

# Sonus faber Liuto Monitor

Compact Elegance

Neil Gader

Our sonic expectations for compact loudspeakers have risen dramatically in recent years. Every aspect of small speaker performance has benefited from advancements in materials technology and analysis, and computer-aided design. Output has increased; driver and cabinet colorations have decreased. Across-the-board, the musical experience is more consistent. More importantly—especially for those of us about to open our wallets—the impact has been felt at every price level from the elite to the humble.

The relative size and simplicity of the compact speaker have always had certain sonic advantages, and today those advantages are even more pronounced—for instance, point-source-like imaging and detail and freedom from cabinet resonances are better than ever. That's not to say that everyone is a fan of the small speaker in spite of its virtues. Its size also sets limits on bass extension and dynamic range and tends to make it best suited to smaller listening spaces. I should know: I'm a small room listener. But as a big fan of little speakers, such reservations tend to pale in significance. And recent experience has shown me that, today, in a showdown between large and small speakers it's not always clear who's kicking sand in whose face.

Case in point, the \$2998 Sonus faber Liuto Monitor. It's the compact, stand-mounted cousin to the full-bore Liuto, a floorstander that I playfully dubbed the Bad Boy of Italy (sorry Silvio) in Issue 199. Why? Because it had a combination of Sonus' harmonious virtues—micro-finesse, speed, and the characteristic Sonus warmth—and yet it didn't stand down in the face of material that demanded a heap of dynamic slam, extension, and stage-strutting bravado. The Liuto could make short work of Pantera as easily as it made love to Pachibel.

The Liuto Monitor, piccolo-sized in comparison, may not be up to that level of Bad Boy brio, but to the extent that it imparts much of the Liuto's full-bodied excitement, it has been mentored well. It's a bass-reflex design with a rear-mounted port. If the uppermost drivers look familiar, they should. They include the Liuto's 25mm soft dome tweeter and a 6" thermo-



molded polypropylene/textile cone mid/bass adapted for the Liuto Monitor. The crossover point rises slightly from 3kHz to 3.5kHz.

The Liuto Monitor streamlines the traditional Sf form without sacrificing heritage accents. That continuity includes the lute-shaped enclosure, the engraved brass nameplate, the warmth of the leather-like grained surfaces, and the sculpted end caps of the vented rear panel. The stands are works of art—graceful and rigid, with a top plate that is cross-drilled for securing it to the threaded holes in the bottom of the Monitor's enclosure. Heavy knurled knobs allow even chunky fingers to tighten down

the included spikes and mounting screws. Frankly, unless you're dropping the Liuto Monitor on a shelf, I can't imagine living without the stands.

In tonality and general sonics, the Liuto Monitor hews to the Sf company line by focusing first on capturing natural richness and a bit of romance throughout the midrange. This is consistent with my experience of Sonus faber. Its speakers have a flair for the dramatic, imparting an almost operatic dimension to the sound. At a mere 13" tall the Liuto Monitor has a lighter overall balance than the three-way Liuto, but that is to be expected, as it must make do without the virtues of a dedicated midrange driver. Still, I found its midrange character often echoed the warmth and fleshiness of its sibling, if not the sheer dynamic zing.

The Liuto Monitor doesn't sound skeletal like so many minis can. Tonally it is not ruler-flat, so, yes, there's a bit of a lift in the low treble. But as I listened to k.d. lang's cover of "After The Gold Rush," this anomaly seemed reasonably reined in—with nothing close to an overdose of sibilance. However, evidence of some added treble energy is perceivable. During Mary Gauthier's country-rocking "Sugar Cane" from *Filth and Fire* [Signature Sounds], I could hear an emphasis on transient textures emanating from the guitarist's flat-pick and a bit more rosin and grit off the bow on the fiddle strings. Collectively, these mask a bit of soundboard resonance and natural decay. Also the

Liuto Monitor's upper midrange is not quite as forward as I've come to expect from certain familiar vocal recordings; rather, it's just a little relaxed. As a result, Holly Cole's smoky cover of Tom Wait's "Take Me Home" [Alert] slips slightly rearward of the front baffle of the speakers. The Liuto Monitor, on the other hand, revels in reproducing an abundance of tactile musical timbres. More than just flat surfaces, you can feel the lower-pitched flutter of drum-skins and sundry other instrumental resonances.

Imaging and soundstaging are, in a word, exceptional. Although these factors are acknowledged strengths of the contemporary compact speaker, the Liuto Monitor's ability to throw concise images in a dimensional space is superb. The speaker conveys the otherworldly sense that the presentation is completely liberated from the enclosure and free from driver-localization artifacts. In fact, I made a discovery during Holst's Suite No. 2 with the Dallas Wind Ensemble [Reference Recordings]. There's a densely packed brass-section crescendo that the players hold a few bars. The sound is ripe with resonance and bloom, but as the collective notes decay there's also a cymbal almost imperceptibly overlaid above the brass section—just a slight effervescent sizzle that would be easy to mistake for an artifact of the recording on a less highly resolved speaker.

