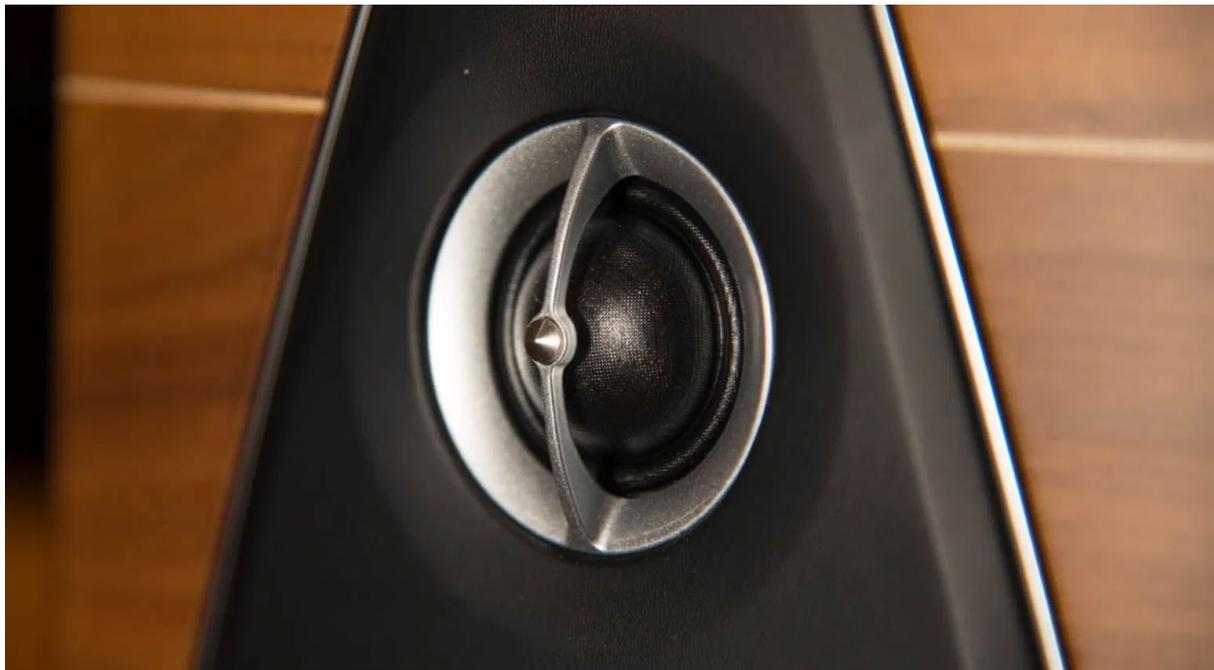


## Review: Sonus Faber Olympica Nova III Loudspeaker

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Natural tones have always seemed to follow Sonus Faber whenever I have the pleasure of hearing them. The Italian company knows how to make a high performance speaker, along with some of the best sounds I've heard in the field (read: audio shows and demos) coming from their flagship Aida loudspeaker. The good news is that quite a bit of that high-end loveliness trickles down into the lower ranks, like the subject of this review, the Sonus Faber Olympica Nova III.

I had an opportunity to take in a pair of the Olympica Nova series from the company for review recently, and the experience was quite indulging. Living with a product for weeks (if not months) gives you such a deeper insight into the design, intent and output than any quick pass at an audio show or even a listening session at a dealer. The Nova 3 I received sits a few tiers down from the previously mentioned Aida, but according to presentations on the subject, is the brand's most popular speaker line. With the release of a new entry-level Lumina series hot on the market, the mid tier Nova seems even more relevant for those looking to really explore the upper sonic capabilities while keeping the cost around \$10k. The range for floorstanding variants of the Nova actually starts with the \$10k Nova II, with our review sample of the Nova III featuring an extra 7" woofer to the three-way design for another \$3k. With a sensitivity of 90 dB SPL (2.83V/1 m) I didn't find any issue driving the speaker via amps from the 250W PASS Labs INT-250 integrated to the 70W Naim Uniti Star all-in-one. This rampant versatility caught me slightly off guard perhaps, with the demands of so many speakers in this range requiring bigger and beefier executions on the power end of things. If you are just looking for evaluation/validation on driver choice alone, the Nova 3 does have quite a bit going for it. I have always been a huge fan of a well executed soft dome tweeter, and Sonus Faber's 1" silk DAD (Damped Apex Dome) tweeter definitely fills that space very well. Additionally, the completely SF custom-made 6" non-pressed (air dried) kapok, kenaf and cellulose pulp mid range driver contains some similarities to the transducers in our favorite QLN stand mount, the Signature 3. So does the oversimplified equation bear acoustic fruits? Simply put yes, with some additional juice to spare.



