

Equipment Reviews

Sonus Faber Venere 3.0 Loudspeakers

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- Written by Jeff Fritz



It is the reviewer's job not only to describe the sound of the component under test -- although that's a huge part of it -- but also to provide some context for that sound. It's naïve to think that products and their sounds exist in a vacuum, with no relation to other, similar products. There's always something else vying for the buyer's attention, and these days the competition is fierce in almost every category of consumer electronics, and at all the popular price points. Therefore, one of the most relevant assessments a reviewer can make for a reader is where a product ranks among its peers in the overall marketplace. This gives potential buyers an informed overview that they can use to help make wise buying decisions.

For example, if you were to walk into a showroom and hear, see, and feel the Sonus Faber Venere 3.0, you might not guess their cost right off, particularly if you have any experience with high-end audio and know how absurdly high the prices can be. You might be surprised that the Venere 3.0 retails for [\$4,999 AUD per pair] -- surprised by how little that is compared with how much it buys.

One of the most interesting tests of the cost of a new product is the general public -- not just the subset of buyers who might be interested in that particular product. We've all had friends who gasp when we tell them how much our new preamp cost. Conversely, folks who have visited my home while the Venere 3.0s were

playing have been quite accepting when told the retail price of the speakers -- a semi-remarkable feat for a high-end brand. Let's face it: most of the high end makes no sense to the average guy.

Design

The 3.0 floorstanding loudspeaker is the largest model in Sonus Faber's Venere line, which includes four other models: the 1.5 and 2.0 stand-mounts (\$1499 and \$1999/pair, respectively), the 2.5 floorstander (\$3,299/pair), and the Center (\$999 each) and Wall (\$TBA each). These prices are for the standard finishes of Gloss Black or White Lacquer; the Venere 3.0 is also available in Walnut veneer for a reasonable upcharge of \$600/pair.

The Veneres represent Sonus Faber's newest line and are their lowest-cost loudspeakers yet -- their price points were determined by designing the speakers in Italy but having them manufactured in China. One of the keys to the successful manufacture of speakers in China, I'm told, is how closely the contracting company monitors quality control on the production line. Companies that take care here can be rewarded with a finished product whose value far exceeds its retail cost. On the other hand, if quality control is all over the map or, worse, nonexistent, the reject rate, as well as poorly made and finished products reaching consumers' hands, can be a

disaster, financially and from a branding standpoint.



The Venere 3.0 is a three-way, four-driver design measuring 45.6"H x 13.4"W x 17.3"D and weighing 47 pounds. Each driver is mounted in an asymmetrical waveguide; starting from the top, they are: a 1" silk-dome tweeter, which at 2300Hz hands off to a 6" midrange cone directly below it, which in turn is crossed over to two 7" woofers at 220Hz. The Venere 3.0's crossovers are said to comprise a combination of first- and third-order slopes.

The midrange and woofer cones look from afar to be carbon fiber, but Sonus Faber says they're made of Curv, a thermo-molded polypropylene textile woven much as carbon fiber would be. The cones' dustcaps are made of coated paper, however -- an interesting combination of materials that Sonus Faber states adds naturalness to the sound. The Venere drivers' parts are sourced from outside vendors (the tweeter's diaphragm, for instance, comes from German firm Dr. Kurt Müller GmbH & Co., aka DKM) and are assembled by others, too, but they aren't picked out of catalogs -- you won't see these drive-units in speakers from any other manufacturer.

The Venere 3.0's specifications include a sensitivity of 90dB SPL (2.83V/m), a nominal impedance of 6 ohms, a frequency response of 38Hz-25kHz, and maximum power handling of 300W, though Sonus Faber also states that the 3.0 can be driven by as little as 40W. The cabinet's lyre-shaped cross section is preferred by Sonus Faber for its lack of parallel surfaces, which strengthens the walls and reduces the formation of standing waves. On the front is a flat-black front baffle; above it is a smoked-glass insert forming the top panel, below it a glass base on which the cabinet rests. The base screws directly into the bottom of the cabinet with wood screws (a step completed by

the purchaser) instead of machine screws and accompanying steel inserts -- just about the only clue of the sort of trade-offs that had to be made to keep the 3.0's cost down.



The speaker's vent is at the bottom of the front baffle. On the narrow rear panel (a strip, really) are two pairs of sturdy five-way binding posts, connected with a metal jumper that can be removed for biwiring or biamping. Beefy spikes fit into the glass base and tilt the speaker back slightly, to attain the optimal firing axes. Grillecloths attach to the front baffle via magnets.

