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Drop-Dead Gorgeous

Sonus Faber Stradivari "Homage" Loudspeaker

Jonathan Valin

The Sonus Faber Stradivari is not the kind of loudspeaker that will make you say, "Wow, I never heard that before!" every ten seconds. Nor will it throw the widest, deepest soundstage. Nor will it "disappear" the way, say, my Kharma 3.2 monitors do.

All the Stradivari *will* do, in fact, is sound astonishingly beautiful on record after record, disc after disc. If you can imagine a Spendor BC-1 with greater authority, more lifelike image size, far superior dynamics, detail, and extension, more seamless driver-to-driver continuity, and considerably less boominess and boxiness, then you have an idea of what these Sonus Fabers are like. Though the Strads won't turn sow's-ear recordings into silk-purse ones, they'll certainly make every disc more listenable—and great ones breathtakingly lovely. Along with the diminutive \$20,000 Kharma Reference Monitor 3.2s and the humongous \$91,000 Rockport Hyperions, they are the most musical dynamic loudspeakers I've auditioned in my home.

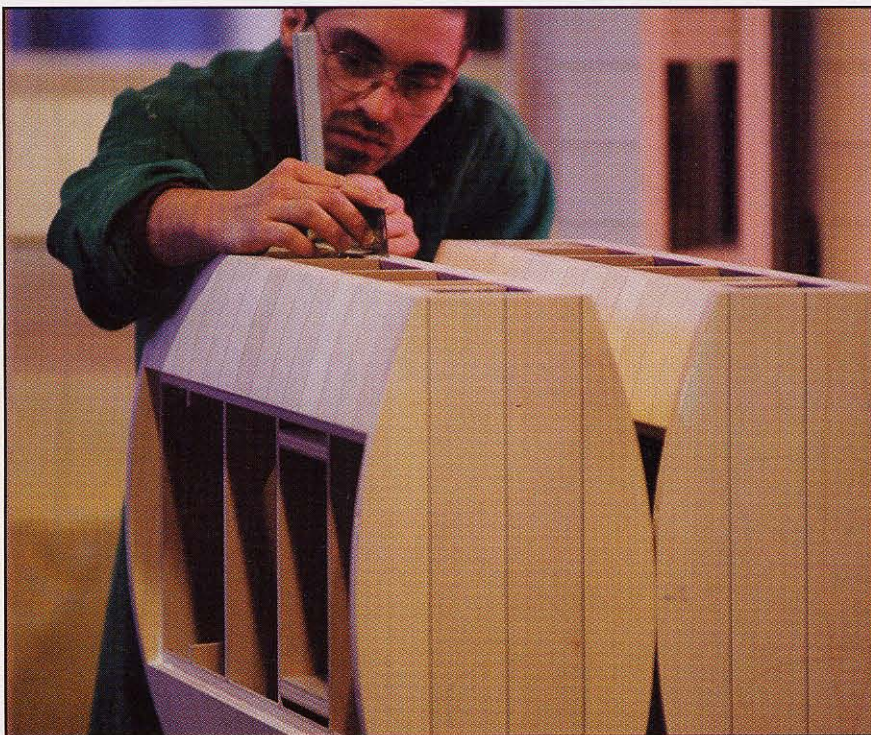
At \$40,000 the pair, these things ought to sound as fabulous as they do. What you might not expect—especially, if you are unfamiliar with other Sonus Faber speakers—is how fabulous they look. Feasting eyes upon them for the first time, my wife, who has seen thirty years' worth of stereo equipment come and go, quipped: "Who cares how they *sound!*" With their graceful curves and gorgeous red lacquer finish, they put you in mind of exactly what Sonus Faber was aiming for: the burnished look of a Stradivarius violin.

