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**The Sonus faber DOMUS Surround Sound System**

Michael Fremer, August, 2006

A decade ago Sonus faber introduced the Concert line, a series of loudspeakers designed to deliver Sonus faber performance and industrial design at a more affordable price point. That's what high-end companies do after establishing a strong reputation at the upper echelon of the marketplace. Once your products become the object of lust, you feed the hungry beast. And make no mistake: early Sonus faber products made waves both for their spectacular looks and their intoxicating sound.



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With the introduction of the new fully shielded DOMUS series, Sonus faber brings the elegant lute shape of its highly regarded (and gorgeous) *Homage* and *Cremona* series speakers to a much more affordable price point: a pair of floor-standing, three-way Grand Piano DOMUS costs \$4,795. That's roughly a little more than half the price of a pair of *Cremonas*. The front-ported design features dual 7" woofers, a 6" midrange, and a 1" ring radiator tweeter. Weighing in at approximately 57 pounds, and standing three and a half feet tall and more than a foot deep, the Grand Piano DOMUS represents a substantial upgrade to the [HERE="http://ultimateavmag.com/speakersystems/26/index5.html"](http://ultimateavmag.com/speakersystems/26/index5.html) Concert Series Grand Piano Home speakers I reviewed for *Stereophile Guide to Home Theater* back in 2002, yet it costs only 1/3 more.

I chose to review a system consisting of a pair of Grand Piano DOMUS for front L/R, the Center DOMUS (\$1,295), a pair of Concertino DOMUS (\$1,495/pr.) stand-mounted speakers for the surrounds and a Gravis DOMUS subwoofer (\$2,495).

#### The New Boss vs. The Old Boss

After a tour of the original Sonus faber factory a number of years ago (the company has since built a large new facility next door to the original one, which it still uses), I was privileged to have dinner with founder and chief designer Franco Serblin and his family. Serblin is a man with a sonic aesthetic that's as well developed as his visual one. I found him relaxing in a chaise lounge on his deck, shoeless, dressed in a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. Yet he managed to possess a sense of style that had me thinking I could have shown up in a tuxedo and he'd still have out-styled me.

The sonics of the Concert Series speakers were quite accomplished, as one would expect from Sonus faber. But probably because of the costs involved, the Concert series lacked the graceful lute shaped cabinetry Sonus developed for the *homage* series loudspeakers. Sonus claims that the lute shape is about more than just looks: the cabinet's non-parallel surfaces prevent internal standing waves while providing better air control within the vented design. The curvaceous side "cheeks" are finished in either black lacquer or a satiny Teak wood.

Speaking of cosmetics, if your home theater plans include burying speakers in walls, behind scrims, and otherwise out of sight, all the work and expense that went into the DOMUS line's looks would be wasted, and you would probably be better off looking at other speakers, unless you fell completely in love with the DOMUS line's sound, and price (\$10,080 for the review system, not including stands) was not an issue.



Still, as attractive as the DOMUS series cabinets are, they can't compare to the woodworking of Sonus' *Guarnari* and *Amati* speakers. The cabinets in those speakers are a combination of solid cured maple and a complex system of laminated components stained with a special formulation that's hand-applied in a delicate procedure only a few artisans are capable of performing. Finally, a high-gloss lacquer is applied, giving the finish a luxurious look and feel that has to be seen and felt to be truly appreciated. But then the price for a pair of *Amati anniversario* is around \$25,000!

Like the Concert series, the new DOMUS range features ingeniously decoupled side panels that, in conjunction with the leather wrap, are said to control cabinet resonances based upon Mr. Serblin's studies of how the great violinmakers crafted their instruments.

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The DOMUS series drivers have been heavily upgraded from those used in the Concert series and are based on the proprietary vented phase plug designs developed for the Stradivari *homage*. A variant of the very popular Vifa ring radiator used in previous Concert series speakers has been retained throughout much of the DOMUS line.

