

Dial M for Magic

SONUS FABER CREMONA M (£5394)

Extensive revisions to the floorstander in the middle of the Italian brand's range have resulted in the Cremona M

hi-finews
HIGHLY
COMMENDED

Tested by Ken Kessler

Approaching a reviewer to assess a product is simple: the manufacturer or distributor contacts the magazine and they arrange delivery. That's it. One assumes that the product is suitable for the magazine, and it's up to the editor to assign the reviewer. But never in my 25 years as a reviewer have I been so nagged, badgered, pestered, henpecked and begged to write a review. Not even by Antony Michaelson of Musical Fidelity.

Given that Absolute Sounds represents a dozen brands, I had to wonder: why-oh-why was I being hectorated into covering this speaker? Maybe there was an incentive: Was Sonus faber going to give a Ferrari to the distributor who sold the most? Or a weekend with Monica Bellucci? A case of Guado al Tasso with each sale? I was baffled beyond my usual state of confusion.

Further investigation was required, but all I could wrestle out of Ricardo Franassovici was that he had '110 percent faith in the product' as one of the greatest to come down the pike in his long career as a purveyor of costly audio equipment. I had only seen him come even remotely this close to such obsessive, incessant behaviour with the original Koetsu Urushi, the Beveridge speaker and the Audio Research CD3. Usually, he's suitably blasé.

Why this preamble? Because – and it kills me to admit it having avoided the review for months – he's absolutely right.

NOT JUST ANOTHER SONUS FABER

Of late, I had played with the Memento, and the teeny Cremona Auditor Elipsa waits in the wings. I wasn't quite Sonus faber'd out, but a break was needed. But once I manhandled the 225 x 430 x 1090mm (wdh), 73kg per pair beauties into place, I could have kicked myself.

Using Yter cable – which I believe is used inside the M – I hooked up the speakers in turn to the McIntosh MC2102/C2200 and Quad 99 CDP II/II-eighty combinations. I used the Nagra CDP and Chord Red Reference CD players as sources. Severe toe-in was adhered to as per Sonus faber tradition.

Familiarity doesn't always breed contempt: it was like renewing old friendships, the string grilles, leather baffles, lute-shaped enclosures and better-than-most-fine-furniture finish making me wonder how anyone could resist these. But the sound is what will sell them, because the Cremona M is instantly inviting, with an immediacy that reaffirms the opening of this paragraph. Familiarity is the overriding characteristic. There is no learning curve with the Cremona M. I'm guessing the

DIAL M FOR MODIFICATIONS

Although Sonus faber produces three ranges – Domus, Cremona and Homage – physical resemblance isn't the sole genetic link. 'M' appended to the Cremona means 'modification', the mods being trickle-down technology from the Elipsa, itself a by-product of the Stradivari. New drivers, crossover revisions, wiring changes, aesthetic fettling – as with the changes from Guarneri Homage to Memento, Sonus faber doesn't merely alter a model's name and one or two details. Better still, as it has proven again and again, the changes are always for the better. In this case, we have one of the best dynamic floorstanders on earth under £10,000. Way under.



AUDIO FILE

Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker

Made by: Sonus faber

Supplied by: Absolute Sounds

Telephone: 020 8971 3909

Web: www.sonusfaber.com



ABOVE: Behind the single-wired speaker terminals is a 'non-resonant' three-way crossover using second-order filters, with crossover frequencies at 400Hz and 2.3kHz

review pair had been run in, because nothing changed over a month's use. They were both controlled and relaxed as required, fast and sharp thanks to the 25mm ultra-dynamic ring radiator driver that features in the company's top models. And if it's mass you require, this system moves enough air – thanks to the 150mm mid driver and two 180mm aluminium/magnesium alloy cone drivers – to trouble one's fillings.

Roy Wood, now having access to the Move's master tapes, has been involved with the band's reissue program, their brilliance reminding all of us how damaging the rock press can be when it allows hipness to overrule quality. The Move's majestic pop and rock, from cabaret to '50s retro to heavy metal, always

'McIntosh and Quad amps drove the Cremona Ms to realistic levels, regardless of material'

exhibited both intelligence and craft, while layering the sound was a specialty. What better litmus test could there be than an epic like 'Don't Make My Baby Blue'? Or 'Cherry Blossom Clinic'?

RARE COHESION

With all that studio jiggery-pokery and multi-tracking, one could assume that sheer artifice would undermine the listening experience. Which is a fair comment if you prefer, say, Segovia over Queen. But the Cremona Ms, because they simply treat the signal with equanimity, presented this disarmingly complex material with a cohesion I've rarely heard before.

The mass harmonies, which would become Wood's trademark with his solo releases, approach the best of religious recordings, with the clarity and detail complemented by a wholeness that made me think of finely woven cloth. If a Corneliani suit ever turned into a rock album... ☞

LOUDSPEAKER TEST

Other period studio works also took on a new sheen and greater presence – the Four Seasons' 'Walk Like A Man' had such thunderous mass that the musical pun (drum and bass masquerading as thudding footsteps) revealed itself as no AM radio ever could. One powerhouse track followed another in marathon sessions: a cluster of recent Jools Holland CDs that demonstrated the M's finesse with both piano and big band, early Man with wailing guitar breaks, a bunch of (Moby) Grape, some Foo Fighters and Kings of Leon.