The company Sonus Faber (the name literally means "sound

craftsman" in Latin) is located in Cremona, Italy—famously the home of the great seventeenth-century violin- and lute-making families of Amati, Guarneri, and Stradivari—and Sonus Faber's Franco Serblin takes his Cremonese heritage very seriously. Over the past decade or so, he has created a series of "homage" speakers (including the one under review) that were inspired by the work of these great Cremonese masters. Indeed, Serblin makes speakers rather in the same way that Andrea Amati, Giuseppe Guarneri, and Antonio Stradivari made lutes, cellos, and violins, mixing artisanal techniques with contemporary science and focusing on the beauty of the sound first and foremost.

The Stradivari is Serblin's chef d'oeuvre, and a departure in several ways from his previous "homage" designs. First of all, the Stradivari is larger than either the Amati or the Guarneri "homage" speakers—a massive, ported, four-driver, three-way floorstander that weighs roughly 165 pounds. Second, unlike the Amati and the Guarneri, which are narrow-baffle loudspeakers (considerably taller and deeper than they are wide), the Strad is *much* wider than it is deep. Third, again unlike the Amati and the Guarneri, whose guitar-shaped enclosures are modeled on Cremonese lutes, the Stradivari's cabinet is elliptical, shaped like the arched body of the king of instruments, the violin. The Stradivari's external walls are exquisitely fashioned from multiple layers of maple and other high quality woods, artfully arranged





in a constrained-layer sandwich designed to reduce resonances. In addition, the enclosure is braced internally with violin-like structural ribs, has tuned ports for the midrange and woofers (analogous to the violin's F-holes), and is finished, in a gorgeous red lacquer derived from Antonio Stradivari's own formula (and said, like the lacquer of a Stradivarius violin, to enhance the beauty of the speaker's sound).

The Stradivari is an "infinite plane" loudspeaker, in which the considerable breadth and elliptical shape of the speaker's baffle is claimed to work "synergistically" to improve the dispersion of its ring-radiator tweeter, to augment dynamic scale and range in the bass (by effectively increasing the radiating area of its two ten-inch woofers), and to greatly reduce diffraction effects. At the same time the superb enclosure and vented subenclosures for the six-inch midrange and twin bass drivers are said to ideally terminate backwaves. I will have more to say about these claims anon.

On to the listening.

As a reproducer of stringed instruments, from doublebass to acoustic guitar to violin, the Stradivari is peerless in my experience—rivaled among dynamic loudspeakers only by the Rockport Hyperion and the long-discontinued Spendor BC-1. The Strad is simply voluptuous sounding, combining fine dynamic nuance and superb large-scale "snap" with drop-dead-gorgeous timbres. For example, on a "difficult" recording like Speaker's Corner's marvelous reissue of *Vienna 1908-1914* [Mercury], which can (like so many other Mercurys) sound a bit edgy on tuttis, the Strad makes the London Symphony Orchestra strings in Schoenberg's *5 Stücke* sound positively

diaphanous. On a much smaller scale the Strad turns Ildikó Hajdu's sumptuous fiddle and György Déri's equally sumptuous, plum-colored cello from the Kodály Duo on Hungaroton's *digital* LP into things of exquisite beauty. Given the variable nature of recordings, this may not be the way basses, cellos, violas, or violins *should* sound on these LPs, but it is certainly the way we want them to sound—the way, at their finest, we remember these instruments sounding. In saying this, I suppose I'm conceding that the Stradivari—like the Hyperion—errs toward the warm side. Indeed, I would say that it is warmer than the more neutral Kharma Reference 3.2—about as warm as the Hyperion but a little darker in balance. (Because of its buttery smoothness in the upper mids and treble and the beguiling fullness of its mid-to-low bass, the Strad tends to sound as if it is weighted just a bit toward the bot-

tom octaves.) And yet, despite the added warmth, the Strad does not obscure the flaws of lesser recordings so much as make them more livable and listenable.

