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Living Thing...

The Sonus Faber Stradivari Homage Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Well, if nothing else and like it or not, you'll be hard pressed to deny that the Sonus Faber Stradivari Homage is at least decidedly different. It's different in appearance, different in construction and very different in concept. Just how different you're about to find out.

I've never been particularly comfortable with the notion of loudspeaker as musical instrument, holding to the view that the speaker should contribute as little of itself as possible. Proposing the speaker as an active participant in the reproductive process flies in the face of all accepted philosophy. But stop for instant and reconsider; don't speakers contribute to a greater or lesser extent whether we like it or not? Isn't this just an acceptance of reality and in its recognition the seeds of a solution – or at least an accommodation?

Even the briefest of listens to the Stradivari Homage will tell you that this isn't a classically neutral speaker. It's a little lean through the bass, fuller in the mid and a touch dark as it transitions to the lighter reaches of the airy, extended treble. These are tonal shifts that sit atop an otherwise seamless energy spectrum, a dynamic coherence that makes the music uncannily convincing, fully justifying the speakers' status as the Sonus Faber flagship. However, how it achieves those results, indeed their specific nature, is inextricably entwined with the speakers' structure and the philosophy that underpins it.

This is not Franco Serblin's first

homage to the artists of the Cremonese tradition of master luthiers. With the Guernari Homage and Amati Homage already in the range you didn't have to be a genius to realise that Stradivarius would happen along soon, and that when he did the results would indeed be special.



The first clue to just how special lies in the shape of the Stradivari cabinet. The graceful, deep curves that adorned the earlier enclosures (faces that launched a thousand imitations) were based on the rear body of a lute. The Stradivari is wider and much flatter, taking its inspiration from the violin. That might sound far-fetched, but examine the cabinet structure in detail and the parallels are both surprising and significant.

The unusual shape of the Stradivari evolved from a desire to better simulate the theoretical model of an infinite baffle. The gentle curve of the broad baffle is perfectly mirrored by the rear face of the shallow enclosure, and constructed

from multiple layers of grain-orientated and carefully selected hardwoods with substantial internal bracing. The surface is then treated with a special lacquer similar to that used on string instruments. The end result is critically damped structure with a well controlled, broadband resonant character. Indeed, the shape, the materials and the mechanical behavior are already remarkably similar to a larger, less lively instrument body.

But the real similarity lies inside.

The shallow cabinet presents a number of problems in dealing with the rear wave generated by the drive-units. The 150mm midrange driver enjoys its own, vented cardioid enclosure, constructed from wood, which as well as handling that energy is clamped between the front and rear faces of the cabinet, acting as an energy bridge directly analogous to the Anima so crucial to a violin. The driver's voice-coil is built on a Kapton former and employs the latest motor technology.

Alongside it, and sharing the separate sub-baffle is the tweeter, a 25mm silk ring radiator optimized with dual, annular wave guides and its own, rear mounted acoustic labyrinth – again constructed from wood. The bass drivers are large, 260mm aluminium and magnesium alloy units built onto 50mm, long throw motors. Rear ported, the internal arrangement is reputedly novel, again to overcome the

► issues of the shallow cabinet depth and prevent early reflections influencing the drivers' output; Serblin is however, understandably coy as to the details. Likewise the specifics of the crossover remain something of a mystery – save for one important fact. The midrange driver covers the range from 300Hz to 4kHz, approximating the span of the human voice.

Unpacking the Stradivari Homage it's impossible to be anything but impressed by the fit, finish and care that's gone into this product – enough on its own to convince many a customer to take the plunge. Personally, the aesthetics leave me cold, but even I was impressed by the sheer quality of the execution. The tall, slim cabinet screws to a massively heavy, cast-iron base plate which accepts the four substantial spikes. Longer ones at the front provide a degree of backward lean, and the precise angle proved critical to the overall performance, as did toe-in. Likewise, these speakers demand space behind them, although don't be fooled into placing them as wide as the proportions of the baffle suggest – you'll end up with a hole in the middle of the soundstage and phase-y vocal images.

Apart from the exceptions noted later, I listened to the Stradivaris with Nordost Valhalla cabling and the Jadis DA88S – a sublime amplifier as well as a sublime combination. Front-ends were the ARC CD3 Mk. II and a Lyra/SPJ combination. But before we get into the sound, one warning – ditch the

grilles. The heavy metal plates and elastic cords combine to create the most sonically intrusive grille I've ever experienced. The results with them in situ are dark, shut-in and tonally uneven, wildly exaggerating the slight bottom

the cuddly mid-band. Unless you take the time and trouble to position these speakers with real care, ensuring that they are exactly symmetrical and that you are also at the correct height and distance, you are going to be short changed. And that would be a crime, because they can (and should) sound so much better than simply "nice".