### The DOMUS Grand Pianos

The big, three-way DOMUS Grand Pianos do cost more than the Concert series Grand Pianos they replace, but they are so much more capable in every way. Where the original was a two-way with a passive radiator, the new design is a ported three-way that plays louder without strain, is far more dynamic at both ends of the scale, and extends far lower in the bass. Sonus suggests running them full range in a 5.1-channel system and that's what I did. I also found that the familiar ring radiator tweeter here provided far smoother high frequency response than the slightly excessive top end of the older Grand Piano. In addition, while the original Grand Piano's silk dome tweeter featured a rather steep suck-out in the vertical axis, making listening height and/or speaker front baffle rake angle critical, the ring radiator's smoother off-axis vertical response makes the overall high frequency balance of the DOMUS far less dependent upon the height of the listening position and/or the speaker's rake angle.

So, both cosmetically and sonically the new DOMUS Grand Piano represents a big step up from the original. The tonal balance has more in common with the more expensive Sonus faber speakers than with the original Grand Piano. The DOMUS Grand Piano features a smooth, extended top end, a slightly suppressed but pleasing upper midrange, and a very sweet, smooth, well-balanced midrange, which is a Sonus specialty (I'll be curious to see if the measurements correlate with what I heard).

The original Grand Piano was good down to around 40Hz, below which response dropped off admirably, free of any attempted "bumps" suggesting more bottom end than there really was. The three-way DOMUS Grand Piano clearly extends lower, and is more effortless in doing so. More importantly, top to bottom driver integration is exceedingly well done, with no seams sticking out. In this regard the DOMUS Grand Piano is a major improvement over the Concert series Grand Pianos.

Despite being placed between a large RPTV, the DOMUS Grand Pianos managed to disappear effectively, producing an expansive, transparent soundstage that was convincingly tall and wide. Even if the measured upper mids prove to be slightly recessed, the speaker's smooth, somewhat forgiving, yet admirably detailed presentation makes long term listening exceedingly pleasurable. The balance makes edgy soundtracks tolerable, while the really good ones still manage to shine.

My biggest gripe with the DOMUS Grand Pianos is the odd vertical placement of their binding posts. There's enough real estate on the lute-shaped cabinet's rear panel for the posts to be placed horizontally, but for some reason the designer chose vertical placement, which makes hiding the cables difficult.

### Center DOMUS

The new three-way Center DOMUS features a 3/4" ring radiator tweeter/3" coated paper midrange combo that's vertically stacked and flanked by dual 6" coated paper cone woofers. Sonus managed to fit it all into a sleek, leather and wood-clad box that's only five inches tall, two feet wide, and a foot deep. This is a substantial upgrade from the first Concert series center channel speaker, which was a two-way design that flipped a D'Appolito configuration (two woofers flanking a tweeter) on its side. As we all know, this is not a good idea, as the "lobing" interference between the drivers produces off-axis frequency response suck-outs that kill dialog intelligibility.

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## ▶ Speaker Systems

If the weak point in Sonus's Concert line was the two-way center channel speaker, the Center DOMUS may be the new line's major achievement. I began the review with it mounted on a sleek, dedicated stand (\$395) placed in front of a display then under review that did not accommodate a center channel speaker. Later I put the Center DOMUS atop my reference Hitachi CRT-based RPTV. In either location, the Center DOMUS produced the some of the most believable dialog I have heard yet from a home theater system. Voicing a speaker to reproduce the human voice is a daunting task. Make the speaker too warm, and male voices sound boxy, muffled and difficult to understand. There's too much chest and not enough throat. Go for intelligibility by lifting the presence region and you often get discontinuity in male voices, shrillness in female voices, and "mechanicalness" in both, particularly on sibilants, which take on a distinct, easily identifiable life of their own, thus destroying any hope of believability.



While I have heard better low level intelligibility from a few center channel speakers I've reviewed over the years, few have matched or beat the Center DOMUS's combination of intelligibility, believability and freedom from mechanical artifacts at normal to relatively loud listening levels (one such center channel is the far more



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expensive, more massive and more capable Aerial CC5).

