



## Sonus Faber Homage Amati Tradition Loudspeakers

15 November 2017

I'll never forget the first time I saw a Sonus Faber loudspeaker.

It was 2002, and I was fresh out of college, broke, and hungry to put the last four years of educational purgatory to good use.

I was also in the market for a new apartment.

Like many early nesters, when I wasn't out exploring potential residences, I was window-shopping for potential décor.

It was during one such expedition that I stumbled on what I thought at the time was the most beautiful loudspeaker I'd ever seen: Sonus Faber's Amati Homage.

There stood a pair of them, flaunting meticulously crafted maple cabinets that reflected the glow of equally gorgeous McIntosh Laboratory electronics.

My attraction to these things was almost as strong as what I'd felt the first time I laid eyes on a brand-new Ferrari. I was captivated before I'd heard a single note.

To this day, I maintain that Sonus Faber and McIntosh produce some of the most aesthetically appealing products in hi-fi.



At the 2011 Consumer Electronics Show, Sonus Faber again beguiled me by introducing the Amati Homage's successor: the Amati Futura. Taking the Homage's lute-like shape to a whole new level, the Futura proved an absolutely stunning speaker to look at or hear, and my editor, Jeff Fritz, gushed over it in his review in April of the next year. So not long after CES 2017, when I heard that Sonus Faber was about to release another new version of the Amati, the Homage Tradition, I immediately jumped on the bandwagon to review it.

## Traditionally built

Twenty-four years ago, Sonus Faber produced the Guarneri Homage, a very special stand-mounted speaker. Some might say that the Guarneri helped guide the company to where they are today -- the Guarneri was their first speaker to have a cabinet with a lute-like cross section. Sonus Faber presented the very first pair of Guarneri Homages to the Salon of the Violin, in Cremona, Italy, where they remain to this day on demonstration among fine stringed instruments made by Guarneri, Amati, Stradivari, and others. Sonus Faber presented a second and a third pair of Guarneri Homages to master violinists Salvatore Accardo and Uto Ughi, and kept a fourth pair at the factory as a reference standard.

In speaking with Livio Cucuzza, chief design officer for the McIntosh Group, current owners of Sonus Faber, I asked him what had inspired the new Tradition series. "The aim of the Tradition collection is to honor the great design history of our brand using the most classical elements of Italian design," he said. He explained that he knew that if the Tradition models were going to distinguish themselves among all Sonus Faber speakers, they needed to be exceptional -- to exude Italian heritage and quality, but in a way no one had conceived of before. Before he went back to the drawing board, he studied Sonus Faber's heritage, the lute shape, and what Sonus Faber had learned in two decades of making loudspeakers. He also reviewed the doubly curved cabinets originating in "the Sonus Faber," which has now found its way into both the Aida and the Lillium. Still, inspiration eluded him. So Cucuzza looked outside the musical arena and found another iconic Italian masterpiece: a Riva Aquarama runabout, a speedboat from the 1960s. He explained: "The great Riva creations of that period are still an iconic piece of Italian design, famous and recognizable all over the world. We followed that design image to create most of the details of the Tradition speakers, from the top aluminum/wood combination to the shape of the extruded-aluminum venting on the back, which was designed to emulate waves. This also led to the Tradition name, as it is both Italian and Sonus Faber tradition combined together."



The resulting Homage Tradition family comprises four models; the flagship Amati (\$29,900 USD per pair), which replaces the Amati Futura; the all-new Serafino (\$21,900/pair), essentially a smaller Amati; the stand-mounted Guarneri (\$15,900/pair), replacing the Guarneri Evolution; and the Vox center-channel, replacing the Homage Vox. The Homage Tradition Vox is expected to be released in early 2018 for under \$15,000.

The Amati Tradition stands 46"H x 16.25"W x 20.1"D, weighs 135 pounds, and has a lute-shaped cross section. It's supported by four knurled aluminum outrigger spikes, expertly milled and polished, that include Sonus Faber's Zero Vibration Transmission system (ZVT; more on this later). Each Amati Tradition begins life as a core structure of six 1"-thick braces of HDF, notched and glued together to form the speaker's skeleton. Incorporated into this skeleton are three rectangular, rear-venting ports of precise geometry and texture. According to Paolo Tezzon, Sonus Faber's director of R&D, the geometry of each port's duct is designed to aid the speaker dynamically while eliminating port noise. The ducts divide the cabinet into three central, damped chambers that Sonus Faber calls Acoustic Labyrinths, and the unique application of a felt lining for each duct enables the management of air velocity thereby lowering the tuning frequency and reducing the speaker's total harmonic distortion (THD). If that sounds familiar, it's because this system, called Stealth Ultraflex, is an evolution of the Stealth Reflex system introduced in Sonus Faber's Olympica series in 2013. Above and below these chambers are two more sealed chambers that respectively house Sonus Faber's unique Tuned Mass Damper (TMD) counter-vibration system and the Amati Tradition's robust new crossover network.