In fact, their sound is, in my experience, unique, and thus takes a little understanding. Where we need to start is with the sound of individual instruments. It really is as if the Stradivaris manage to instill a little of themselves into the recorded sound. Yet it's not a reductive process; far from making everything sound the same it's as if they chime with and

accentuate the inner character and tonal structure of each individual instrument. It creates fleeting, almost disturbing instances of recognition as the gestalt character of an instrument or ensemble takes momentary, living shape before you: The basses on their riser in the Barbirolli *Tallis Fantasia*, Narcisco Yepes' guitar, the body and strings of the instruments breathtaking in their presence and complexity. Diane Christansen or Eliza Gilkyson, Leontyne Price or Lou Reed (with whom I really did experience a perfect day) all take on a communicative presence and solidity that stems from the vivid recreation of their distinctive tonal characters. This is communication through colour, but taken beyond anything I've experienced before.

Playing the Barbirolli Sibelius *2nd Symphony*, the vivid tonal contrasts that typify the composers work take on a vital richness that illuminates the work. The plaintive woodwind phrases that start to open out the pizzicato introduction to the Second Movement hang in the sound-space, ►



to upper-mid shift and altering the top-end out of all recognition. Listening height and distance are critical too, if you aren't going to suffer a congealed and turgid sound – hence the importance of the speakers' vertical angle. Don't be fooled by

▶ the contrast of the gentle Timpani rumble that underpins them adding depth and flavour. When the horns add a gentle prompt the distinctive tonal colour makes perfect sense, heralding the coming crescendo, the arrival of the swelling strings that add the substance to carry the soaring brass tuttis and their woodwind echoes. With the Sonus Fabers the manipulation of the orchestral palette, the interchange and interplay of tonal colours brings emotional weight and contrast to the music, carrying and uplifting the listener. Now you know exactly what instruments the composer has brought into play, but like no other speaker in my experience, it's also clearly understand why.

Cooks talk about a symphony of flavours and that's what you'll experience here. Like the lime juice that cuts and enhances the flavour of a seared Tuna steak, bringing out both its taste but also the translucent quality to its texture, the Stradivaris highlight the textural and harmonic contrasts that enrich and enliven music. So, the contrasts between the orchestral tone of Dorati's LSO and Munch's Boston Symphony offer another side, another dimension to the comparison between Starker's Dvorak and Piatigorsky's. It's almost as if the speakers eschew the conventional mode of hi-fi expression, opening instead a vibrant, alternative landscape.

Voices are a particular joy. Whether it's the live version of 'The Thing You Love...' (Steve Dawson and Diane Christansen, *Duets*), Jackie Leven, or any of the other singers already mentioned, there's a warmth and humanity to their presentation that enhances their communicative capabilities. Diction

becomes incredibly clear, as is the way a singer shapes and works his words. So when Jackie states that he "ran away to sing" there's plenty of speakers and systems that leave you thinking he ran away to sea!



– especially given the nautical bent of the song itself. With the Sonus Fabers you wonder why there was ever any confusion. Leontyne Price's

dramatic entrance (in every sense of the word) in the Karanjan/Vienna RCA Soria recording of *Carmen* simply oozes animal grace and disdain, wound round with the conundrum of innocence (the singer's, not the character's) combined with the promise of something dark and seamy. It's a million miles from the crystalline control and purity of a Milanov or the earthy experience of Callas. Again, it brings a new dimension to the dramatic power of the character, as well as an unusual fragility – the flaw that marks all great tragedies. But it's here also that we first start to appreciate the price we're paying for that kaleidoscope of colour and range of emotion. When she advances on the hapless Don Jose and flings the flower at his feet, the "Attrape" comes across as more self-contained, even self-satisfied, than threatening and venomous. Why? It's to do with the way the Stradivaris handle individual notes.

Few speakers will give you a better sense of musical shape or line, the phrasing in a piece. Play John Coltrane's 'My Favorite Things' and the busy repetitions and re-inventions of the theme are reproduced with poise, purpose and clarity as the lead role is handed from one player to the next, the shape and curve of the melody bent and stretched but never broken. The musical genius is clear to hear, the extended extrapolation a thing of beauty, fragile and

wonderful in its grace and delicacy; superb. Now listen to the easy flow of McCoy Tyner's lines, and the way he punctuates and accents them. Those crisper, weightier ▶

notes are a little soft, lacking the pace, attack and impact that gives them their full effect as punctuation. What you are hearing is the way the speaker rests on the heart and tail of the note, its harmonic shading, development and decay, at the expense of tracing the leading-edge shape and slope.

It's almost as if, in listening terms, the note is there in body, less so in mind. It's a fascinating effect and one that needs some explanation.