Given the modest size of the mid/bass driver there are some dynamic and amplitude limitations, but the Liuto Monitor shouldn't be underestimated. During the Holst it delivered a sophisticated blend of finely graduated mid- and low-level dynamics from the brass and wind ensemble. This is where small speakers often turn anemic, but trumpet and trombone signatures were pristine, and there was a good balance of transient attack and bloom. However, the Monitor has its limits. With true Bigfoot-bass pipe organ or, say, baritone sax, the Liuto Monitor can only take its large-speaker impersonation so far. Roundhouse punches of deep bass are cushioned for self-preservation, and you can almost hear the transducers girding themselves for the



## SPECS & PRICING

**Type:** Two-way, vented-box, stand-mount loudspeaker  
**Drivers:** 1" soft dome tweeter, 6" polypropylene-textile mid/woofer  
**Sensitivity:** 86dB  
**Nominal Impedance:** 8 ohms  
**Dimensions:** 17" x 7.3" x 13.3"  
**Weight:** 17.6 lbs each  
**Price:** \$2998/pr. (stands, \$798/pr.)

**ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT**  
VPI Classic 3, Sota Cosmos Series III turntable; SME V tonearm; Sumiko Palo Santos, Air Tight PC-3; Parasound JC-3 phono; ARC CD5; Vitus Audio SIA-25, ARC DSi200; Synergistic Tesla Apex, Wireworld Platinum; Synergistic Tesla, Wireworld Silver Electra & Kimber Palladian power cords.

**SUMIKO AUDIO**  
2431 Fifth Street  
Berkeley, CA 94710  
(510) 843-4500  
sumikoaudio.net

COMMENT ON THIS ARTICLE ON THE FORUM AT [AVGUIDE.COM](http://AVGUIDE.COM)



blows to come.

Likewise, the scale of images is proportionate to the number of instruments populating the soundstage, which is to say smaller collections of musicians fare better in scale accuracy. A solo classical guitar like Michael Newman off a Sheffield direct-to-disc can sound stunningly real. However, a symphonic work of monumental proportions like Vaughan Williams' *Antartica* [Naxos] loses a little something in the translation of the majesty and vastness of acoustic space. In this sense the small driver is too short on cone area to replicate the full sensation of air movement in the original venue.

Every level of a stereo audio chain involves the art of compromise. For the compact speaker it's the bass octaves and dynamics. Sonus faber is a company that knows the territory like a truffle dog knows a Piedmont forest. Today it's not enough to make a well-crafted product; to produce a successful small speaker you need to be a little crafty, as well. And the Liuto Monitor is shrewd in the way it finds an authoritative voice. First there's a persuasive but not over-weighted upper midbass that smoothly rolls off, avoiding major dips and humps. There's good extension and output into the upper midbass and a distinct lack of the port colorations that muddy images. Lastly, it plays plenty loud but within limits, so as not to unhinge its spectral balance and compress that dynamic envelope. As a result the Liuto Monitor cultivates a sense of even-handed authority, enough to prevent a common malady of small speakers—an overly prominent treble

range, which in the absence of low-end balance tends to give the speaker a dry and flinty character.

The Liuto Monitor's solid mid/upper-bass response makes it an equally good candidate for a subwoofer (see my REL R-218 review this Issue). But then you need to consider that if the total cost with stands and the aforementioned sub places the system within about \$700 of the full-blood Liuto, what would the play be? A small listening room would have to be factored into the equation. Also, there's the form factor—the Liuto Monitor makes for an incredibly small footprint in a room; even with the REL the system is virtually invisible. The Liuto is physically imposing, but it's also hard to deny the gusto of a true three-way. And then there are listening habits. If small-scale, more intimate music is primary, then a sub could be irrelevant. Mahler and pipe organ lovers? Run, don't walk, to grab a sub. The other advantage of the Liuto Monitor is that the expenses are more incremental—you're free to add the sub as your budget permits. Whatever the decision, it's a nice quandary to find yourself in.

Returning to my original premise, what makes the Sonus faber Liuto Monitor so satisfying is the way the company has preserved the sonic virtues that we take for granted in its larger offerings, like the Liuto, and infused many of those same elements into one of its smaller performers, without losing what makes a compact so special. In my view, these successes, along with premium execution and craftsmanship, make the Liuto Monitor one of the most elegant and versatile small speakers available. **tas**

the absolute sound  
2010  
PRODUCT  
OF THE YEAR  
AWARD

Now in stock!

The Absolute Sound's  
2010 Product of the Year  
Award Winner  
The **ca21** Preamplifier

\$2295



"Of all the integrated amps I've reviewed in the last year...the Mystère ia21 is my favorite, the least expensive, and drew the least attention to itself, allowing me to focus on the music." —Erick Lichte **stereophile** March 2011

The **Mystère ia21** Integrated amplifier \$2995

For more information

USA: Mystere USA at 909.931.0219 [www.mystere-usa.com](http://www.mystere-usa.com) • Canada: Audioscape Canada Inc. at 905.833.0010