Atop the skeleton are laid curved, 1.2"-thick panels of alternating layers of wood ply and glue, cured in a press. The resulting laminate is then CNC machined and painstakingly hand-veneered with the selected wood, and a horizontal pinstripe of light-stained maple is inlaid between each pair of panels. The entire assembly is then sanded, stained, and covered with 11 coats of clear lacquer, again all by hand. This process, Cucuzza informed me, takes more than 20 days to complete for each speaker. The luxuriously veneered side panels of all Tradition models can be ordered in walnut stained violin red, or wenge stained a specially blended deep brown. The result of all this isartisanal.



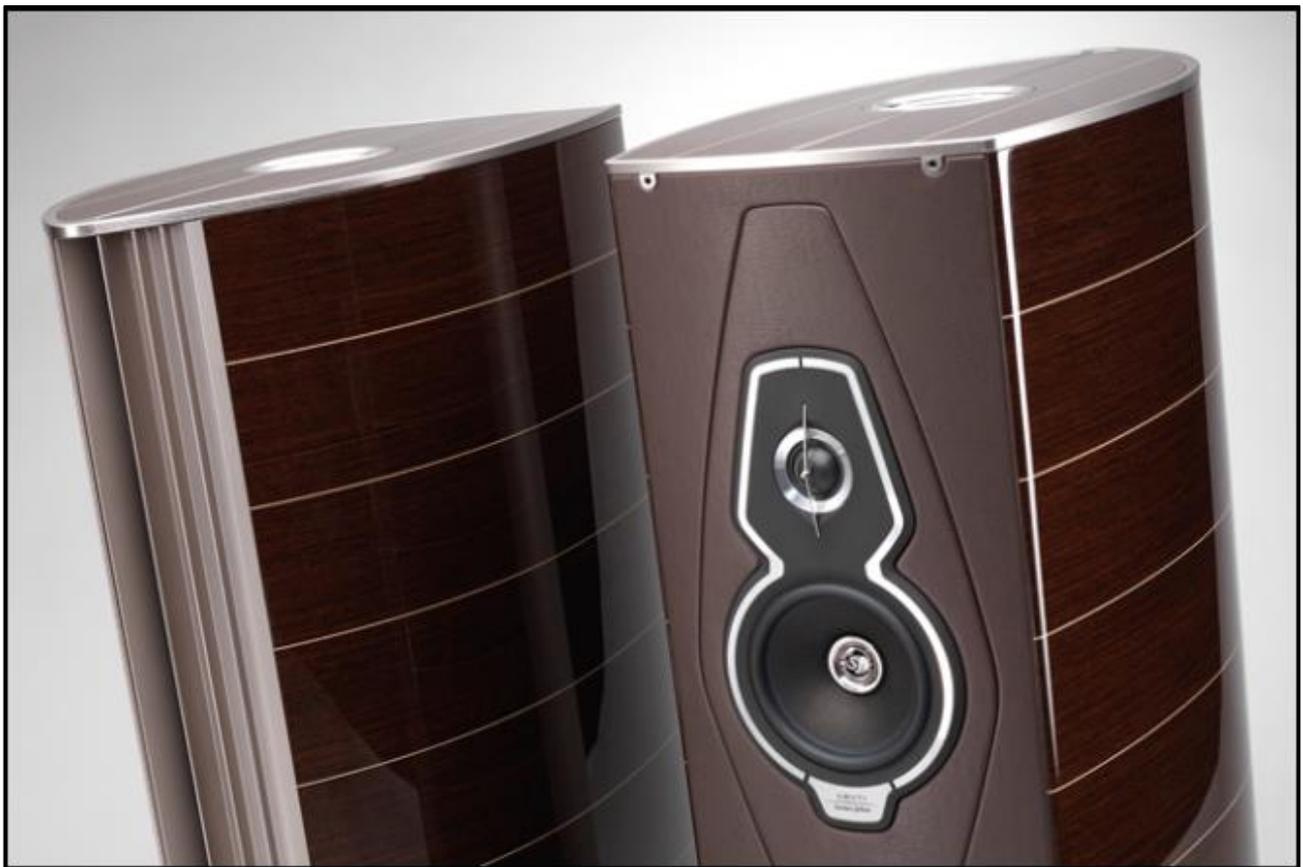
As Tezzon explained it to me, ZVT is a form of mechanical isolation comprising alternating and overlapping layers of metal and elastomer inside each footer. This is claimed to dramatically reduce the transmission of vibrations, particularly in the 30-80Hz range, into whatever surface the speaker sits on. The problem with this, of course, is that any vibrations not absorbed by ZVT end up being trapped inside the cabinet. This is where TMD comes into play, converting this trapped vibrational energy into heat by oscillating in opposition with these residual vibrations.

