

# Start ME UP



## Sonus faber Venere Model 1.5

**Tiny Goddess**

**Neil Gader**

**S**onus faber, I thought I knew you—that we had an understanding. What happened? You’ve seduced me for years with romantic, walnut-and-leather-accented, lute-shaped loudspeakers inspired by the 18<sup>th</sup> century craftsmanship of the Cremonese master luthiers. Speaker designs that were so much a part of the fabric of this industry that they seemed destined to endure, timeless in and of themselves. So when I caught my first glimpse of your sleek and contemporary Venere line—available in six, modestly priced models (including center-channel and wall-mounted numbers)—I felt the sting of betrayal. The Model 1.5, the baby of the line and the subject of this review, looks as if stepped off a Milano runway, quickly tossed back an *espresso doppio*, and bopped by MacWorld—so *au courant* it could be in a Roche Bobois catalog. But the more time I spent with this compact two-way, the more my longing for yesterday began slipping away. Venere, Latin for Venus, the goddess of love and

beauty, represents a new direction for Sonus faber in this price category. And true to its name I think I’m smitten.

Whether it’s adorned in either a glossy arctic-white or a piano-black hand-rubbed-lacquer finish, Venere is all about flowing lines. It sports multi-radius arched side panels, a gently angled front baffle, and a playfully upswept “ducktail” top panel of tempered glass with Sf’s logo screen-printed on it in silver foil. However you look at it, Venere is a game-changer for Sonus faber, and its market positioning is clear. Entry-level Millennials anxious to put the finishing touches on their digital media systems or home theaters should start lining up now.

As refreshing and easy on the eye as the Venere lineup appears to be, it didn’t just materialize out of nowhere—many of its styling and design cues key off Sonus faber’s lavish \$120,000 Aida floorstander. Beyond the Aida-like side-panel curves, there are the softly curved corners designed to eliminate diffraction artifacts, the general driver architecture, and the new, larger soft dome. Also the lack of parallel surfaces not only increases structural rigidity but reduces internal resonances. The Venere’s beauty is more than skin-deep—the enclosure is an MDF composite sourced by Sf not only for its acoustically inert properties but also to meet California’s stringent emissions requirements. The base of the front baffle houses a narrow, slotted, foam-filled port. To the rear, speaker terminals are nicely offset from one another for easy access and are doubled up for bi-wiring or bi-amping. The quick-release magnetically-attached grilles are also well done.

The twin drivers are entirely designed by Sonus faber Lab and manufactured by its cadre of suppliers. Final assembly and finishing occurs in China. Central is the silk-domed 29mm tweeter (made by the German company DKM). It’s inset into a deep oval-shaped waveguide to increase output, maintain linearity, and make its dispersion at the lower end of its passband more closely approximate the woofer’s dispersion at the transition to the tweeter. The 6” mid/bass driver uses a trademark Curv cone, and it too is set into a shallow of the front baffle. “Curv” refers to the innovative variant of the polypropylene cone Sonus faber developed. It’s a woven, self-reinforcing material that features better internal damping and higher rigidity than mineral-filled polypropylene. It also offers higher resistance to temperature extremes with greater stiffness and tensile strength. Its stiffness-to-weight ratio results in exemplary roll-off properties.

The Venere’s crossover point is set at 2kHz, and sensitivity is a relatively low 85dB, a predictable trade-off for a speaker of modest internal volume that is expected to produce authentic bass response.

The stands are purpose-built for the Model 1.5, constructed of a tempered glass base and parallel MDF uprights that terminate in a steel top-plate that mounts to the underside of the Venere. They’re rigid; they establish the correct listening height with the adjustable aluminum footers; and they couple to the floor providing the proper amount of rearward tilt to acoustically time-align the drivers. I consider them a mandatory option. Caveat to D.I.Y. enthusiasts: Due to the convoluted instructions the stands

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may take more than a few minutes to assemble, but I'm told a clearer guide is being considered.

Going in, I assumed that the Model 1.5 would have the default sonic traits of many small, two-way compacts: There would be riveting detail, cavernous dimensionality, and a cat burglar disappearing act. But such attributes are often accompanied by wobbly bass and a lack of dynamic reserves, deficits often masked by a brighter-than-bright top end. (Fact is, it's much easier for a small speaker to top-load a tweeter with detail than pressure a little woofer to sputter out a series of organ pedal points.)

