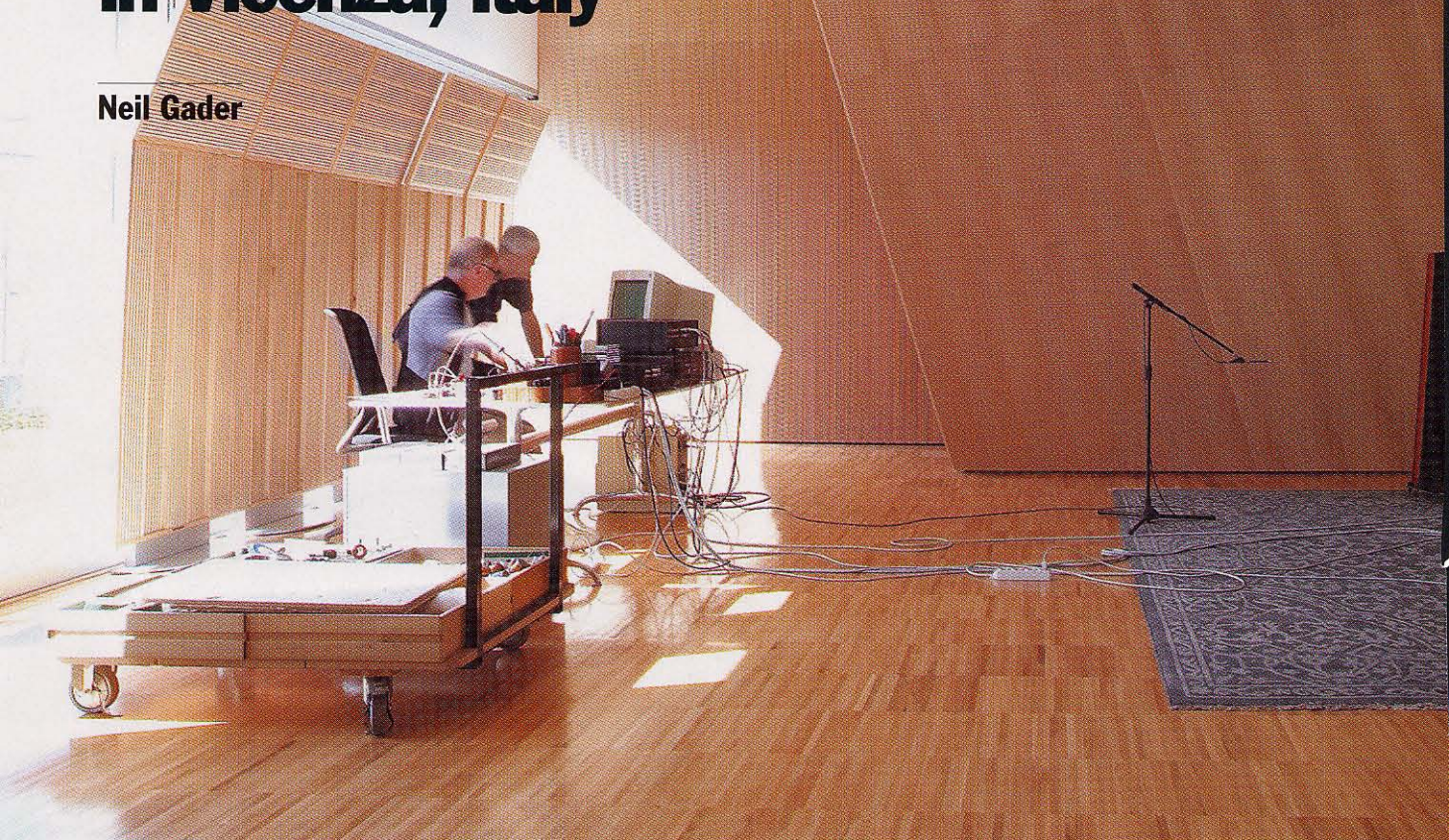


A Tale of Two Strads

Visiting the Sonus Faber Factory in Vicenza, Italy

Neil Gader



It's impossible to treat a visit to the Sonus Faber factory as a mere assignment. Not only does it mean immersion in the Sonus philosophy of design and manufacture, but also total engagement in Italian culture, its music, and its history. Indeed for Sonus Faber it's the intersection of the past and the present that informs every loudspeaker the company produces. Just as the technology of today supplies the Sonus design team with the finest available transducers, it's the study of the great masters of lute and violin craftsmanship that guides and breathes life into Sonus Faber's inimitable enclosure designs.