The Amati Tradition's front baffle, which is 1.1" thick and CNC-milled from a single piece of HDF, is swathed in a beautifully smooth, leather-like plastic in black or dark brown, depending on the veneer selected. When I asked Cuccuza why they didn't use real leather, he said that, while nice in smaller applications, leather has too many imperfections, and sourcing perfect sheets of it large enough to cover the entire baffle would have wasted an enormous amount of leather. Sonus Faber was able to use a better-textured synthetic material without having to kill any animals.

Partially concealing the baffle is Sonus Faber's famously strong grille, designed to look like the strings of a violin. Held in place under tension by hanger bars of brushed aluminum attached by subtle mounting holes, the grille is acoustically transparent but offers the drivers little protection.

Around back, extruded aluminum fins anodized a beautiful black or champagne (depending on the finish) and designed to emulate waves extend the full height of each speaker, seamlessly concealing the Stealth Ultraflex system while increasing the cabinet's overall rigidity. Between them, at the bottom, is a single column of two pairs of five-way binding posts, for biwiring.

On the baffle of each 3.5-way Amati Tradition are four drivers. The 1" silk-dome tweeter and the midrange cone are mounted on a shared subbaffle that decouples them from the main baffle. The Arrow Point or Damped Apex Dome (DAD) tweeter is driven by a new neodymium motor system and has a bandpass of 2.5-35kHz. This tweeter, also used in the Liliium and Il Cremonese models, vents into the first of the three Acoustic Labyrinth chambers. Tezzon told me that DAD helps prevent antiphase behaviors in that portion of the dome, to extend the tweeter's reproduction of high frequencies.



Directly below the tweeter, venting into the same rear acoustic chamber, is a new 5.9" midrange driver with a cone made of an air-dried, nonpressed blend of cellulose pulp, kapok, kenaf, and other natural fibers, propelled by a neodymium-magnet motor with a voice coil of Copper Clad Aluminum Wire (CCAW) wrapped around a composite former. Although

1.2" smaller in diameter, this midrange driver is otherwise identical to the one used in the Liliu and Il Cremonese.

Similar in motor design but larger in diameter are the Amati Tradition's two 8.7" woofers, each cone comprising two skins of cellulose pulp sandwiching a core of syntactic foam. The skins of the two cones differ slightly in composition, to smooth the transition at 80Hz from the low-bass to the midbass drivers, and at 250Hz from the midbass to the midrange.

The crossover, a beefy new network heavily based on those used in the Liliu and Il Cremonese, is claimed to be made of only the highest-quality parts: Mundorf Evo Oil and Silver/Gold/Oil capacitors, Jantzen inductors, etc.

The Homage Amati Tradition has a specified frequency response of 28Hz-35kHz, a sensitivity of 90dB/2.83V/m, a nominal impedance of 4 ohms, and can handle from 100 to 500W of power.

## Setting the stage

Getting the Homage Amati Traditions to fly like butterflies instead of sting like bees in my room was not as easy as I'd anticipated. At first I simply replaced my reference Rockport Technologies Atria speakers with the Sonus Fabers, drove the latter with my reference electronics of Simaudio Moon Evolution P-8 preamplifier and W-7M monoblocks, and streamed music from my Dell Ultrabook laptop through JRiver Media Center 20 to my Wadia Di322 DAC and thence to the P-8. Power was supplied by a Torus AVR20 power conditioner fed by a dedicated 20A line, and everything was linked with Clarus Crimson interconnects and power cables. Fresh out of their boxes, the Amati Traditions didn't sound like Sonus Faber speakers. As I listened to "Tea in the Sahara," from the Police's Synchronicity (24-bit/88.2kHz FLAC, A&M), the Amati Traditions painted an expectedly vast soundstage, with Sting wonderfully imaged at the center against the deep, visceral twang of his bass guitar. But as I listened further, I began to realize that Stewart Copeland's cymbal taps were a bit splashy and lacking in tonal color, the dynamic contrasts of his drums teetering between arresting and aggressive. Something wasn't quite right.