Here's what I didn't expect. First was the darker, relatively even midrange tonal balance and the refreshingly unhyped treble, not the aforementioned rising top that I've learned to dread. I also didn't expect the volume of air that the Model 1.5 seemed to set into motion in my room particularly during symphonic recordings. There was a sense of the physical nature of music reproduction in the way it conveyed the thicker body of a cello, the rippling skin of a timpani, the darker resonances of a large piano soundboard, or the complex textures of a contrabassoon.

Nor did I expect the midrange weight and bloom that this fifteen-inch-tall monitor generated. The Model 1.5 reproduces the bottom half of the midband with a weight and heft that most small-volume, narrow-baffle monitors cannot muster. The thick blat of a trombone or a heavy bow across the strings of an acoustic bass during Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* [Argo] is immediately identifiable for what it is and the brain doesn't have to suspend disbelief to enjoy the musical moment. In fact, the Venere immediately called to mind a larger, multi-driver speaker.

The treble for its part, rather than sounding dry or brittle or over-etched with false detail, had more than a hint of the darker acoustic signature that reminded me of other Sonus faber's like the Liuto. And by *darker* I'm not implying run-of-the-mill resolution. Just the opposite. During the Audra McDonald lullaby "Lay Down Your Head," the Venere expressed a wealth of finely wrought, low-level transients and timbre as the string quartet and accompanying harp delicately enter. When I began playing Leonard Cohen's "Darkness" from his new album *Old Ideas* [Columbia] I didn't count on the heavy core-resonance of his voice to be so richly reproduced. Catching me equally off guard was Korngold's Violin Concerto in D; the sound was expansive, the output generous. The Venere threw a wide, well-resolved, three-dimensional soundstage brimming with ambient cues and the "feel" of the venue—of the sound reaching the corners and back wall of the listening space.

Explosive is not a word that normally comes to mind when describing the lower-frequency extension and dynamics of an inexpensive compact monitor but within rational limits the Venere constantly surprised me in this area. Bass response is solid into the 60Hz range and, depending on room size and wall reinforcement, has usable response even further down. And I didn't have to worry about softballing the Model 1.5 in the volume department either. Often low bass from a small speaker sounds vaguely orphaned from the midrange—a sonic gap pops up where the music goes soft in the power range of the upper bass/lower mids and then regroups in the midbass. The effect is disquieting and can be a deal-breaker. While the Venere 1.5 can't entirely break free of its own physical constraints it does so in a manner that is entirely reasonable and at times utterly convincing.

What also stands out is the inter-driver coherence of the Model 1.5, which produces the sense that music is originating from a single point, rather than alternating between tweeter and mid/bass. Its midbass and upper-bass response is surefooted and seamlessly connected with the adjoining octaves. Significantly, I never felt as if I were fidgeting or otherwise subliminally cocking my head this way or that in order to get an accurate tonal fix on the speaker. It didn't impart the dreaded tweeter-on-top/bass-on-bottom discontinuity. What I heard was a smooth, solid wall of unbroken sound that easily adapted to a bit of slouching or off-axis listening. Obviously the Venere will sound its best in the sweet spot, stereo being what it is, but clearly the Sf team has put some serious thought into its ovular waveguide technology.

As good as the Model 1.5 is however, two drivers in a 15" box, however alluring, ultimately succumb to their own physical limitations. On a minimalist track like Lyle Lovett's "Baltimore," a small presence dip laid the vocal back in the mix slightly. There was also a bit of constriction in the lower treble during Sheryl Crow's "I Shall Believe" that emphasized the upper elements of harmonized vocals and deemphasized the more throaty and chesty aspect of those voices. Larger, sweeping dynamics are tamped down a bit, and while bass response in a smaller room was very good, don't expect the Venere to reproduce a bass note's decay to the full extent before running out of wind. On a major plus side, port interaction and box colorations were virtually absent from my listening sessions.

At the end of any evaluation, I always ask myself the same question—am I sorry to see this gear leave? The Model 1.5 was so irresistible on a multitude of levels—concept, design, cost, and sound—I concluded that I not only didn't want it to leave but also to call it anything other than a TAS Product of the Year would be an injustice. And I'm not done yet. I'll be reviewing its floorstanding sibling, the Model 2.5, in a forthcoming issue. I can't wait. **tas**

## SPECS & PRICING

**Type:** Two-way, bass-reflex  
**Drivers:** 1.2" tweeter, 6" mid/bass  
**Frequency response:** 50Hz-25kHz  
**Sensitivity:** 85dB  
**Impedance:** 6 ohms  
**Dimensions:** 15.5" x 8.1" x 11.8"  
**Weight:** 13 lbs.  
**Price:** \$1198 (\$398/pr stands)

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