Sonus Faber is located in Vicenza, the affluent manufacturing district in the northernmost region of Italy known as the Veneto. The city is dotted throughout by the stately architecture of native son Andrea Palladio and offers its own distinctive tradition of high-tech innovation, fashion, food, and, of course, wine. The purpose of my visit was two-fold—a tour of the new facility (under construction when I last visited two years ago)

but also to listen to its latest "Homage" Series loudspeaker, the Stradavari. And, as it turned out, an even rarer Stradavari. My hosts for the visit were Cesare Bevilacqua, President of Sonus Faber, Founder/Designer Franco Serblin¹, and John Hunter of Sumiko, the U.S. distributor for Sonus Faber.

In contrast to the previous factory, the newly built facility is roughly the difference between the Dark Ages and the Renaissance. Whereas the former building had 2000 square meters of work space, it was spread among five distinct structures, grossly reducing efficiency. The current factory is a single, two-story structure. It's Bauhaus-inspired and airy, with large glass areas and skylights filtering natural light along the entire assembly line and office workspaces. Much of the perimeter is enclosed in an atrium-style environment where bamboo trees bring a bit of the natural world inside. Space has increased

¹ Sonus Faber was founded in 1980.

markedly to 3600 square meters providing Sonus Faber—a ten million dollar company—with the room to meet growth projections of 10% each year over the next five years. With assembly and final testing upstairs and packaging and shipping on the first floor, logistics have vastly improved as well.

What this means for efficiency is that the same twenty line employees have increased output close to 30% in the past year. And the new factory could increase output another 50% with only a small increase in employment. Mr. Bevilacqua pointed out to me that he doesn't employ *workers*, but instead "artisans" who work together as a family. The team is always looking for new methods to increase quality and efficiency, meeting once a week with production managers to troubleshoot. The office also holds staff dinners every two or three months.

In addition to the assembly facility, there are also two off-site cabinet shops for the construction and finishing of enclosures. The Cremona Auditor and the Concert Line cabinets are built in the city of Bassano. Cabinets for the Classic line, which includes the larger Cremona and Cremona Center, Amati Homage, Guarneri Homage, and the new Stradavari Homage, are built in the Cittadella shop an hour to the northeast. This is filled to the rafters with raw maple and other woods; I was surprised to learn that all of the walnut is sourced from Virginia.

What most captured my attention was the contrast between modern assembly technology and the laborious hand-fitting of components. For example, the unassembled cabinets from the Cremona through the Homage series are matched, sanded, and fitted as a unit, then dis-

sembled, with each cabinet part receiving a serial number corresponding to that specific enclosure. After final finishing is complete, the enclosure is reassembled exactly as originally prepared, insuring a quality of fit beyond typical mass-production tolerances.

Similarly the arched top and back of the Stradavari (pictured below) use maple-composite triple-layer sheets. Each of eight of these sheets is steamed into the correct curvature, but at different grain angles to one another to



reduce sympathetic resonances. Glue is then applied, creating an ultra-thick non-resonant laminate 25 layers thick. Bracing is typically high-density fiberboard rather than the cheaper medium-density type. The braces are not merely glued but slotted and glued into channels. The thread-like black Homage purfling is a wood-strip inlay reminiscent of classic lute construction.

In order to attain the rich and seemingly bottomless patina of the Homage

series the finish is applied with seven coats of lacquer. Sonus Faber doesn't manufacture its own drivers (they are variously sourced from Denmark) but each driver is meticulously matched and modified for its application. For example, Sonus creates a special circular rear chamber out of solid maple for its Cremona and Homage tweeters. Virtually every driver receives special attention as regards venting and damping and resonance control. Crossovers for the limited-production Homage series are still assembled by one man—one of Sonus Faber's longest-term employees.

The distinctive grain of "synth" leather was created for Sonus Faber and is still cut and applied by hand to each speaker. Even now most people assume it's the real thing. In terms of longevity and damping it's actually better than the natural stuff. Finally, all speakers are fitted in a mini "anechoic" chamber for a quality-control check.

The Other Strad

Following the tour my eyes and ears received the ultimate "dolci" during a visit to the birthplace of legendary master violin and luthier craftsmanship, Cremona. Although the Museum of Civilization, which houses the famed Hall of Violins collection, was undergoing renovation, Mr. Bevilacqua had arranged a short tour courtesy of Andrea Mosconi, the curator of the Museum. To everyone's delight, Mr. Mosconi received us causally holding a violin and bow accompanied with an impish grin. He explained it was the Stradavari "Cremonese," built in 1715 (currently valued at five million dollars), and that he was going to treat us

2 Keeping the violins of the collection "fit" includes playing them a short while every day.

to an impromptu performance of Bach.² We were seated in a large exhibition room with twenty-foot-high arched ceilings, rectangular in shape and approximately thirty by sixty feet in size. Up close the Strad, gleaming and golden in the soft light, looked remarkably fresh for its nearly 300 years. Its sound was delightfully balanced in this highly reverberant hall. Transitions from string to string were seamless, something I didn't quite expect. But it was the way the sound from this ultimate "point source" seemed to burst forth and blossom in all directions that made the experience so breathtaking. The music seemed to swirl in an expanding vortex, contrails brushing the edges of the hall with the delicacy of angel's wings.