The overall fit'n'finish of the Venera 3.0 is remarkable for the price. My samples, in White Lacquer, looked modern and crisp, and the combination of materials and colors made for an attractive speaker that I can imagine working well with almost any room and décor. I saw no orange peel in the finish, nor could I find any flaws other than a few scratches on the spikes. I give the Venera 3.0 a solid "A" in terms of looks, build, and packaging.

Sound

I was hoping that, with the Veneres, Sonus Faber had not produced a line of speakers with syrupy, overwarm sound. I could see them doing that, in an attempt to hark back to the days when that type of sound was described as "romantic" and "inviting," but that these days comes off as boring and nondescript. The Venera 3.0 was not problematic in that way. In fact, to my ears, its sound seemed quite straightforward. Right off, I heard a substantially neutral tonal character that was presented in a seamless fashion that indicated good integration of the drivers' outputs.

Beginning with the vocal range: the midband didn't leave me wanting more tonal density. Recordings with prominent male and female voices were brought to the fore by the Venera 3.0s with effortless clarity. I listened to Andrea Bocelli sing Mascagni's "Sancta Maria," from the tenor's *Sacred Arias* (16-bit/44.1kHz AIFF, Philips), and was impressed by how the Veneres projected his voice cleanly into the room, with clear intelligibility and smooth sound. With this track I've noticed that a speaker that's reticent in the midrange will miniaturize Bocelli's voice. The Sonus Fabers most certainly did not do that. In fact, when I switched to Enya's "One Toy Soldier," from her *And Winter Came* (16/44.1 AIFF, Reprise), her voice popped right out of the large electronically contrived soundstage. But what were most impressive with this track were the tick-tocks in the opening moments, which serve to establish the rhythm. These were snappy and crisp, sounding present in my room, with enough definition in the leading edges to make them believable. The Venera 3.0s were very good at keeping all the musical elements of this and other tracks separate and distinct, their four drivers delivering big-speaker soundstaging from a moderately sized floorstander.



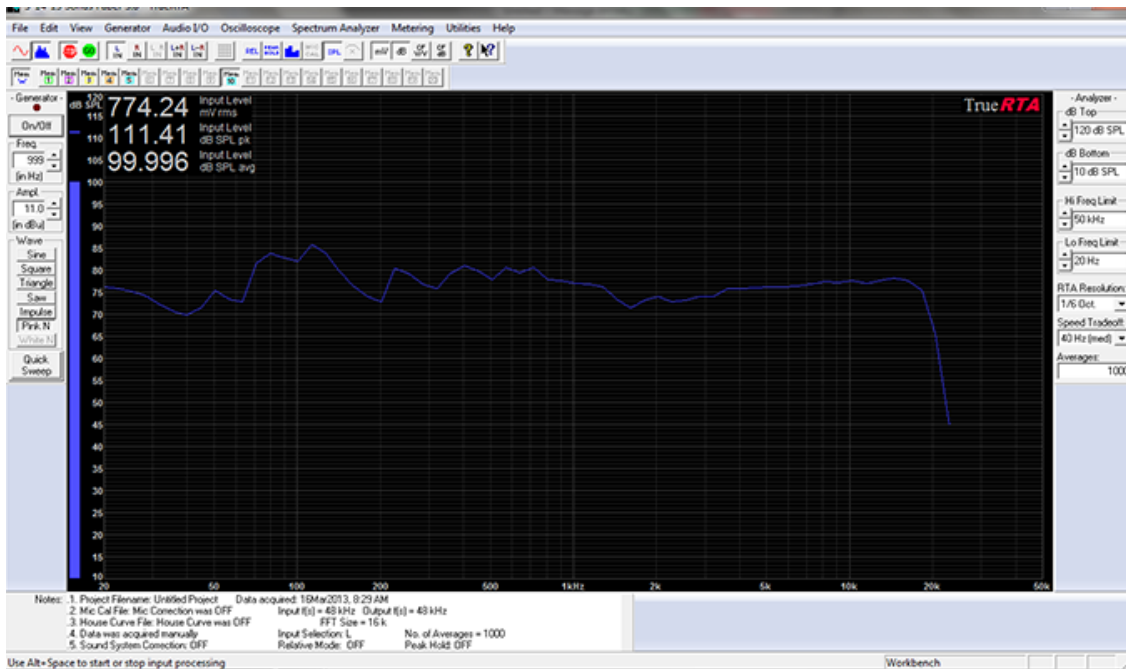
Which brings me to my next observation. The 3.0 is the top of the Venere line, and I believe Sonus Faber wanted this model to “bring it” when asked to do so. These speakers could produce sizable scale and substantial energy -- “Emmanuel,” from the Enya album, sounded majestic, swelling to reproduce an immense soundscape in my room. Enya’s voice was clear and distinct at all times, while the chorus came in to create a convincingly atmospheric soundstage of impressive height and depth.

