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Classic Italian style meets innovative design: but can Sonus faber scale down the success of its Olympica IIs?
Review: Andrew Everard
Lab: Keith Howard

The past few years have not only seen Sonus faber grow its range to encompass several complete lineups of speakers, but also parent company Fine Sounds expanding to encompass a number of high-end brands. More on that in our boxout panel, but the £3998 Sonus faber Olympica I speaker is something of a return to the company’s roots: it’s relatively small, exquisitely finished in solid wood and leather, and uses in-house components and design to make it unmistakably a product of the company’s Italian factory.

A two-way design, standing just over 350mm tall, the Olympica I is the smallest model in a four-strong range taking as its inspiration Palladio’s Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, Sonus faber’s home town. The design of the speakers is said to reflect the sonic characteristics of the theatre, known for its remarkable acoustics as much as its aesthetic qualities, Sonus faber having long placed an emphasis on the abilities of its speakers to create a credible threedimensional soundstage.

DEDICATED STANDS AVAILABLE
Reviewing the Olympica III, the range-topping floorstander [HFN May ’14] Ken Kessler was clearly very taken with both the design and the sound, describing this as ‘commanding yet capable of great delicacy, the soundstage huge, yet the imagery specific and precise’.

Can Sonus faber repeat the success story with the much smaller and less expensive standmount model? Well, all the anatre – the wood, the leather, the characteristic drivers – are lined up, just as they are in the flagship model; it’s just that these smaller speakers will require the use of some speaker stands in order to make the most of them.

Sonus faber can supply a pair for an additional £849, which may sound a bit on the hefty side, but hefty is just what these stands are. Made from anodised aluminium, and with a design derived from the Guarneri stands, they give the speakers just the right upward tilt, and come complete with stainless steel feet for stability. The tops of the stands bolt into the speakers, giving a solid single assembly with none of that messing about with upward-pointing spikes, Blu-tack or the like.

The speakers themselves use Sonus faber’s 29mm silk ‘Arrow Point’ DAD (Damped Apex Dome) tweeter, said to combine the benefits of classic dome and ring transducer designs, while the mid/bass driver is a 150mm unit combining an ‘eddy current free’ voice coil with a ‘dynamically linear’ magnet assembly. The cone is made from an air-dried non-pressec blend of cellulose pulp, kapok and other natural fibres, coated with a viscous damping layer.

As well as Mundorf Evo oil capacitors and Jantzen inductors, the crossover uses Sonus faber’s ‘progressive slope’ design, handing over between the drivers in a range centred on 2.5kHz. Twin sets of terminals, usually linked with jumper bars, are provided for bi-wiring, the screw-down clamps having a neat flanged design to make them easy to loosen or tighten.

Sonus faber calls this a ‘Paralaminar stealth ultraflex’ vented loudspeaker’, the enclosure itself following the company’s ‘Lyre’ profile – in plan view it follows the shape of the classical instrument much sported by assorted nymphs, shepherds and vase-bound deities – with the curved walls being of progressive thickness to enhance the natural damping and prevention of internal standing waves. The asymmetrical cabinet design is specific to the Olympica I, with one side of the speaker slightly longer than...
FINE SOUNDS’ GROWING STABLE

Sonus faber’s flagship speaker launch in Venice a few years back was the kind of glitzy event almost unprecedented in high-end hi-fi, but when it was later announced that the name chosen for the product was having to be changed from ‘Fenice’ to simply ‘The Sonus Faber’, there were some mutterings about hubris. Similarly, there was later some grumbling from the faithful when it became clear its Venere range was being made in China. No such confusion with the Olympica models, which are made in Italy: this time it’s the company behind the Sonus Faber brand that’s left homel. Having expanded in recent years to encompass Audio Research, McIntosh, Sumiko and Wadia, the Fine Sounds group was recently the subject of a management buyout by Mauro Grange, formerly CEO of the Italian speaker manufacturer, and Charlie Randall, President of McIntosh since 2001. So Fine Sounds is no longer that Italian audio company with some American high-end brands on its books – following the buy-out, it’s now headquartered on Madison Avenue in New York.

the other, giving a narrow, offset rear panel (more of which anon). The cabinets, braced with solid walnut vertical clamps and available in either natural walnut or graphite finish, have maple joints between the panels providing a subtle pinstriped effect, and all the wood is coated with medium gloss lacquer.

Leather is used on the front baffles, as on the top and rear panels; and to one edge of the rear panel is the vent for the speaker’s reflex port-loading, covered by an intricately detailed anodised stainless steel mesh grille. With the speakers in situ you’ll never see these vents, but that’s the kind of attention to detail involved here — the construction, fit and finish is a delight throughout, right down to the ‘stringed’ grilles, which echo the ribbing on the stands.

