk, or the bedroom, knowing they would never be realised.

Not wanting to be caught out a second time, two decades later, I simply assumed that Sonus faber's Auditor Elipsa was a non-working scale model of the Stradivari Homage or the Cremona Elipsa. It was too teeny, too damned cute to be a real speaker. Hell, you could almost hide it behind an LP sleeve. I couldn't believe it was a real speaker.

Accepting that it was, indeed, a real speaker, I never expected the latest in the Cremona range to 'pull a Wilson': like Wilson's mind-boggling Duette, designed for near-wall or shelf placement, the Auditor Elipsa belies its raison d'être by acting as a stunning stereo pair for full-time, audiophile pleasure. Yes, this mini-masterpiece was conceived primarily for rear-channel or other secondary uses. Which is as preposterous as finding out, say, that Ornellaia was developed as a table wine. (Which it wasn't, I hasten to add...)

STAND FOR IT

An all-new design using the Stradivari/Elipsa panel-meets-oval elliptical topology, the Auditor Elipsa is wider than it is deep: 341 x 335 x 224mm (hwd) including the supplied wall-mounting hardware. And the brackets don't have much to support: these weigh only 15.2kg per pair. The brackets bolt to the back and allow the speakers to pivot as needed. But I owe it to all of you to spend the next year or so begging Sonus faber to produce a dedicated floor stand. My-oh-my, does this speaker justify it.

Even scaled down, Franco Serblin's radical, almost panel-like cabinet shape for the Stradivari – a form created to control resonance and standing waves – remains drop-dead gorgeous. Available in natural maple or light graphite, the Auditor Elipsa is the Liv Tyler of speakers. It's a testimony to Italian wizardry. Something in the water... or the wine. Whatever the source, no other nationality possesses design skills like it.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Having matured over a quarter-century-plus into a company with three distinct ranges, and having long ago addressed multichannel with subs, centres and surrounds, Sonus faber continues to redefine the way we look at speakers. More than any brand, Sonus faber forced box-type speakers to evolve away from the characterless, wife-antagonising, slab-sided tedium we've suffered since the mid-1950s. Although no longer totally involved with Sonus faber, designer Serblin deserves our thanks for this. And if past behaviour is anything to go by, expect clones of this speaker to follow post haste.



Behind the trademark 'violin string' grille on this two-way vented box is a 25mm 'ultra dynamic ring radiator-driver' for the upper frequencies. It crosses over at 2.5kHz to a 150mm mid-woofer with Sonus faber's Symmetric Drive Motor System and wood fibre cone, treated for break-up control.

Being Italian and dazzlingly attractive, it's also made of materials and fashioned in a manner that are simpatico with the form. 'Pretty' isn't enough. The Auditor Elipsa recalls fine furniture, the glovebox door in a Bentley, a humidior from Humidif. Even before Sonus faber named a trio of speakers after famous

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violin makers, the company's artistry yielded enclosures that suggested nearby Cremona. This diminutive treasure gives up nothing to its larger siblings.

As with its antecedents, the Auditor Elipsa features sandwich construction achieved by using hand-selected layers of various woods and solid maple, 'quality graded and oriented' to enhance performance. Details include the aforementioned grille which completes the visual link to the first Guarneri, and the terminals on the back are the recently-introduced, bespoke multi-way binding posts for bare wire, spades or banana plugs, designed so you don't need a spanner or special tool to tighten them sufficiently.

MODEST AMBITIONS

Because Sonus faber's ambitions for the Auditor Elipsa are so modest – did they not know before this left the factory that it was a bloody marvel? – the specification is almost prosaic. A small box claiming a 55Hz–30kHz response, 89dB sensitivity and 4ohm nominal impedance? With that description, you'd be hard-pressed to imagine anything different from thousands of undistinguished boxes designed to run off AV receivers of questionable pedigree.

Connected to the McIntosh C2200 and MC2102 pre/power combo with Yter cable (also, I believe, used internally in the speaker), the Auditor Elipsa was fed material via the Marantz CD-12 CD player. ☞

ABOVE: The Cremona Auditor Elipsa has a single-wire-only crossover, featuring Sonus faber's own terminal posts for bare wire, spades or 4mm plugs

AUDIO FILE

Compact two-way speaker for rear-channel or small system duties

Price: £2498

Made by: Sonus faber

Supplied by: Absolute Sounds

Telephone: 020 8971 3909

Web: www.sonusfaber.com

LOUDSPEAKER TEST



ABOVE: The Auditor Elipsa uses the same ring tweeter with annular doped diaphragm as the big Stradivari

EMOTION CONVEYED

These speakers are large in scale and bass 'mass'; you won't believe you're hearing a speaker a mere inch or so taller than an LS3/5A. The Calling's twangy cover of the Georgia Satellites' masterpiece, 'Keep Your Hands to Yourself' summoned attack, speed, transient recovery and clarity as you would expect from a speaker with the same tweeter as the 'Strad' – one of the finest transducers on earth. Irrespective of the voice or instrument, lucidity and transparency marked the mid-to-upper reaches. And while it rips my guts out to say this, the vocals sounded more natural than via LS3/5As.