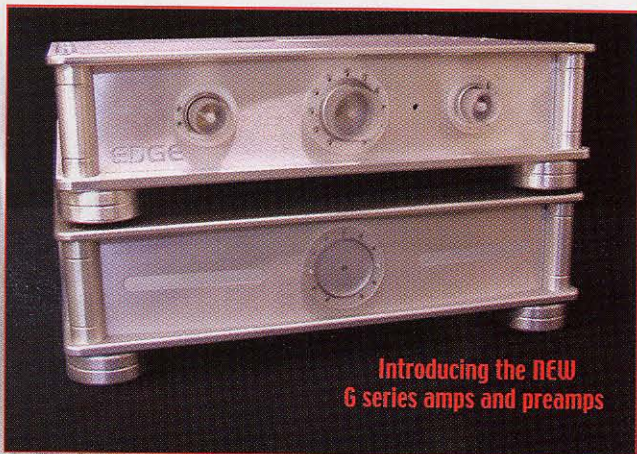
For a moment I put my reviewer's hat back on. The sound was powerfully

midrange, without edge or bite. The upper register was sweet and buttery. There was no treble tilt or transient speed in the sense that we expect from our systems because much of the individual attributes we listen for no longer call attention to themselves in the presence of such immaculate balance. This performance provoked a reconsideration of the rudiments of stereo sound and the nature and extent of audio distortions. All became ripe for reappraisal as I drank in the sheer majesty of the soaring Strad.

The Main Event: The Stradavari "Homage"

The Stradavari Homage is a radical departure from previous Sonus Faber designs which drew inspiration from the

narrow frontal area and deep profile of the lute. Inspired by the radiation patterns of the violin's arched sound-board, the Stradavari Homage is shallow and broad across the baffle with a slight pinch in the waist. Dimensions accordingly are 25.5" x 53" x 19.75". Designer Franco Serblin describes the profile as "elliptical," which he believes allows for very high rigidity. He maintains that the large front panel is less room dependant as well. The Stradavari is a three-way dual-ported reflex design incorporating a pair of 10" woofers from SEAS wired in parallel, a 6" midrange from Audio Technology, and a 33mm Neodymium ring-radiator tweeter sourced from ScanSpeak. The midrange and tweeter drivers are mounted on a separate, arched baffle decoupled from the main cabinet. The crossover is a quasi-first-order design with transitions at 300Hz and



Introducing the NEW G series amps and preamps

"EDGE amplifiers had to be the most realistic sound I have heard at a show."--Enjoy the Music