To address this, I first repositioned the Amati Traditions, hoping that less toe-in would rein in the highs a bit. After about an hour of experimenting with different positions, the Amati Traditions sounded best 2' from my treated sidewalls, 4' from the front wall, 8' apart, and 9' from my listening position. Toeing in the speakers so that their tweeter axes crossed about 5' behind my head yielded the best balance of imaging, tonal color, and bass definition.



Because the top end was still a bit hot, I then experimented with various combinations of my reference electronics and some gear in for review from Balanced Audio Technology. I heard the biggest improvement when I replaced my Simaudio P-8 with a BAT VK-53SE preamplifier; voices sounded smoother, more three-dimensional, and downright organic; most important, the top end was now much better balanced, sounding less hot than warm. Leaving in place the VK-53SE, I swapped out the Simaudio W-7M monoblocks for a Parasound Halo A 51 five-channel amp, and finally a BAT VK-255SE stereo amp (also in for review). Driven by the BAT combo, the big Sonus Fabers seemed to thrive.

## Huracán Performante

Late last year, one of Italy's most beloved companies introduced a version of an already successful product so heavily revised that one could be forgiven for calling it a reinvention. The company was Lamborghini, and the reinvention was their riveting Huracán Performante. Having recently established, at the Nürburgring, a new lap-time record for a production car of 20.6km in 6 minutes 52.1 seconds, the Performante not only displaced the significantly more powerful Porsche 918 Spyder as the quickest car around that track, it outpaced a base Huracán by almost 34 seconds. This marked a monumental achievement for Lamborghini, and sent a clear message about what they're capable of.

After I'd got the Homage Amati Traditions to sound their best in my room, the improvements I heard over past iterations of the Amati were almost as profound. This surprised me -- like the standard Huracán, the Amati Futura is itself a very good loudspeaker. But as the Huracán Performante's driving character evolved proportionately with its performance, so has the sound of the Amati Tradition evolved by way of its new cabinetry, porting, isolation, and cleverly constructed array of new drivers.

The first clue to just how engaging the Amati Tradition could be was when I cued up the title track of Ludovico Einaudi's *Una Mattina* (16/44.1 FLAC, Decca). I was immediately aware of previously unheard details, such as the sound of Einaudi's foot working his piano's pedals, the longer notes when he pressed the sustain pedal, and the piano's tonal color. In combination with how convincingly the large Amati Traditions seemed to "disappear" from the room, it all added up to a compellingly realistic and emotionally evocative experience.



Changing gears, I played "Royals," from Lorde's *Pure Heroine* (16/44.1 FLAC, Universal), and again was presented with a polished, well-sorted sound. Lorde's voice was vividly etched center stage against a thunderous bass line and room-encompassing backing vocals. The transients of the hi-hat cymbal were fast, controlled, and well defined against the other percussion, emulating oversized finger snaps decaying into a deep, cavernous soundstage. Most obvious was how deep and controlled the bass was. While not quite as deep as what I heard when I reviewed Paradigm's *Persona 7F* speaker (\$25,000/pair), the Amati Traditions acquitted themselves much better than I'd expected, besting my reference Rockport Atrius (\$25,500/pair, discontinued) by no small margin in depth, slam, and volume. I also heard none of the homogenization that some pop albums can suffer from through less articulate speakers; instead, instruments were placed onstage where they should be, with just the right amount of scale, tonal color, image specificity, and body. In short, "Royals" sounded clean, clear, and natural.

With another favorite track -- "I'll Be Your Lover, Too," from Van Morrison's *His Band and the Street Choir* (24/192 FLAC, Warner Bros.) -- the Amati Traditions fully revealed what they could do, casting a soundstage wider and deeper than I'm used to with this recording. Morrison was of course at center stage, but not as I usually hear him. This time he seemed to sit about 1' behind the Amati Traditions' baffles and about 2' in front of Dahaud Elias Shaar (aka David Shaw), who subtly brushed the skins of his drums to John Klingberg's delicately nuanced bass guitar. To Morrison's left, John Platania melodically plucked his acoustic guitar, complemented by Morrison's guitar far to my left, coming straight from the left speaker. With lights down, wine in hand, and the BAT VK-53SE's eight tubes warming my room faster than I'd have liked them to, the sense of space with this track was utterly captivating -- even my wife sat down for a few minutes, to note how live, open, and palpable the sound was. I could hear the texture of Shaar's drumskins as his brushes stroked them, while keeping an ear open for the subtle sliding of Platania's pick as the song builds to a climax. The dynamic contrasts of Morrison plucking the strings of his own acoustic guitar were convincingly reproduced, sounding spacious and detailed, but not at the expense of body or tonal color.