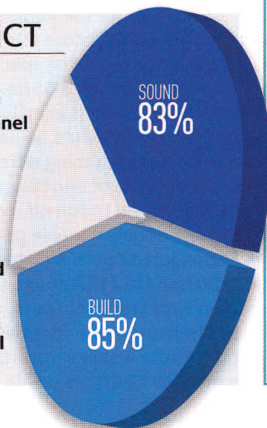
An assortment of voices reinforced this impression. With the unplugged *This Is Pat DiNizio*, which opens with one of the finest versions ever of the Beatles' 'For No One', the concept that a hi-fi system – as much as a recording – can convey emotion is hard to dispute. You could hear real aching and longing, something the Smithereens' front-man expresses with abject sincerity.

Dion's *Son Of Skip James*, continuing his transition into bluesman, is a more sonorous affair, but as with DiNizio's album, sparse arrangements allow you to nail down to the millimetre such matters as instrument positioning and soundstage dimensions. In these areas, the small Sonus thinks it's a point source. Almost magically, they seem to disappear. The soundstage ignores the speakers' edges.

Thanks to the superbly mastered Led Zeppelin smorgasbord, *Mothership*, I accepted that the Amator Elipsas defied logic: they coped with the sheer bombast of 'Immigrant Song', the spatial decay in 'Good Times Bad Times', the brontosaurus thud of Bonham's drums, as if six times the size. Forget about installing these in the back of the room. They deserve pride of place. In other words, amazing things come in small packages. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Something told me that the Auditor Elipsa merited more than relegation to rear channel usage. It is a glorious, huge-sounding, fulfilling speaker that emulates the virtues of no less than the LS3/5A, but with real-world power handling, satisfying bass and looks to die for. Gorgeous-looking, great-sounding and small? Simply irresistible? All that and more.



SONUS FABER AUDITOR ELIPSA SPEAKER / £2498

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LAB
RESULTS



The 25mm ring tweeter uses an annular doped diaphragm around a cone-shaped central phase plug that suppresses cancellations. Response reaches out to beyond 40kHz

The crossover is mounted behind the main driver, described as a non-resonant second-order design with optimised phase characteristics. Crossover frequency is 2.5kHz

The 150mm cone driver, exclusive to Sonus faber, uses a Symmetric Drive Motor System, with a selected black wood fibre cone and dynamic linear suspension

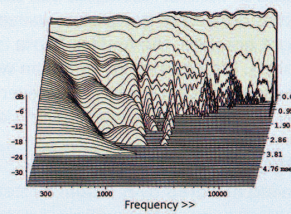
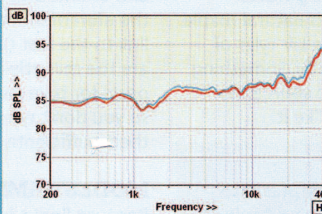
HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

We couldn't match Sonus faber's quoted sensitivity of 89dB but accords with a speaker of this size and impedance. In any case, boundary reinforcement from the wall behind will afford it a stronger bass performance than this figure suggests. High-frequency response from the ring radiator tweeter reaches to well over 40kHz but, as usual with this unit, there is a large ultrasonic peak in its output.

With a minimum impedance modulus of 4.2ohm, the Auditor Elipsa comfortably meets its 4ohm specification and is a relatively easy loudspeaker to drive, its minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) being a moderately challenging 2.3ohm at 126Hz. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall is mostly clean with just a hint of bass-mid driver breakup modes appearing above 1kHz. KH

Matching of the two speakers was excellent with an error between 200Hz and 20kHz of just ± 0.6 dB. A diffraction-corrected bass extension of 70Hz (-6 dB ref 200Hz) may seem disappointing but accords with a speaker of this size and impedance. In any case, boundary reinforcement from the wall behind will afford it a stronger bass performance than this figure suggests. High-frequency response from the ring radiator tweeter reaches to well over 40kHz but, as usual with this unit, there is a large ultrasonic peak in its output.

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ABOVE LEFT: A flat response trend engineered to benefit from the bass reinforcement of wall or bookshelf mounting; ABOVE RIGHT: A clean-looking spectral decay with some minor bass-mid driver modes above 1kHz

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL at 1m for 2.83V rms input)	87.5dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	4.2ohm @ 200Hz 16.9ohm @ 92Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-44° @ 106Hz 38° @ 26Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	± 0.6 dB
LF/HF extension (-6 dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	70Hz / >40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL at 1m)	1.7% / 2.1% / 0.1%