No doubt Sonus chose to shelve down the presence region somewhat to compensate for the processed and somewhat hyped sound of most dialogue tracks. In this case, their feeling probably is that "accuracy" is best off taking a backseat to "believability." I can't disagree, based on my time with this system's center channel speaker, though the low level intelligibility drop off had me sometimes turning the overall volume up higher than I'd like during some late night movie watching.

### The Concertino Surround Speakers

The diminutive Concertino is a two-way, front-ported speaker featuring a 6" woofer crossed over at 3.6kHz to a 3/4" ring-radiator tweeter in a lute-shaped box with decoupled sides. In addition to using the pair for surrounds I moved them to the front and drove them as a stereo pair for a Stereophile review of a two-channel Outlaw Audio receiver. With claimed 50Hz (including port contribution) response the Concertinos proved to be impressive performers, with a surprisingly robust, yet supple bottom end and silky-smooth mids and highs. (Add the \$600 100w/100w Outlaw receiver and you've got the core of a great stereo system for \$2000!). As surrounds, the Concertino's subjectively smooth on-axis response allowed them to disappear while firing at ear level directly at my listening position. Those seated closer to one side or the other on the couch lodged no complaints about being so close to the line of fire, and when I sat in those positions I found the speakers remarkably unobtrusive, hearing instead the 5.1-channel soundfield they helped create.

### Gravis DOMUS

The Gravis subwoofer features a 12" front-firing driver powered by a 200-watt MOSFET amplifier, coupled to a downward firing 10" passive radiator. The built-in low pass filter offers six selectable crossover points (24db/octave) between 38Hz and 65Hz. There's a phase switch, and RCA and XLR inputs. Because of the passive radiator, floor distance is critical, so the speaker sits on four relatively tall, non-adjustable feet. Because of its graceful shape, and leather and wood trim, the Gravis is one subwoofer that doesn't require hiding.

The Gravis' specs don't offer low frequency response and I'm not sure if the Gravis goes as low as some other subs I've reviewed. And because my room has a "bump" where I have to place subs, I missed the parametric LF equalizer featured in the [Infinity CSW10](#) and Revel Concerta B12 subs I reviewed a while back for UAV. But in terms of natural, not "thumpy" bass, the Gravis was as "musical" sounding as the [Aerial SW-12](#), and it doesn't get more "musical" than that in my experience (although the Gravis certainly doesn't go down to the Aerial's subterranean under 10Hz lower limit, either). When properly dialed in, I felt the Gravis was more than capable of delivering "0.1" effects for movie, but that it truly excelled with music. When I watched the PBS HD feed of Cream's Reunion Concert at The Royal Albert Hall, I found the sub's rendering of the lower limits of Jack Bruce's bass was both well textured and dynamic while avoiding one note "boom." With the Gravis you may not get the very bottom-end room shaking some other subs provide, but thanks in part to the MOSFET amp and probably the tuned passive radiator system, you'd be hard-pressed to hear a more musically subtle and refined sounding sub.

### All Together Now

Put it all together and with the DOMUS speakers you have a smooth-sounding high performance music and film surround sound system capable of producing the wide dynamic swings necessary to make both music and movies come convincingly alive. While the DOMUS system's smooth frequency balance was also a major step up from the previous Grand Piano system I reviewed, it was the system's improved dynamic capabilities and its ability to play louder without apparent strain that really set it apart from its predecessor. The center channel DOMUS was also a much better performer and among the most believable dialog reproducers I've heard, even when placed on the floor stand projecting well into the listening room.