Golden Ear Award 2003



Edge Electronics

815 S.E. 47th Street, Cape Coral, FL 33904

Tollfree-877.461.7443

P - 239.945.6227 • F - 239.945.6338

edgeamps@aol.com

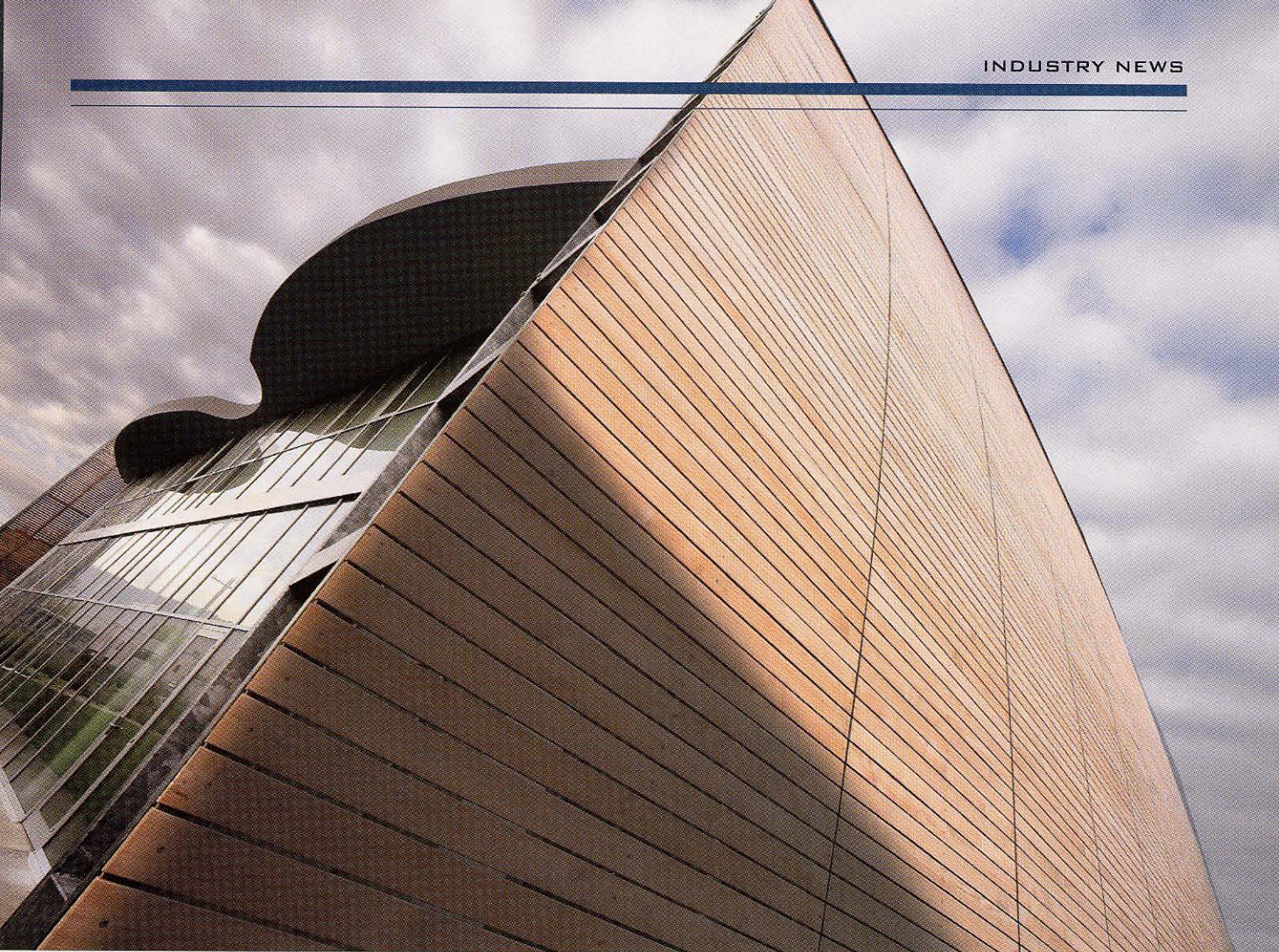
www.edgeamp.com

"...how just plain gorgeous the Signature sounds in it's battery-driven mode!"-- The Absolute Sound



2 ch or 6 ch operation.





“I’m confident there will always be a loyal part of the market for a good stereo loudspeaker.”

4.2kHz. All internal wiring uses a special silver alloy developed by Mr. Serblin (a former dentist). This conductor is even carried through into the proprietary binding posts—a critical detail that Serblin feels is often overlooked. Sensitivity is 92dB, impedance a nominal 4 ohms. The speakers rest on short metal stands with spikes adjustable for rake. Shipping weight is over 400 pounds per pair.

My listening observations occurred over a narrow window of time and in the large, dry listening room at the factory. Nonetheless my first impressions indicate the Stradavari possesses the familiar warm naturalistic rendering of music that is such

a part of the Sonus Faber family of speakers—but to an even higher level. Serblin’s fervent design aim is to capture midrange authenticity and the Strad’s sonics reflect this. Its character was not especially forward but the speaker had presence to burn and presented a complexly layered soundstage rich with dimensionality. Rather than sounding ostentatious the Stradavari became a servant to the material—seemingly playing as “big” or as “small” as the music required. Driver integration and coherence was excellent. The Stradavari fully fleshed out every square inch of the soundboard of Evgeny Kissin’s Steinway during *Pictures At An Exhibition* [RCA]. And Norah Jones’ cover of “The Nearness of You” [Blue Note] was sensual and filled with air and transient delicacy. Bass was extended, articulate yet not overdamped. It had the distinctive Sonus low-frequency bloom that was quite addictive with acoustic instruments like stand-up bass or piano.

In my closing moments I asked Mr. Serblin whether multichannel music had

captured his interest and he replied that it had not, although he understood its increasing popularity. “My passion remains for simple stereo. I’m confident there will always be a loyal part of the market for a good stereo loudspeaker.” Serblin concluded “Stradavari is the future. With me it’s important that I attempt to reinvent the loudspeaker when I start again. It’s important that I have a new inspiration—that I feel the emotion. I don’t want to repeat myself with the same design.”

The speakers will be available only in “Red Violin” finish (naturally) and later in Nera (a dark graphite high-gloss lacquer). Sonus Faber will produce about ten pairs a month and up to 150 pairs a year at peak output. Production will be ramping up in February. Setup will be important with the Stradavari and it appears likely that lucky owners will get the white glove treatment from distributor Sumiko, complete with an in-house optimization shortly after delivery. Expected price is \$40,000/pr. 