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## An Artisan's Sound

# The Sonus Faber Cremona Loudspeaker

Wayne Garcia

**T**he Sonus Faber Cremona is a beguiling speaker. It is beautiful sounding (and looking too)—open and warm, dynamically free, and seductively easy on the ears. And yet the Cremona is no slouch when it comes to the sonic attributes that audiophiles hold so dear—the resolution of low-level details, the ability to create a soundstage of impressive width, depth, and height, and the convincing placement of instruments within that space. The Cremona will also change its sonic shape and tonal color to reflect those qualities in a given recording. For instance, with Webern's minimalist (and very brief) *Five Pieces for Orchestra* (from *Vienna 1908-1914* [Mercury Living Presence LP]), the Cremona's character is exceptionally airy and holographic, allowing us to hear deep into the hall's recorded acoustic (so deep as to imagine ourselves walking amidst the players and back to the rear of the stage). A flute has the fluttering breathiness we hear in life, a triangle its floating, delicate, and lightly percussive nature, and the individual notes of a violin their distinctly warm, sweet 'n' sour quality. But then with a closely-miked jazz LP such as Analogue Productions' 45rpm edition of *88 Basie Street*, the acoustic space flattens and widens out as if pressed under a giant pane of glass, creating the illusion of an up-close, oversized, and rollicking big band in the room with us, with a flood of instrumental tones and textures as fat and frothy as an old-fashioned milkshake. Or, with a marvelously well-recorded rock record like the White Stripes' *Elephant* [Third Man], we get a tight, immediate studio perspective—air dense with the gut-smacking whumps of

primitively pounded toms and glorious thickets of nasty electric guitar chords. In other words, though the Cremona is a "musical" as opposed to entirely "neutral" design, it is nonetheless very transparent to the source.

Like every product from this Italian firm (based in Vicenza), the Cremona is the brainchild of Franco Serblin, a dapper man-of-the-world—aren't all Italians?—who does in fact think of his creations as musical instruments, not scientific ones. As such, it would be against Franco's romantic spirit for his speakers to be anything but beautiful sounding—a company brochure translates the Latin *Sonus Faber* into "hand-made sound." He also strongly identifies with (and draws inspiration from) the violinmaking tradition of the nearby town of Cremona—most readily seen in his speakers' Stradivarius-inspired lute-shaped cabinets and silk-wrapped grilles, the strings of which are said to be the same diameter as a violin's top string. (If traveling to northern Italy, visit Cremona's 12<sup>th</sup>-century Town Hall Palace, where exquisite examples of the art of Antonio Stradivari, Giuseppe Guarneri, and the Amati family are on display. You may also hear recordings of these instruments played back over a pair of Sonus Faber Guarneri Homage speakers.)



Though not inexpensive at \$7495/pair, the floorstanding Cremona is meant to bring a taste of the company's \$22,000 Amati Homage—which it strongly resembles and some of whose technology it shares—to a wider audience. The enclosure's non-parallel walls—a Sonus standard that has influenced many other speaker builders—significantly reduce internal standing waves, while its leather-clad front baffle is meant to soften reflections off the wood surface it covers. Available in medium-gloss lacquered maple and



stained "graphite," the Cremona is a three-way design of unusual coherence. This is due largely, it would seem, to a simple crossover, well-matched drivers, and a midrange unit that spans a wide spectrum of frequencies (from roughly 300Hz–3kHz, with usable output from 100Hz–5kHz). Within this range the Cremona is one of the most musically expressive speakers I've encountered, making it a delight for lovers of the human voice. With singers famous for their brilliant phrasing, you'll hear a Sinatra stretch and reshape vowels like so much taffy on "I Get a Kick Out of You" (*Songs for Young Lovers* [Columbia LP]), a Billie Holiday seemingly force out, then swallow, line by line, the wistful lyrics to "My Man" (*The Complete Decca Recordings* [GRP CD]), and a Bob Dylan spit contempt in the bitter, snaggletoothed tale of loss, "Idiot Wind" (*Blood on the Tracks* [Columbia LP]). These minuscule levels of hue, detail, and dynamics are all the more remarkable given that the Cremona's midrange driver is (rear) ported, a fact that I almost neglected to mention because it never really registered during my listening sessions. Not coincidentally, hearing the Cremona with a solo violin recording is a spine-tingling experience: Nathan Milstein's Strad is brought to dazzling life throughout the Bach Sonatas and Partitas [DGG]. Although the Cremona's midband may not have the ultimate airiness or crystalline transparency of an electrostat, it is one of the few full-range speakers from the non-analytical school (particularly those under ten grand) that I would even mention in the same breath as MartinLogan or Quad.

