

# SONUS FABER ELIPSA LOUDSPEAKER

I've tried, really I have, but I honestly can't think of another loudspeaker manufacturer creating models as purely beautiful sounding as those made by Italy's Sonus faber. With each passing year, Franco Serblin and the team at his Vicenza-based design and manufacturing facility add to their impressive heritage of gorgeous sounding—and equally gorgeous looking—products. TAS has covered a fair number of Sonus faber designs over the years. Most recently, Neil Gader reviewed the \$3495 Domus Concerto in Issue 163; Jonathan Valin reviewed the company's top-of-the-line \$40,000 Stradivari Homage in Issue 148; I reported on the \$8995 Cremona in Issue 143, and followed up with its standmounted sibling, the \$4845 Cremona Auditor in Issue 146. Except for the Stradivari Homage, all Sonus faber models are based on Serblin's classic "lute"-shaped enclosure that over the years has influenced everything from B&W's 800 Series to the cheapest "home theater-in-a-box" systems. In actuality, the Stradivari is based on a lute shape, too, but its cabinet was inspired by the idea of a pair of conjoined lutes, which naturally results in an enclosure that is wider than it is deep—rather like an ellipse. And, I might add, rather like a violin.

Now, if you happened to read Issue 171's CES Report, you may have noticed that several members of our crew singled out Sonus faber's new Elipsa as one of the finest sounds heard at this year's show. The speaker was praised for its strikingly rich tonality, breadth and depth of soundstage, remarkable detail, transparency, focus, and ability to communicate musical emotion. I was among those who picked the Elipsa as one of the best sounds at CES, and jumped at the offer to be the first U.S. reviewer to hear a pair at home.

Although it strongly resembles one (and is clearly based on that design), the Elipsa is not really a half-priced Stradivari. The Strad resides at the top of Sonus faber's Homage series, and is luxe in every way. Not that the Elipsa is priced like a drive-through burger and coke—or should that be pizza and straw-encased jug of Chianti? Yes, it is about half of the Stradivari's cost, and at \$20,800 is still plenty luxe enough for guys like me and (most of) you. And the Elipsa's superb sound holds its own against similarly priced models from Wilson, Avalon, Kharma, and the like. But the Old World finishing details that go into Homage designs like the Strad—most notably the 20 coats of hand-rubbed, high-gloss red lacquer (semi-seriously whispered to be derived from Antonio Stradivari's very recipe), that affect the sound as well as the look of the Stradivari—are not present in the Elipsa, which takes its place atop the Cremona series. Still, this is not to say that the Elipsa and Stradivari are not in other ways very much alike.

Most obvious, of course, are the two speakers' violin-inspired shape, which creates

an infinite baffle for their drivers. Even though the Elipsa is much larger than the Cremona and Auditor models I previously reviewed, U.S. distributor Sumiko's Kevin Wolff says that its wide baffle helps remove some of the room from the sonic equation, allowing the speaker to couple more easily with smaller rooms, such as mine, while reducing diffraction effects and increasing dynamic range and low-frequency response.

The enclosure's sandwich-style construction consists of 20 handselected staves of layered maple (which can be ordered in a natural matte or "graphite" finish—same wood, stained a lovely and contemporary-looking deep metal gray) that are specifically oriented to reduce resonance. "A violin is not made of MDF," Serblin likes to say, and indeed, viewed head-on the Elipsa's slightly pinched "waist" adds to the suggestion of the speaker's fiddle-fangled form. Additional sub-structural ribs are placed within to increase the enclosure's resistance to vibration and the buildup of internal standing waves. In addition, the woofer and midrange drivers reside in their own sub-enclosures, vented to the rear of the cabinet. The top and bottom end caps are made of solid wood. Knowing that even the most inert loudspeaker enclosures still resonate to some degree, the designers of the Sonus faber line chose to work with, rather than fight against, enclosure resonance, and at 107 lbs. apiece, with all that bracing, the Elipsa cabinet is plenty stable. But just as a violin can be tuned for the most pleasing pitch, so, too, during the design and construction process, is the Elipsa's cabinet.