A system with this level of sonic refinement demands to be driven by high resolution electronics. While the sound was pleasing when I had the \$880 JVC receiver in my system, switching to the far more expensive and powerful Marantz SR9600 proved a revelation in terms of low-level microdynamic resolution and transient cleanliness. Reproducing some recently acquired Harmonia Mundi 5.1-channel SACDs that combo was definitely "audiophile quality," particularly in the way it dealt with the difficult-to-reproduce piano on Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 (Olga Kern and the Warsaw Philharmonic, HMU 807492). The bottom octaves were rendered with impressive clarity and freedom from "boom," while the upper end of the keyboard was free of the edge and "tinkle" common in modestly priced surround sound home theater systems. I'd rather have two great channels than 5.1 mediocre ones for music listening, but once you get to this performance level you've got impressive tonal balance, resolution and the spaciousness of surround sound. It doesn't come

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cheaply but if you plan on combining your music and movie listening into one system be prepared to spend, or seriously compromise sonic performance.

Movie watching was equally enjoyable through this system. With its dynamic and spatial capabilities coupled with its smooth, non-peaky frequency balance, the DOMUS system was equally effective handling noisy sound effects-laden movies and ones relying more on the music. Even though I'd already seen it, I felt The Red Violin deserved to be seen and heard again on this system and I was rewarded with a musically satisfying performance.

If the measurements show a somewhat depressed upper midrange, that's a purposeful design element and a deviation from "flat" I endorse. Next to the gargantuan and ultra expensive [Aerial system](#) I reviewed a while back, this DOMUS system ranks as my favorite and its sleek leather and teak Italian design makes a welcome addition to even the most elegant of living rooms. My wife was sad to see the DOMUS system go and that's saying a lot!

#### Conclusion

The Sonus faber DOMUS system represents a substantial investment at around \$10,000 as reviewed. It combines gorgeous styling with suave, yet muscular sonics. Even if you're using your surround sound system for movies only, if you can afford it the DOMUS system is worth checking out. If your home theater also serves as your primary music system the DOMUS system belongs at the top of your list.

#### Highs and Lows

##### Highs

Musical refinement  
Believable center channel dialog  
Gorgeous looks

##### Lows

Dialog intelligibility suffers at very low SPLs  
Vertical speaker terminal placement on Grand Pianos makes wire hiding difficult  
Subwoofer expense not matched by ultra-low (subjective) response