It was abundantly clear that forceful music was not a challenge. Both the McIntosh and Quad amplifiers were able to drive the Cremona Ms to realistic levels regardless of the material, and the lower registers, whether derived from strings, keyboards or drums, were solid, palpable and controlled in the most convincing and realistic manner you could desire.

Still, I can imagine some listeners preferring tighter, more overly damped bottom octaves, in which case I would suggest driving the Cremona Ms with high-powered solid-state amps to effect a change. The speaker is so good, from top to bottom, that it would be a shame to sacrifice everything from the upper bass onto the extreme treble for the sake of some dialled-in constipation down below.

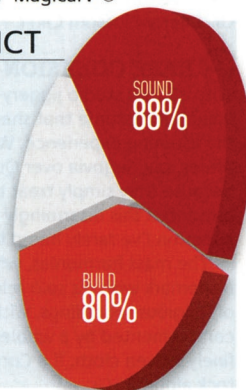
REAL POLISH

As ever, a run of quieter, leaner tracks revealed other strengths. I had a distinct feeling that the Cremona M would love acoustic guitar... which it did. A stack of old folkie discs from Karen Dalton and Fred Neil, as well as selections from the new Bob Dylan box set, fed the ideal material to the Sonus fabers for demonstrating the way the speakers preserve the 'woodiness' of the instruments. At the same time, the closely-mic'd vocals of the era were free of sibilance. But I've saved the best for last: the way these speakers create the physical, spatial properties of a musical event will overshadow every other virtue. Scale was never an issue, whether listening to the close harmonies of the Persuasions a cappella, or the overwhelmingly majestic 'I Can't Believe You' from the J Geils Band's *Sanctuary* album. The Cremona Ms just never quit.

Finding a speaker this pretty and this musically capable is like finding an Italian supercar that does 60mpg. There are no weaknesses. There are no rough edges. It's practical, too: the speaker comes with sensible stands and spikes, the terminals are intelligently designed and there's even a bottle of furniture polish in the box. Sonically? It behaves like a classic dynamic speaker, with openness that almost approaches a panel. I think the 'M' really stands for 'Magical'. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Sonus faber cognoscenti rightly adore the *Homage* series, but this model from the middle range in the family offers so much bang for the buck that it beggars the need to spend more. Gorgeous to look at, robust and grand enough to do justice to huge works, delicate and detailed – this deserves to be my speaker of the year.



SONUS FABER CREMONA M SPEAKER / £5394

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LAB
RESULTS

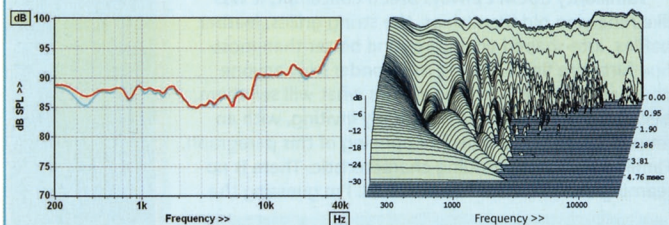


HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Not every Sonus faber to have come my way has measured well but the Cremona M put in a mostly fine performance in front of the measurement microphone. Although we couldn't match the claimed sensitivity of 91dB, our figure of 89dB still puts the Cremona M in the above-average category. A shelved up treble output above 8kHz contributes to this figure: at lower frequencies the sensitivity is more like 87.5dB.

Aiding sensitivity is the speaker's low impedance, which displays a minimum modulus of just 2.3ohm at 114Hz. This low modulus, coupled with significant phase angle at low frequencies, makes the Cremona M a stern test of its partnering amplifier, its worst-case EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) being a low 1.2ohm at 86Hz.

The frequency response trend, measured on the tweeter axis, is pretty flat up to 2kHz, followed by a mild presence region dip before the aforementioned shelving up of the treble. The frequency response error figures are low as a consequence, and the review pair were well matched. Diffraction-corrected bass extension is good if not exceptional at 47Hz (-6dB ref 200Hz) and the 25mm ring tweeter has strong output to above 40kHz. Although the cumulative spectral decay waterfall shows a mostly clean, fast decay in output from the tweeter, below 2kHz there are some ridges in the plot perhaps indicating the presence of breakup modes in the cone of the midrange driver. A severe resonance at 700Hz is also present in the output of the midrange driver's reflex tuning port. KH



ABOVE LEFT: A flat bass and midrange followed by a 'presence' dip and uplifted treble; ABOVE RIGHT: Cabinet resonances are well controlled but there are a series of modes ~2kHz possibly originating from the mid driver

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL at 1m for 2.83V rms input)	89dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	2.3ohm @ 114Hz 11.1ohm @ 20Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-50° @ 70Hz 28° @ 1.5kHz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	±1.2dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	47Hz / >40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL at 1m)	0.4% / 1.1% / 0.3%