As you might expect, the Stradivari is also a superb reproducer of the human voice, from basso to soprano. On large-scale multimiked studio recordings, like *Elektra* [Decca] or *Showboat* [Angel], it makes soloists and chorus sound just as beautiful as it does solo and massed violins and cellos, though, as with these string instruments, the Strad tends to sweeten vocal timbres attractively and, because, of its slight darkness, to make performers sound less freed up from the speakers, less "there-in-the-room-with-you" and more "there-in-the-recording-studio-or-concert-hall." On smaller-scale, minimally miked recordings, it may be even more impressive, particularly on discs where voices are accompanied by strings, such as the guitar, auto-harp, and upright bass on Cisco's remarkable LP reissue of Ian and Sylvia's *Four Strong Winds* [Vanguard].

I suppose I could go through all the instruments, from piccolo to grand piano, and say just about the same things I've said about the way the Stradivari reproduces strings and voices. When it comes to timbres and dynamics, it is superb—as good or better than anything I've yet heard. And because of its high sensitivity, low distortion, harmonic richness, treble smoothness, and extraordinary dynamic ease, it will play very softly or very loudly without falling apart. Indeed, for those who like their large-scale music played large (and have the large), the Strad is an obvious must-audition. And for a guy like me, who is very sensitive to the upper midrange roughness, driver discon-



tinuities, and speaker/room interactions that are exaggerated at high volumes (in much the same way that video artifacts on DVD are exaggerated when an image is projected on a big screen), the Strad is, along with the Rockport Hyperion and the Kharma Exquisite 1-B, the only *three-way* dynamic loudspeaker I could listen to contentedly at concert-hall levels and beyond.

Perhaps because of its inherent richness and ripeness, the Strad is as good as anything I've heard at realistically reproducing instruments that play in the bass. Though it is a large speaker, it isn't gigantic like the Hyperion or some of the bigger planars, and yet it generates truly deep bass at least as well as these others do. In my medium-sized listening room (17.5 x 16 x 12 feet), the Strad plays down into the low 20s (no small feat), and though it does not have the crisp definition and leaned-out midbass that some audiophiles seem to demand from their bass reproducers (neither does the Hyperion), it manages, like the Hyperion, to combine a high measure of performance-and-instrument-related detail with an even higher measure of the dynamic authority and richness of timbre that grand pianos, doublebasses, bassoons, tubas, and cellos have in life. The Strad also has unusually good transient response in the bass—which is, frankly, something the Hyperion did not—so that basses played pizzicato or staccato, like those doubled by bass drum near the close of Britten's *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell* [Cisco], have the sensational impact they have in a concert hall. (The Strad is, by the way, just as fast

on transients in the mids and treble—e.g., on the amusing whip and woodblock in this same Britten piece or the marvelous triple-note wind figure, with string pizzicato, in the third movement ["Farben"] of the aforementioned Schoenberg piece, which here really does sound, as Schoenberg intended it to, like a trout suddenly breaking the placid sunlit surface of a lake on a summer morning.) Its clarity on complex harmonies—for instance in the lyric passage late in the Allegro of the Brahms First Cello Sonata [Mercury] in which Starker double-stops his instrument, producing gorgeous counterpoint between the deep bass line and that of the mid-register—is amazingly high.

So where's the rub? Actually, there are just two, unless you count the speaker's inherently sweet, warm, rich balance against it. (And those of you who do should consult a shrink.)

First, the Strads seldom "disappear" into the soundfield the way my (admittedly much smaller) two-way Kharma Reference 3.2 monitors do. I am generally aware of them as sound sources, no matter where they are placed (and John Hunter of Sumiko did a helluva job positioning them for fullest extension, highest detail, and widest soundstage in my room). In all likelihood, this would not have been the case in a larger space than my listening room (these are large speakers, after all), though it may also be that, Sonus Faber's claims to the contrary notwithstanding, those beautiful lacquered enclosures have a beautiful resonant signature of their own. I will find out for sure when I pay




Sumiko a visit later in the year to hear the Strads set up in a big room. In the nonce, I would not let this reservation bother you overly much. The \$91,000 Rockport Hyperions—the best speakers I’ve ever heard in my home (though the Strads give ’em a helluva run in some respects)—didn’t “disappear,” either.