THE SONUS FABER MAGIC

Used with a range of amplifiers from the Technics SU-C700 integrated to the little Benchmark AHB2 power amp [see p50], but mainly with my Naim Supernait2/HiCap, fed from the Naim ND5/S55PS and with all cabling from The Chord Company, it was immediately apparent that the old Sonus faber magic is very much present and correct here.

Following the suggestion of the comprehensive user manual, I positioned them well clear of side and rear walls (70-80cm is suggested, but of course this will vary from room to room) and with the characteristic Sonus faber tone to achieve the best soundstage focus. These aren’t really speakers designed for ‘straight down the room’ firing: things really snap into place when you have them set up so you can get a good sight of the ‘outer’ panels from the listening position, at which point you’ll find them capable of really quite extraordinary imaging.

One intriguing set-up possibility comes about due to the fact that the speakers are ‘handed’, in that the reflex slot only exits on one side of the speaker. Thus it’s possible to tune the bass by having the vents facing either inwards or outwards. Again, the effect will vary from room to room, and so some experimentation is recommended, but I found the ‘outward’ set-up gave a subtle lift to the bass, while inward kept things good and tight. After a few hours of listening either way, I found I preferred the latter.

Playing the country rock of Carrie Underwood, from her Greatest Hits: Decade #1 album [Arista Nashville 500876], the Olympicas immediately impressed with the ‘rightness’ of their sound, even with very commercial material such as this. Both vocal tonality and clarity were excellent — impressive given the scale and warmth these little speakers can deliver, and handy when a song like ‘Two Black Cadillacs’ has a story to tell — while bass and drums had plenty of heft along with tightness and real pace.

Anyone labouring under the misconception that Sonus faber speakers are best with string quartets and forensically-recorded jazz needs to have a rethink: these speakers can be driven hard when required.

Mind you, they ‘do gorgeous’, too: loading up the ever reliable jaw dropper Buddy Holly: From the Original Master Tapes [MCA MCAD-5540] the Sonus fabers glide through ‘True Love Ways’ in a

‘And they kept pace with the Philthy Animal’s flat-out drumming’
SONUS FABER OLYMPICA I

Sonus faber claims 87.3dB sensitivity for the Olympica I which corresponds well with our measured 87.3dB and 86.4dB output at 1m. The HI-FI NEWS and CLARETTA measurements at 87.3dB were recorded with slightly differing response data but the noise floor was 85.3dB or lower. Given that 84.8dB was the output with a music-shaped spectrum, 85dB is a more realistic figure. This has been achieved while maintaining an amp-friendly impedance: we measured a minimum module of 4.2ohm - well in keeping with the nominal 4ohm figure - and although the impedance phase angles are high, the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) fell to a low of 2.3ohm at 125Hz, comfortably above the 1.7ohm often recorded by competing floorstanders.

Forward frequency response [Graph 1, below] measured on the tweeter axis, is essentially flat in trend until output begins rising above 10kHz. Up to this point the response errors are within ±3.8dB but the treble lift increases this to ±5.0dB and ±5.5dB respectively for 200Hz-2kHz. Pair matching over the same frequency range is good at ±1.0dB. Nearfield measurement of the bass response is complicated by the area of the rectangular reflex port being difficult to determine, but weighting the driver and port outputs so as to align their infracsonic contributions resulted in a diffraction-corrected bass extension of 51Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz), a fair figure for this compact cabinet. The opposite frequency extreme ultrasonic output is maintained to above 40kHz. The cumulative spectral decay was measured at under 4kHz with no evidence of energy decay but here there is indication of a resonance associated with the dip in response at about 1kHz, and a few more low-level resonances are visible higher in frequency.

Above: The Olympica I’s response has a slight boost >10kHz but is essentially flat. Pair matching is good.

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HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

This is a small speaker as sumptuous and seductive in its sound as in its looks, with a wonderfully cultured, yet expressive balance sufficient to make you forget your hi-fi system and become immersed in the music. The optional stands really are a must-have, and absolute bass extension is limited, but this is still a remarkable, and very tempting design - and not just for fans of jazz and string quartets.

Sound Quality: 95%

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity [LP, 1m/2.83V, 1m/2.83V, 87.3dB/85.4dB, 86.4dB]

Impedance module min/max (20kHz-20kHz): 4.2ohm @ 18kHz, 34.5ohm @ 65kHz

Impedance phase min/max (20kHz-20kHz): 55° @ 98Hz, 50° @ 25kHz

Pair matching (20kHz-20kHz): ±0.08dB

UT/HF extension <60Hz ref 20kHz/1kHz: 51Hz @ >40kHz, >40kHz

THD 10kHz/1kHz/1kHz (for 90dB SPL/m): 1.8% / 0.4% / 0.3%

Dimensions (HxWxD): 354x223x368mm