But first, it must be acknowledged, identified and time stamped that the Sonus Faber Olympica Nova III is one hell of a beautiful speaker. Sitting in the wood-paneled den listening room at my house, the mid-toned wood grain of the “walnut” finish sits as an amazing compliment to the overall look and feel of the space (the Nova 3 also comes in dark brown “wedge” option). Due to the asymmetrical “lute” shape of the Olympica line, harsh angles and boxy box stereotypes are easily shed for something that eludes to a more sophisticated and elegant look. This also means that in the rear where the speaker joins back together is a single piece of aluminum that functions as a port, spanning from top to bottom. This part of Sonus Faber’s “Stealth Ultraflex” system (also found on the upriver *Homage Tradition*) is slightly directional in nature, which might see different reactions in your room if the two speakers swap L/R channels. After some fine tuning, I noticed a better low end response with the slot facing inward, but according to company reps, the option is available for either implementation and any given performance is highly subject to room acoustics.

Like many pieces in the Sonus Faber lineup, black leather adorns the area surrounding the tweeter and mid range woofer assembly. It doesn’t quite cover the same real estate as the two-way *Heritage* collection, but it definitely adds a bit of understated class and is a nice touch to help round out the speaker’s already established good looks. According to this podcast interview with company CEO Jeff Poggi and Brand Manager William Kline, the front-facing string grill is an extension of the music instrument inspiration within the overall industrial design. Some have complained that it’s not a true grill from a coverage standpoint, but in my experiences with household pets and random objects flying, it gets the job done rebuffing any light collisions. It may not be powerful enough to sway the curiosity of a small child’s deep seeded need to push in expensive tweeters, but for most scenarios the function and the form worked out very well.

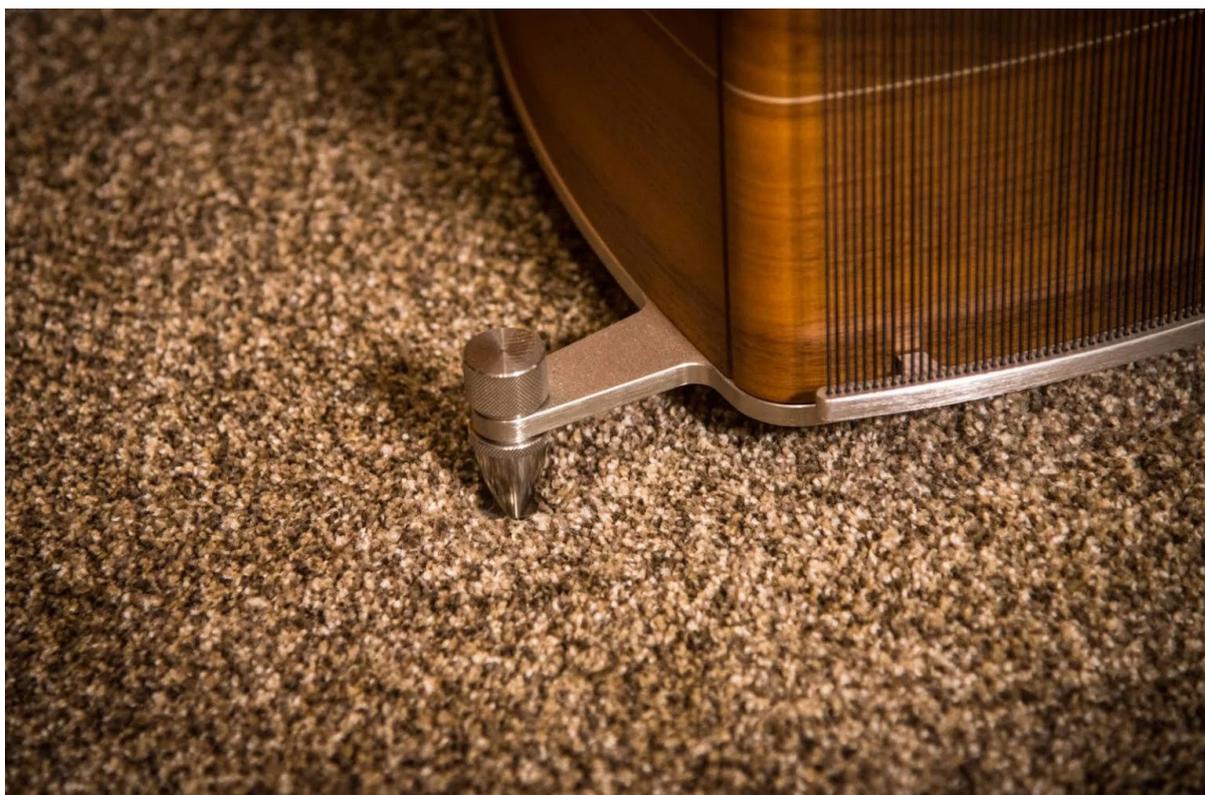


The Sonus Faber Olympica Nova III was tested with several amplifiers, including the beefy Pass Labs INT-250 and even the thumpy-and-controlled NAIM Uniti Star all-in-one. Sources were typically pulled from hi-res Qobuz or local files, with AudioQuest Earth interconnects and Thunderbird Zero speaker cables.