But all that transparency, speed, and dimensionality so effortlessly reproduced from good recordings came at the expense of highlighting the drawbacks of poor recordings. A prime example of how relentlessly faithful the Amati Traditions were to whatever they were presented with was "Silent Lucidity," from *Sign of the Times: The Best of Queensrÿche* (16/44.1 FLAC, EMI). All was well and good with Geoff Tate's voice in the first few seconds, the Sonus Fabers communicating high levels of image specificity and texture, but as the music's volume level rises, signs of sibilance began to appear in Tate's voice, and the combination of Chris DeGarmo's and Michael Wilton's electric guitars against drummer Scott Rockenfield's heavy-handed cymbals began to sound aggressive and compressed at anything but low listening levels.

I heard a similar harshness in the title track of Pink's *The Truth About Love* (16/44.1 FLAC, RCA). The Amati Traditions did a lot right here, placing Pink's voice center stage, replete with all the intended reverb anyone could want. Backing singers were also projected far forward, sounding almost as if they were coming from behind me, but percussion instruments, drums, electric guitar, and particularly the synth bass all sounded diffuse and indistinct. While this overproduced texture was intended on this track, the Amati Traditions seemed to draw my attention to it a bit too much, constantly reminding me that the recording itself lacked the resolution to fully convey the intended effect.

## Comparison

Probably the most appropriate speaker to compare with the Amati Tradition would be its predecessor, the Amati Futura, but I didn't have a pair of the latter on hand. What I can tell you is that the Amati Tradition dug deeper in the bass, exhibited a more obvious midrange, and was more resolving in the highs. If these speakers were candidates for marriage, the Amati Futura would be the one you'd fall in love with and eventually marry; the Amati Tradition, with its seductive looks and exhilarating personality, would be the one you'd constantly lust after and keep on the side, as a lover.

The differences between the Amati Traditions and my reference Rockport Technologies Atrius were even greater. The Atria's triple-laminated, constrained-mode-damped enclosure has walls almost four times as thick as the Amati Tradition's, to abate cabinet resonances. The knuckle-rap test revealed that the two speakers produced similar levels of cabinet noise or lack thereof, and led me to conclude that Sonus Faber's combination of TMD and ZVT really works. Sonically things were less of a toss-up -- the Amati Traditions were more rewarding to listen to across the board, with two major caveats.



First, careful attention must be paid in mating the Amatis with electronics; I found that the warmth inherent in the tubed BAT amps I had on hand greatly helped these speakers to sound tonally balanced. Driven by my solid-state Simaudio electronics, the Sonus Fabers sounded too forward, their sound bordering on fatiguing. Second, careful attention must be paid to positioning the Amati Traditions. In my room, too much toe-in made them sound a bit beamy, with diminished image specificity, soundstage depth, and overall palpability. By comparison, my Rockport Atrias can be properly positioned in a fraction of the time, and have sounded good with all variety of electronics.

But with these caveats taken into account, the Amati Traditions rewarded me with arresting realism, seductive midrange purity, a wonderfully coherent top end, and bass deep and resolute enough to practically obviate the need for a subwoofer. When I performed a back-to-back comparison of the two speakers using Van Morrison's "I'll Be Your Lover, Too," the Sonus Fabers better communicated the low-end bite of Platania's acoustic guitar, the texture of Morrison's voice, and the spaces between the musicians. While my Rockports gave a degree or two more warmth, the Amati Traditions drew larger, fuller images in my room, better enabling me to appreciate the full depth and extent of each bass note and string pluck, and the dynamic range of Morrison's voice. It wasn't a clean sweep for the Sonus Fabers -- the Rockports consistently presented a bit more bass detail, most notable when I focused on Sting's bass in the Police's "Tea in the Sahara." The Amati Traditions were downright spectacular with this track, illustrating the intended depth and fortitude behind each bass note -- but the Atrias reproduced the utmost in resonance, texture, and pitch of each note plucked.

## In the end

The Homage Amati Tradition is Sonus Faber's fourth version of the Amati, and the most beautiful yet. The levels of fit, finish, and attention to detail dripping from the review samples clearly represent the passion bestowed on each unit created. More important, the Homage Tradition is the best-sounding iteration of the Amati. Careful attention must be paid in positioning them and selecting accompanying electronics, but this is really no different from properly adjusting the suspension settings of or selecting the best tires for a Lamborghini Huracán Performante. I have greatly enjoyed my time with the new Amatis. If you're in the market for such a product, I highly recommend that you listen to them before buying anything else.

by Aron Garrecht

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