As with most loudspeakers, the musical heart of the Elipsa beats to the tune of its midrange driver, and this one happens to be a brand new design unique to the Elipsa—a 6" ScanSpeak-sourced paper cone that's been impregnated with wood-pulp fibers. Although it may seem like yesterday's news, paper remains an excellent choice of driver material, as it's not only lightweight and rigid but also quite low in material coloration. The wood fibers add to the driver's rigidity and help break up standing waves at the cone's surface.

The midrange, of course, influences the selection of the remaining drivers. As with all Sonus faber models, the 1" "dual-toroidal waveguide" ringradiator tweeter is likewise sourced from ScanSpeak, and uses silk as its dome material. As Kevin Wolff put it to me, "Sure, lots of manufacturers are using ScanSpeak drivers, but Franco and his design team keep pushing ScanSpeak in ways that other manufacturers don't. These drivers are unique to Sonus faber, and that's why the label on the drivers bear the company's name." Referring to the tweeter, Wolff continued, "We like to call it an 'annular dome,' you know, as in architecture. It's like a brick kiln, which is the strongest shape known."

Drivers have improved enormously over the past 20 years. Early silk-dome tweeters

were lucky to reach 20kHz, sacrificing detail and extension for natural warmth of tone. (This is a major reason why metal domes rose in popularity around the same time—they were lightweight, rigid, and much more extended than other materials, if often bright and “metallic” sounding.) Today’s best silk domes, like those found in the Elipsa, needn’t apologize for their extension, as they can reach up to 40kHz while retaining their inherent warmth and lack of brittleness. They may not be as “precise” sounding or as hyperdetailed as metal domes, or as extended and water-neutral as the best syntheticdiamond tweeters, like the one found in my reference Kharma Mini Exquisite, but I, for one, would take silk’s warmth and inherent sweetness over “etched” every day of the week. In the middle of the tweeter’s dome resides a nearly invisible phase plug. An up-close examination reveals a needle-thin, roughly half-inch stamen-like extension that causes the tweeter to bear a striking resemblance to a drop of water landing in a small dark pool. This, along with the wide baffle, is said to enhance the tweeter’s wide yet focused dispersion pattern.

The 10.2" aluminum/magnesium woofer is, in fact, identical to that used in the Stradivari, but the Strad uses a pair of these and the Elipsa just one. As you might guess, the hybrid aluminum/ magnesium cone material is exceptionally light and stiff, and the surface is damped with an elastic coating to break up resonance without adding mass. Unseen within the enclosure is the wooferspider’s open-basket design —again that low-mass-plus-rigidity thing—a technology that has evolved throughout Sonus faber’s entire line. As with many modern drivers, this woofer needs no dust cap, because the center-aligning phase plug has such a tight gap. A look at the woofer’s phase plug reveals a multi-pointed star shaped device whose job is to “evacuate” telltale gusts of air that might otherwise cause mechanical and audible compression. (This is another bit of thoughtful technology that’s found its way throughout the Sonus faber line.)

Another reason Sonus faber pushes to get the utmost out of its drivers is to simplify its crossovers, which in turn makes the speakers easier to drive. This and the Elipsa’s 91dB sensitivity allow owners to choose amplifiers based on sonic quality, not sheer power output. (During my evaluation period, I drove the Elipsa with excellent results using two very different amplifiers: MBL’s 290Wpc—or 570Wpc into the Elipsa’s 4-ohm load—9007 solid-state monoblocks, and also a friend’s KR Audio Kronzilla SXI integrated amplifier, a 50Wpc tube model.) Before getting to the sound, I should mention that the Elipsa is a beautifully crafted product that reflects its maker’s near-obsessive attention to the smallest details, from the refined cabinetry, to the use of “ecologically sensitive lacquer,” to the small abstract “snail” graphic on the grille struts (a nod to Serblin’s first sat-sub-style design), to the superb custom wing-shaped speaker lugs, on which, should you ever examine them, you’ll find a tiny rendition of the Sonus faber name—a sweet finishing touch many owners might

never even discover.

Franco Serblin and his design group are believers in music as an art of strong emotional content. And each of their models is designed above all else to deliver that emotion. Indeed, I'd say that, though it is not alone in this regard, Sonus faber is among the companies that view its speakers almost as musical instruments, as opposed, say, to music-reproduction tools.