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## ▶ Speaker Systems

### Specifications

**System price (as reviewed):** \$10,080 (stands not included)

**Grand Piano DOMUS** Ported three-driver, three-way, floor-standing, magnetically shielded (L/R)

**Drivers:** 1" ring radiator tweeter, 6" coated paper cone midrange, 2 x 7" coated paper woofers.

**Frequency response:** 30Hz-20kHz

**Impedance:** 4Ω (nominal)

**Crossover:** initial first order, distributed multi-slope @ 400Hz & 3.6kHz

**Sensitivity:** 90dB/2.83V/m

**Dimensions:** 41.7" x 8.25" x 12.25" (HxWxD)

**Weight:** 57 lbs (each)

**Price:** \$4795/pair (black leather and teak or piano lacquer black).

**Center DOMUS** Ported four-driver, three-way, magnetically shielded (center)

**Drivers:** .75" ring radiator tweeter 3.25" coated paper cone midrange, two 6" coated paper cone woofers

**Frequency response:** 40Hz-20kHz

**Impedance:** 4Ω (nominal)

**Crossover:** initial first order, distributed multi-slope @ 450Hz & 4.5kHz

**Sensitivity:** 88dB/2.83V/m

**Dimensions:** 6.5" x 24.5" x 10.25" (HxWxD)

**Weight:** 27.75 lbs

**Price:** \$1295 (black leather and teak or piano lacquer black); optional stand, \$395

**Concertino DOMUS** Ported two-way (surround)

**Drivers:** .75" ring radiator tweeter, 6" coated paper cone midrange/woofer

**Frequency response:** 50Hz-20kHz

**Sensitivity:** 88dB/2.83V/m

**Impedance:** 4Ω (nominal)

**Crossover frequency:** initial first order, distributed multi-slope @ 3.6kHz

**Dimensions:** 13" x 7.25" x 10.75" (HxWxD)

**Weight:** 25 lbs

**Price:** \$1495/pair; dedicated stands, \$695/pair

**Gravis DOMUS** powered subwoofer

**Drivers:** 12" hard paper cone, 10.25" passive radiator

**Amplifier output:** 200W RMS MOSFET

**Dimensions:** 14.5" x 14.25" x 18.5" (HxWxD)

**Weight:** 56.3 lbs

**Price:** \$2495

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**Measurements**

The measurements shown were made with the grilles removed. While the grilles did not make a dramatic change in the response, they did produce a less even response in the mid and upper treble.

The Grand Piano DOMUS is tuned to 36Hz. I agree with Sonus faber's nominal impedance rating of 4Ω, though it does dip below 4Ω from 89Hz-172Hz, with a minimum value of 3.5Ω at 107Hz. But the impedance phase angle remains remarkably benign across the full audible range. Any amp comfortable with a 4Ω load should have no trouble with this speaker. The Grand Piano DOMUS' sensitivity measured approximately 89dB/2.83V/meter.

The horizontal front response of the Grand Piano DOMUS is shown in Fig.1 (violet). This is the pseudo-anechoic response averaged over a 30° forward horizontal angle, taken at tweeter height, combined with the nearfield responses of the woofers and port.

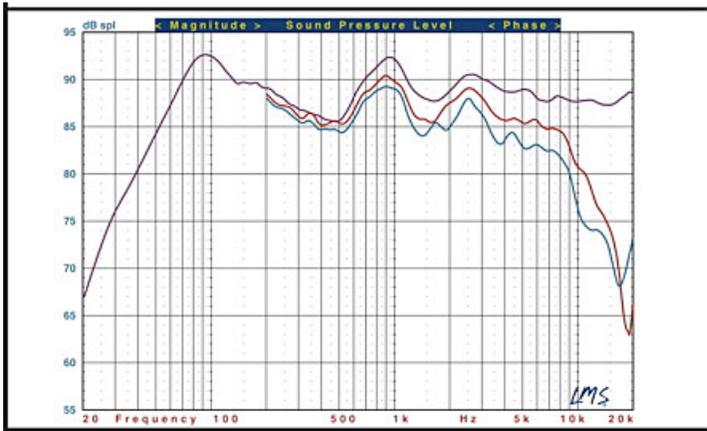


Fig.1: Sonus faber Grand Piano DOMUS, pseudo-anechoic response beyond the horizontal axis at 45° (red) and 60° (blue)

The Grand Piano DOMUS's averaged front horizontal response has a significant dip at 500Hz, fairly close to the rated lower crossover frequency of 400Hz. This dip is not deep enough (a maximum of about -4dB) to cause major problems, but might be the cause of the laid-back midrange that MF notes in the review (though this dip is in the heart of the midrange, not the upper midrange). There's a small peak at 950Hz followed by another (smaller yet) dip at 1.5kHz. The off-axis results follow the on-axis average fairly closely until the inevitable rolloff at high frequencies. The dip at 500Hz aside, the averaged response is within a respectable tolerance of plus or minus about 2.5dB from 600Hz to 20kHz, with particularly smooth and extended high frequencies. The latter are also shelved down just a little, which confirms the sweet top end MF heard. The useful low frequency limit, however (-10dB relative to the level at 150Hz), is a modest 38Hz.

The vertical response characteristics, shown in Fig.2, suggest that the vertical listening axis is fairly critical. You'll hear the best balance with your ears positioned as close as possible to tweeter height. If you must deviate from that, lower is better than higher.