The easy way the speaker grasps the shape and pace of a phrase, the rhythmic momentum of a piece, tells you that the placement of notes is spot-on. But what you are lacking is the initial attack and jump. Not new, and there have been plenty of speakers that have softened leading edges before now. But to understand the effect in this instance, you have to combine it with the vivid colours and sweeping flow that the Stradivaris bring to proceedings. So, let's see what happens in musical terms. Using the Dvorak *Cello Concerto* I've already touched on, and playing Piatigorsky on XRCD and vinyl (the 180g Classic Records re-issue), Starker on CD and original US pressed Mercury LP, the differences between the formats, pressings and performances are great indeed. It's also apparent that Starker is the better player and that Dorati's interpretation is more to my taste than Munch's. However, why that is remains more obscure, as if the speaker is concentrating on what is being played rather than how. The details of technique, whether in the case of Starker or Yepes, Janis Ian or

McCoy Tyner, are subordinated to the purpose and effect of the whole. Likewise the life and immediacy in the music is slightly muted, offering a more distant and

assess for themselves.

A further extension of this voicing is the way in which the speaker presents the soundstage. Familiar acoustics are extremely broad but slightly shallower than I'm used to (that doesn't of course mean that they're wrong, just that they're different). Combined with the reduced sense of immediacy the overall effect is less transparent than is currently fashionable. Yet, rather than the grain or mist that can normally be blamed for such a reduction, the Stradivaris bring an almost velvety texture to the intra-instrumental spaces, a blackness that contributes to the dramatic tonal and harmonic contrast between those instruments. I first talked about tonal separation (as opposed to spatial) in the context of the Lamm electronics. These Sonus Fabers take it to its logical extreme. No, you don't get the precise focus and dimensionality that comes with ultra transparency, but instruments are just as effectively separated, while the width of the soundstage leaves you in no doubt as to their relative locations. Reading this you could be forgiven for concluding that combining the Stradivaris with the Jadis DA88S might be altogether too much of a good thing. Far from it. This is a speaker that dominates the sound of the driving electronics meaning that you need to play to its strengths. That the Jadis most certainly does: A brief flirtation with solid-state



some would certainly argue, a more comfortable vision. It's a perfectly valid choice but it is a choice and it's one that the potential purchasers will have to

► in a vain attempt to improve leading-edge definition and transparency simply revealed the speakers' reluctance to play ball. Instead of compensating for each other's weaknesses, the two simply fought to impose themselves, ultimately delivering the worst of both worlds. That doesn't limit the use of the Sonus Fabers to valve electronics, but it does mean that whatever amp does the driving will need to do so in a sympathetic way that cherishes their strengths rather than chivies their weaknesses. A far more effective solution was delivered by the Nordost cable loom, which succeeded in maximizing the existing dynamic jump and definition, rather than trying to add to it.

decent efficiency and bandwidth, along with the body and substance that comes with its rich tonal shading, means that it plays loud and proud, with a real sense of power. The 60 Watts delivered by the Jadis was quite sufficient for room-clearing levels, without the onset of audible strain or distress. The effortless sense of shape and overall structure works wonders with jazz and matters just as much to rock. So whether it's big-band or *Never Mind The Bollocks* the Sonus Fabers rise readily to the occasion. One recent sale was to a dyed-in-the-wool AC/DC aficionado – and they don't come much louder or prouder than that.

in delivering genuine high-end sound in a package that is both financially and domestically more approachable. But more importantly, it's also a product for the future – your future. Choose this speaker and you'll be enjoying it for years to come. It's a design that fastens on the beauty in music, and that never goes out of fashion. Bravo Franco – vive la difference! ➤



It's also possible to purchase speaker cables constructed from the same wire that is used internally, and whilst an entirely Nordost cable system provides a pretty hostile environment in which to assess such a product, it nonetheless acquitted itself well. With a rounder and richer sound than the Nordost, bought at the expense of some lucidity and dynamic differentiation, it certainly offers a valid alternative for those lacking an existing, coherent loom.

You might also conclude that the Stradivari is a speaker best suited to classical music. Well, not so; it's far simpler than that, being suited to music full-stop. The combination of

The Stradivari is a surprising speaker in many ways. It's surprisingly different and distinctly unexpected. Its strengths and weaknesses make it a less than obvious choice for someone with my listening biases, yet it was astonishingly engaging and satisfying, encouraging longer and longer listening sessions. Franco Serblin is to be applauded for having the courage to pursue his own agenda and beliefs, admired for having achieved his goals so completely. The Stradivari Homage is a product of the moment, offering as it does, true cutting-edge, wide bandwidth performance at a fraction of the price of other flagship designs. It joins the likes of Avalon and Marten

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	3-way ported loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	1x 25mm silk ring radiator 1x 150mm midrange unit on Kapton former 2x 260mm aluminium/magnesium bass units
Crossover Points:	300Hz and 4kHz
Bandwidth:	22Hz – 40kHz ±3dB
Efficiency:	92dB
Impedance:	4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	650x1350x500mm (incl stand)
Weight:	75kg ea.
Finishes:	Graphite or red violin lacquer
Price:	Violin red £22,000 Graphite £24,000

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