The Elipsa's sound is about as far as you can get from the Analytical School of Speaker Design. This is not to suggest that the Elipsa makes everything sound the same—it is in actuality quite revealing of recordings and upstream components—but that it does make everything played through it sound consistently and exceptionally lovely.

Take, for instance, Neil Young's recently released CD, *Live at Massey Hall 1971* [Reprise]. A solo show in which he plays guitar and piano, this is one of Young's finest performances, one where he sings with notable delicacy, sweetness, and depth. Now, I'm not gonna lie to you. The sound on this disc is very good, and Young's performance is so riveting that I've listened to it repeatedly, and with great enjoyment, even over my Scion xA's stock Pioneer car-audio system. But, played over the Elipsa, the experience is magical and, at times, almost painfully beautiful—so nakedly emotional is Young's singing, so elegantly effective yet simple is his piano and guitar playing. Speaking of the latter, the Elipsa also does a superb job conveying the size and body of Young's dreadnaught Martin acoustic, with its richly shimmering wooden tone and chunky low E-string, as well as the spatial ambience of Toronto's packed Massey Hall.

As an example of the Elipsa's ability to be revealing without being analytical, I had something of a surprise while switching from two classical recordings I happen to be quite familiar with, ones that both Jon Valin and I have cited in past reviews: the Stern/Bernstein recording of the Barber Violin Concerto [Sony CD] and Roberto Gerhard's "Libra" from his *Astrological Series* [Decca LP]. What surprised me was how dramatically the Elipsa showed analog's superiority to digital. And not just any digital but the best digital I've yet to hear—MBL's 1521 A CD transport and 1511 E DAC (reviewed in Issue 164 and awarded a Golden Ear in this issue).

Not only is the Barber Violin Concerto one dazzling piece of music, but the Stern/Bernstein performance of it on the 20-bit Sony disc is a knockout—and very good-sounding, too (okay, not as well recorded as the spectacular Gerhard, but still referencequality). Given Sonus faber's provenance and inspiration, I expected the Elipsa to sound ravishing with Isaac Stern's famed Guarnerius del Gesù violin. And so it did—warm, rich, sweet, and unusually expressive, if perhaps, a tad softer than

I'm used to. During the meltingly lovely second movement, the Elipsa showed equal parts excellence with the New York Philharmonic's soaring winds, sweeping string sections, and plucked double basses. Listeners accustomed to the sound of massed plucked basses in the concert hall will especially appreciate the Elipsa's lack of the artificially tight, over-damped low frequencies heard from most of today's speakers. Though the Elipsa's soundstage was impressively natural in scale and height, its breadth and depth were not quite as voluminous as they were in a very large display room at CES, or as they are in my own room with the Kharma Mini Exquisite, which seems to be the perfect size for my space. I've concluded—and the Sumiko guys have agreed—that my room is just a bit too small for the Elipsa to fully unfold in. (Once Sumiko's Wolff and John-Paul Lizars finished placing the speakers—note that rake and toe-in are critical to getting the most out of the Elipsas—they were only a foot away from the side walls of my eleven-foot wide listening room. I'm convinced that just another few feet would have allowed them to open up the way they did in Vegas. The point being that, room-friendly baffle or not, all speakers need a bit of room to breathe.)

But switching to the Gerhard LP on the Redpoint Model D/Graham Phantom/Airtight PC-1 combo left the digital in the dust (and would continue to do so throughout my listening sessions). The soundstage depth rolled way back (though due to my room, width remained about the same), while the air around instruments, each instrument's focus and textural qualities, and dynamic range all improved—and dramatically so. Another thing I wasn't expecting with the Elipsa, because I'm not sure I've ever experienced it in quite this way before, is the speaker's way with upper-octave rhythmic precision. Though this “pace and timing” thing is often talked about with components, it is usually in the context of the bass and midrange. But with the Elipsa, whether it was revealing the interplay of Stern's fiddle and high-pitched wind instruments, or the Gerhard players' guitar and percussion work, or the olyrhythmic play of Wilco throughout *a ghost is born* [Nonesuch], I was struck time and again with subtle yet revealing musical changeups and interactions.