Second, in addition to what I would call the “transparency” question, the Strads do not soundstage quite as well as the Kharma Reference 3.2s do. Of course, no other speaker I’ve heard, save for the Nearfield Acoustics Pipedreams, does. Though stage depth is superior by anything but Kharma standards, stage width always seems a bit curtailed to me, even in comparison to other comparable speakers. While spreading the Strads more widely apart spreads the stage, they do not really image much “outside the box” (beyond the outer edges of their enclosures), the way the Kharmas do. (I should note, once again, that the Hyperion wasn’t a world-beating soundstager, either.) On the other hand, image size is extraordinary with the Strad, and inner detail is, as noted, excellent.

The Strads sound best toed in greatly, so that you are listening virtually on axis with their drivers. They should also be set as far as possible from rear and side walls and at least five or six feet from one another (although setting them too far apart will rob you of midbass). Their tilt (which greatly affects the

blend of the tweeter) must be carefully adjusted. (I could see where they could sound a bit bright or overly dark, if tilt weren’t dialed-in just so.) And, as cool-looking as they are, their “strung” grilles *must* be removed for best sound. In my room, the Strads sounded their finest with moderate-power tube amplification, particularly with the 70Wpc Ming Da monoblocks (review forthcoming) and the 75Wpc Tenor 75Wp’s. The 300Wpc hybrid Tenor 300Hp’s also did a superb job—allowing the speakers to “open up” more because of their enormous advantage in power.

I should also note that switching cable and interconnect from my reference balanced Nordost Valhalla to single-ended runs of Synergistic Research’s new active X-2 Absolute Reference makes a good deal of the loudspeaker’s darkness go away, though it makes a bit of the midbass go away, too.

In spite of any shortcomings, the Sonus Faber Stradivari, like the Kharma Reference Monitor 3.2 and the Rockport Hyperion, is a truly great high-end loudspeaker, as gorgeous to look at as it is to listen to. I cannot imagine any of you not loving it as much as I do—and as much as my listening panel does. (I’ve never had this many return visits from guys who are old, jaded hands when it comes to audio gear.) Its sound is so beautiful, so dynamic, so utterly, thrillingly, and addictively musical that it actually takes an effort to tear yourself away from the listening room. Frankly, I don’t know when I’ve last been able to say that—and mean it. For the music lover, this is a reference-quality product. 

SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Four-driver, three-way, floorstanding dynamic loudspeaker
 Speaker complement: One-inch Neodymium ring tweeter, six-inch dynamic midrange, (2) ten-inch aluminum/magnesium alloy woofers
 Crossover: Multi-slope at 330Hz and 4kHz
 Sensitivity: 92dB
 Impedance: 4 ohms nominal
 Frequency response: 22Hz–40kHz
 Dimensions: 25.5" x 53.5" x 10"
 Weight: 165 lbs. apiece
 Price: \$40,000

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Aesthetix Io and Calisto, Lamm L2 and LP2, Messenger and Xanden pre-amps; Tenor 75Wp, Tenor 300Hp, Lamm ML-2, Krell FPB650, Ming Da 70 amplifiers; Walker Proscenium Gold turntable and arm; Clearaudio HarmonyMg cartridge; emmLabs DAC6e/emmLabs modified Philips SACD1000 transport, Krell SACD Standard SACD players; Krell 25sc CD player/preamp; Nordost Valhalla, Synergistic Research X2 Absolute Reference, Purist Audio Dominus, Silent Source cable and interconnect; Walker Velocitor, Richard Gray Power Company 600S and Pole Pig power conditioners; Walker Audio Valid Points

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