All drivers, by the way, are sourced from ScanSpeak, with custom touches ordered up by Sonus Faber. Each of the paper-composite midrange and bass drivers are hand-cut with razors at slanting angles (these "slices" are filled with a polymer damping material) to break up tension at the driver's surface, dramatically reducing radial standing waves.

The six-inch bass drivers, too, are ported, and, like the midrange, don't sound it, so absent is that "chuffy" noise


typically heard from vented cabinets. And because they cover only the bass frequencies, even the smallest residual port colorations are less audible than those heard from speakers with higher crossover points. Though they're unusually small for a floorstanding design, these remarkable drivers extend solidly to around 35Hz in my room, with a wonderful tonality and texture. While the Cremona's bottom octaves always sound controlled, they never come across as overly tight or mechanical—the acoustic bass on 88 *Basie Street's* "Bluesville" is weighty, full-bodied, and lifelike, while the Count's grand piano has a warm, rich, visceral percussiveness rarely heard outside the living room or a small hall.

And the tweeter? Simply glorious. A one-inch fabric-dome "ring radiator" with a metal phase-plug stuck in its midsection, it is constructed so that only the outer "ring" portion moves, lowering mass and increasing dispersion. Spec'd all the way out to 40kHz, this tweeter has both excellent sensitivity and high power-handling, both of which were evident with Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra (from the Mercury LP cited above), where the high-frequency driver must endure an all-out assault of whacked percussion, rasping brass, and furiously bowed violins playing in their top register. Not only did the Cremona tweeter keep up with the rest of the drivers throughout the demanding dynamic peaks, it never seemed to compress, strain, or lose resolution. It may be fine for our music to shriek, croak, rattle, and buzz, but our tweeters shouldn't.

Which brings me to another aspect of the Cremona's success story: not only do the drivers speak with as close to a single voice as seems possible from a three-way system, but they share that same coherence when riding the gentlest as well as the most treacherous dynamic waves. Do, however, remove the stringed grilles for the best sound. This is a slight bummer because they look so cool. But even as acoustically transparent as the strings are compared to cloth, the Cremona sounds far better with the

grilles off. Another thing I like about the Cremona is that it doesn't collapse dynamically when played at lower volumes, which is important to urban apartment dwellers like me.

With its 90dB sensitivity and 4-ohm impedance the Cremona is easy to drive, too, which means a wide variety of both tube and solid-state amps can be coupled to it, allowing you to concentrate on models with the highest sound quality, not the beefiest power spec.

Like a wine that's smooth yet powerful, complex yet approachable, full of depths not easily described, and the ability to surprise even with familiarity, the Cremona is a speaker that will satisfy over the long term. Unless, that is, you run out of music to play over it. 

#### SPECIFICATIONS

3-way floorstanding loudspeaker  
 Driver complement: 1.1" tweeter, 5.9" midrange, (2) 6" woofers  
 Frequency response: 32Hz–40kHz  
 Sensitivity: 90dB  
 Impedance: 4 ohms  
 Recommended amplifier power: 50–300W  
 Dimensions: 8.9" x 18.1" x 42.9"  
 Weight: 76.5 lbs. each

#### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Balanced Audio Technology VK-300X and Perreux R200i integrated amplifiers; Primare SP31.7 A/V controller and BAT VK-6200 multichannel amplifier; BAT VK-D5 CD player; Arcam DV88 DVD/CD player; Rega P25 turntable; Grado Statement Sonata and Cardas "Heart" cartridges; Cardas Neutral Reference speaker cables, Cardas Golden Reference interconnects; Finite Elemente "Spider" equipment rack; ASC Tube Traps; Richard Gray's Power Company 400S and 600S; Essential Sound Products Power Conditioner/Strip

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