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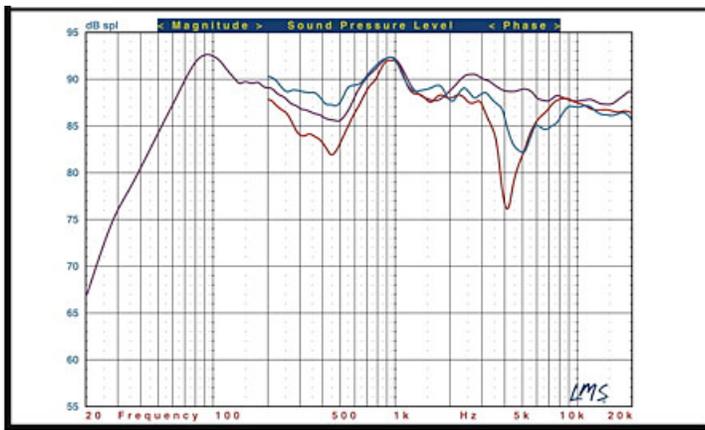


Fig.2: Sonus faber Grand Piano DOMUS, pseudo-anechoic response at 15° above (red) and 15° below (blue) the tweeter axis

The Center DOMUS's impedance dropped to a minimum value of 3.6Ω at 156Hz. Its ported cabinet is tuned to 63Hz. Sonus faber's rated nominal impedance of 4 Ω is appropriate. The impedance also has a benign phase angle, though a little less so than is the case with the Grand Piano DOMUS. The Center's sensitivity measured approximately 87dB/2.83V/m, and the speaker should be an easy load to drive for any 4Ω-capable amp.

The measured front horizontal response of the Center DOMUS, taken on the tweeter axis and averaged in the same manner as described above for the Grand Piano DOMUS, is shown in Fig.3 (violet curve). The effective bass extension is approximately 52Hz (-10dB relative to the output at 150Hz). The on-axis response shows a dip at 400Hz similar to that seen in the Grand Piano DOMUS. (It may well contribute to the low-level dialog intelligibility that MF comments on.) There's also a broad dip centered at around 5kHz, but more on that below. The off-axis response follows these same deviations, but also shows the positive effect of a 3-way center design. Apart from an additional suckout in the 60-degree response, the horizontal off-axis aberrations follow those of the on-axis average, without any of the additional suckouts nearly always found in two-way (woofer-tweeter-woofer), horizontally-configured center speakers.



Fig.3: Sonus faber Center DOMUS, pseudo-anechoic response beyond the horizontal axis at 45° (red) and 60° (blue)

The vertical response measurements in Fig.4 do suggest a way to mitigate the Center's broad suckout at 5kHz, shown in Fig.3. The Fig.3 responses were taken on the tweeter axis. But as Fig.4 shows, the dip disappears at a listening position *Below* the tweeter. This will be ideal for a center channel located on top of a big screen television, which will place it above the listeners' ears. But on a solid stand (preferably) or shelf below the screen, the listeners' ears will be above the tweeter. While MF did not comment on any sonic differences in the two placements, there is an easy solution for the lower mounting location: Turn the Center Domus upside down if you use it on a low stand!

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Fig.4: Sonus faber Center DOMUS, pseudo-anechoic response at 15° above (red) and 15° below (blue) the tweeter axis

(When heard on axis, the Center's 5kHz suckout could also further contribute to a degraded low level intelligibility by reducing the audibility of mid-treble vocal consonants that let us distinguish, for example, between P and T. At higher levels, however, these sounds, some of which are called fricatives, will be less annoying with such a response dip because they are often exaggerated in movie soundtracks.)

MF loved the sound of the Domus system, and it is possible that the response variations we measured in both the Grand Piano DOMUS and Center DOMUS, particularly those at around 500Hz, are the result of deliberate voicing. Yet I know that Sonus faber does design flatter speakers; check out the review of their Amati anniversario in *Stereophile*. That speaker does cost 6-times as much as the Grand Piano DOMUS, but linear response through this region is not just a matter of price.

*Violet (all figures): pseudo-anechoic response on the tweeter axis, averaged across a 30° horizontal window, combined with near-field responses of the woofers and port. Apart from the low frequency measurements (woofers and port), all measurements were taken at 1 meter*

## Company Info

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