I’ve heard smallish floorstanders that sounded like large bookshelf speakers. These types of designs -- perhaps due to budget-constrained drivers -- always leave me with the feeling that I need to push the speaker a little harder than normal in order to get the exact sound I want out of them. In other words, they can sound as if they’re being held back by something. Mind you, the sounds of such speakers can be pleasant; they’re just not ultimately satisfying. The Sonus Faber Venere 3.0 went a long way toward ameliorating that problem in speakers costing under \$4000/pair. I felt that, when I goosed the volume, the Venere 3.0s responded by effortlessly scaling properly with whatever music I was playing.



When I decided to have Slacker Radio playing in the background, the Venere never gratuitously exposed the limited resolution of this sort of source. I listened to Ellie Goulding’s *Lights* (Slacker, Polydor), cranked the volume to 11, and plopped myself down in my listening seat. The beat was driving hard, and the peaks reached 95dB in my room, per my iPhone SPL meter. What this tells me is that the Venere 3.0 is a very “livable” speaker -- one you can listen to with recordings

and sources of various qualities at a wide range of volume levels, without worrying about damaging the speakers or your ears. This is a very good attribute for a speaker that’s priced within reach of many Apple-buying consumers.



Venere 3.0 frequency response at the listening position in the Music Vault



When I moved back to the other end of the recording-quality scale -- Jerry Junkin conducting the Dallas Wind Symphony, with organist Mary Preston, in Sir William Walton's *Crown Imperial* (24/176.4 WAV, Reference Recordings) -- I could immediately appreciate the resolution that the Sonus Fabers let through. Highs were very detailed, if not ultra-airy, and the midrange was crisp. Granted, the low-frequency foundation wasn't as firm or as deep as I've heard from some much larger speakers with this track -- the sound of the pipe organ was not as grand or as room filling. After all, low bass is where the reality of two bass drivers measuring only 7" surfaces. They just aren't going to play as loud or as low as a properly loaded set of 10" cones or a single 12" cone. Still, the bass the Venere 3.0s did produce was tighter than I'd expected, with good physical impact when the music called for it. Donald Fagen's *Morph the Cat* (16/44.1 AIFF, Reprise) energized my room and gave me a satisfying sense of weight -- just what's needed to make this song enjoyable.

Considerations and conclusions

If, as we've heard so many times before, loudspeaker design is a balance of trade-offs, then Sonus Faber's Venere 3.0 is perhaps the most balanced design you can buy for anywhere near \$5000/pair. It's the speaker no one thought Sonus Faber could or would produce, and they've pulled it off: It can play large and loud, it can render recordings of both high and low resolution in enjoyable fashion, its substantially neutral tonal character won't distract you with speaker colorations, and it can do all of this while looking spectacular. In this respect, it's an easy recommendation for listeners both serious and casual. It might not be as revealing as, say, KEF's R900, a model popular among SoundStage! Network reviewers (Roger Kanno

and Hans Wetzel each own a set), but the Venere 3.0 costs \$1000/pair less than the R900, and has one up on the KEF in terms of appearance -- the R900 looks boxy by comparison.

Although I know that designers can be tempted to optimize one or two aspects of sound quality in order to give a speaker's sound something "special" that the listener can latch on to, Sonus Faber has avoided that trap. With the Venere 3.0, no single aspect of sonic reproduction sticks out, and the result is a balanced sound that will appeal to average folk as well as to the audiophile.

At the end of the day, the Sonus Faber Venere 3.0 is the speaker I would unhesitatingly recommend to any friend shopping for a pair of speakers costing up to \$5500/pair. While there's stiff competition above that -- the aforementioned KEF R900, PSB's Synchrony One, the Paradigm Tribute -- I can't think of any other speaker I'd rather own at the price. But even if you've budgeted \$5500 to \$7000, the Venere 3.0 should be in your short list of speakers to hear

I imagine box after box of Veneres, stretching almost as far as the mind's eye can see, ready to ship to waiting customers. This speaker is a big deal for Sonus Faber, and for the high-end community at large.

... *Jeff Fritz*

Associated Equipment

- **Amplifiers** -- Ayre Acoustics MX-R monos
- **Preamplifier** -- Ayre Acoustics KX-R
- **Sources** -- Apple MacBook running OS X Snow Leopard, iTunes, Amarra, Audirvana; Calyx Audio Femto DAC
- **Cables** -- Nordost Valhalla, AudioQuest Niagara interconnects; Nordost Valhalla, AudioQuest Meteor speaker cables; AudioQuest Carbon USB cable; Nordost Valhalla power cords

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Price: \$4999 AUD per pair.

Warranty: Three years parts and labor.

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