Down to the listening, the first thing I noticed about the Olympica Nova III's was just how astonishing their detail reproduction was. Even without a ton of optimizing and across all amplifiers they had a startling ability to dig up sonic information. I don't mean that kind of glossy, exaggerated upper treble characteristic some very expensive gear has which many people describe as 'clean' but to my ears sounds more like high-order harmonics and too much damping.

The Sonus Faber's served up that very special sense of spatial cues around the notes, where the decay information around transients seems to shimmer and manifest themselves in the room in a totally organic way. Even without toe-in the Sonus Fabers seemed to weave a totally holographic soundstage that just appeared in the room without any fanfare or extraneous theatrics. It was reach-out-and-touch-it good from super quiet to super loud.

Tonally, the Sonus Faber had perhaps a slight downward tip at the very top of the frequency spectrum, but to my ears this was very much in line with Bruel and Kjaer suggestion of a slight attenuation at the top of treble range. There was certainly no shortage of detail however, and I never got the impression that there was treble absent or missing. The midrange had a total lack of any colorations that I could hear, and was simply one of the most pleasurable, musical midranges I've heard in a long time. It was invisible in the sense that it never drew any undue attention to itself, it was neither too relaxed, too shouty, too bright, nor too analytical or too euphonic. If anything there was perhaps the slightest smoothness in the upper midrange handing off to the treble, but this was less perceivable as an active trait and more as the absence of any harshness or brightness in the upper mids and lower treble. Even at the very loudest volumes these speakers never once hurt my ears, or even gave the indication of doing so.



On the bottom end, things are similarly put together, though a little more obvious. The bass brings a definitely higher-than-neutral level of party. I recall hearing the Olympica series a few years ago, and my impression then was of bass that felt a little one-note at times. Not the case at all here, the bass was massive but the port tuning was low and gave everything a satisfying rumbly sound, reproducing clean and huge low frequencies well down into the 40hz ranges.

Although the bass was ever-so-slightly elevated, I never felt it was too much, though I've been known to enjoy a little extra bass at times. There wasn't a lack of control in my opinion and when called for mid and upper bass kick drums and basses were tight and well controlled with plenty of texture. Jazz combo groups with upright basses never felt out of proportion even as soundtracks, hip-hop and EDM had a satisfying sense of scale and impact that made the Olympica Novas sound like ten foot tall speakers when called for.

Pulling the reference QLN Signature 3 speakers into the room, it was immediately apparent that they had a lot more going on in the top octaves lending a kind of pleasing depth to the sound. The bass was also reigned in a bit closer to neutral, though the QLN's still had impressive bass for a bookshelf speaker. What they gained in depth though the sound lost in musical engagement. The QLN's for all their magic sounded more like a very accurate reproduction of a recording which... is all we are ever listening to after all in a hi-fi system. But the slight smoothness of the treble and the extra sub-bass rumble of the Olympica Novas aside, the sound of the QLN simply wasn't as detailed. The sense of musical sounds appearing in the room was lost and traded in for a deeper, ever so slightly more perceptually 'accurate' representation. Of course, accuracy is a bit of a fallacy, but the point is, no matter how much I cerebrally understood this fact, my perception was just that the Sonus Fabers let me think less and listen more. If I were to tune a speaker by drawing a frequency response of my ideal curve, what results would be very close to what the Olympica Nova's sound like. Perhaps a scoche less bass, but this is something which can be tuned and will depend to a certain degree on your room. In my room any more bass would have been too much but the level present was well-controlled enough I didn't find it as bothersome as another, less detailed and capable speaker might have been.

So where does that leave us in the overall scheme of things? For \$13.5k the Sonus Faber Nova III certainly draw heavily on expectations, and from this reviewer's perspective, deliver big on several fronts. The first being a very approachable frequency response. There are severe hand-me-downs from the extremely favorable Aida

flagship, allowing for non-fatiguing rich tonal structure across range. This, paired with a level of detail retrieval expected from a device that costs the same as a used car – is something that brings next-level characteristics into the equation. Now, that alone is good enough for most speaker makers in the audiophile realm, but some of the secret sauce of Sonus Faber is intelligent and massively alluring industrial design. The “lute” shape and impeccable wood aesthetic adds to the value in a way that seems appropriate for the high end cost, something that some (but not all) speaker makers are able to achieve. It looks the part, it acts the part. Then there is the versatility. With the reasonable sensible level, it was almost a shocker to see how well the Nova III performed with the 80W Naim Uniti Star, alongside several Schiit Audio mono setups that were in for review. While 250 watts from Nelson undoubtedly brought some serious authority to the situation, even the touch of a Schiit Aegier (40W into 4 ohms) in stereo mode was enough to drive the towers to a lively and accurate staging. The Sonus Faber Olympica Nova III is gorgeous, inside and out.

