

HOME Theater



Sonus Faber Concerto Grand Piano, Concertino, and Solo Speakers

To my friends and associates, I've come to personify the electronics industry. They think of electronics, they think of me. They think of me, they think of electronics. Unfortunately, the industry isn't doing much to help me look good. When I'm so closely associated with an industry that mostly cranks out tacky-looking black boxes, I could

wear Armani every day and still cut no more dashing an image than your average Silicon Valley software engineer.

HIGHLIGHTS

- All the speakers in the system sound wonderfully neutral, natural, and smooth
- They look better than practically any other speakers on the market
- To our surprise, they handle home theater volumes easily
- Bass not as butt-kickin' as you might hope in a \$3,500 speaker

At least there's one company that's trying to raise the image of the electronics industry, and of Brent Butterworth by association. That company is Sonus Faber, an Italian manufacturer that builds some of the most beautiful speakers in the world. Every Sonus speaker looks like it was built by an old-world craftsman in a little country village where an ox cart is the only taxi, wine is the only beverage, and they don't take American Express.

The Concerto Grand Piano is SF's first floorstanding speaker; the Solo is their first center speaker. According to John Hunter of Sumiko (the U.S. importer for Sonus Faber), SF's designers took great pains to make the Solo sound good atop a big-screen TV, or against a wall under a projection screen. Sumiko also sent along a pair of Concertino minimonitors for use as surround speakers.

SF's designers are every bit as good at getting pretty sound as they are at creating pretty boxes. The drivers are custom

designed for Sonus Faber; they're all of extremely high quality. The Concerto Grand Piano packs a 7-inch woofer with a cellulose carbonium cone and a copper phase plug, a 0.8-inch silk-dome tweeter, and a 7-inch passive radiator with an acrylate carbonium cone. The speakers rest on a T-shaped metal piece with three spikes, which makes the speaker much easier to level than most.

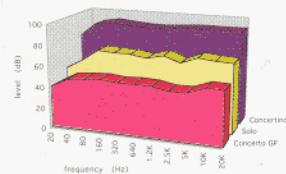
The Solo uses the same 0.8-inch silk-dome tweeter flanked by two 7-inch woofers with paper carbonium cones. It's finished on all sides with black leather. This gives the speaker a non-reflective surface that makes it ideal for use under a front-projection screen.

On both speakers, the binding posts are the mondo metal jobs you'd expect on such a high-end speaker, and they allow for biwiring. All of the drivers are shielded so they won't interfere with your TV's picture.

We auditioned the Sonus system in our L.A. listening room, using it with the Acurus amps in this System Review, and also with the Chiro C-300 and B&K AV5000

that usually provide the power for our West Coast facility. For the front end, we used the Kenwood KC-Z1 and B&K AVP-1030 preamp/processors, the Pioneer CLD-99 LD player, the Sony DVP-S7000 DVD player, and

Sonus Faber Speaker System

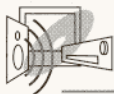


CFG Labs measures: Sonus Faber Concerto Grand Piano, Solo, and Concertino.

This chart shows the on-axis frequency response of the Concerto Grand Piano (bottom), the Solo (center), and the Concertino (top). We measured the speakers at a base level of 90 dB, then scaled the curves to fit on this chart.

The Concerto GP has a very even response from 50 Hz to 1.25 kHz, with some significant dips and peaks from there to 6 kHz, and a rising treble response up to about 18 kHz. None of these errors was noticeable during our testing. Measured atop a 52-inch rear-projection TV, the Solo produced a deep, 9dB dip centered at 2.8 kHz; we thought the midrange of this speaker sounded great, but this dip might prove very noticeable on certain movie soundtracks. The Concertinos measured extremely well throughout the audio range.

To order our extended test report on the Sonus Faber speakers, visit our Web site: www.cfglabs.com, or call 818-595-1570.



System of the Month

the little Goldmund stereo preamp featured in last month's Premiere Designs.

When we were working out the new rating system that debuted in the last issue, Jeff and I conducted an extended listening session with almost every speaker we had in L.A., including the Paradigm Eclipse/BPs Jeff reviewed last month, and the Infinity Compositions Overture 3s we keep as one of our reference speakers. But we made the mistake of starting this comparison with the Sonus Fabers. Why was this a mistake? Because from the lower midrange on up, the Concerto GPs made everything else sound mediocre.

One listen to the Concerto GPs, and you'll understand why some people are willing to pay \$3,500 a pair for a set of speakers. Properly set up (we toed them in to face the listener, and set them well away from the walls) these speakers yield a realistic soundstage that spread all the way across the front of our listening room. It's not the gigantic, super-spacious sound you get from a bipolar like the Eclipse/BP. It's focused, with precise imaging that lets you pinpoint every performer on the recording.

Tonally, the GPs are dead-on for my taste. They're in no way bright: There's just enough treble to give you the sonic detail and realism you want, but not enough to fatigue you during a night-long listening session. The midrange is extremely clean-sounding; when I listened to an afternoon of some of my favorite singers (Holly Cole, Ron Sexsmith, Johnny Hartman), I was very happy to hear little coloration at all. The only deviation from neutrality that I can hear is a slightly lean sound overall; I'm accustomed to using more dynamic and bassy speakers. Sumiko says this is room dependent, that

they usually get a tonal balance that leans a little toward the fuller, darker side, although they have heard the speakers sound thinner in a couple of rooms.

The bass doesn't go particularly low, but it's extremely well implemented; the pitch definition is excellent, and there's not the slightest hint of boominess or lack of control in the low registers. If I owned a pair of Concerto GPs, I doubt I'd add a subwoofer to them, because they actually have just the right amount of bass for my taste.

I think a lot of my positive reaction was due to the Concerto Grand Piano's phase-coherent design, which combines a rear-sloping front baffle that puts all the drivers on the same vertical line, with a first-order crossover between the tweeter and woofer. Because the filters in a first-order crossover are very gradual (6 decibels per octave, compared to 12 or 24 in most crossovers), the drivers tend to run at frequencies that lie at the outside of their useful range, which produces distortion when you turn up the system. Thus, phase-coherent speakers tend to have very realistic imaging on stereo music, but seldom play loud enough for home theater. The GPs are an exception. I'm not going to tell you that they would last more than a minute in a shouting match with the big Eclipse/BPs or Definitive Technology BP-2000s, but much to my surprise, they did maintain their composure even when cranked up to Dolby reference level (105 dB).

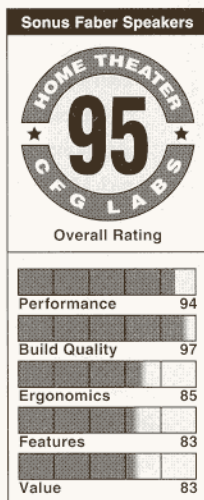
The Solo matched the timbre of the GPs quite well. It did sound better on a stand, under our front-projection screen, but placing it on a TV did not degrade its sound dramatically. It does everything a good center speaker should do. The dialogue sounds clear, with little coloration or distortion; even a blow-your-ears-out disc like GoldenEye sounds palatable through the Solo. The speaker also has excellent horizontal dispersion—it directs the sound out evenly, in a wide fan shape, so that even if

you're sitting off to the side of the room, you get much the same sound as the guy who's lucky enough to have the sweet spot. This is easily one of the best center speakers I've heard.

I'd prefer that SF create a dipolar surround speaker for use with this system, but for those who buy into the "you need five matching speakers for Dolby Digital/DTS" line, the Concertinos will make perfect surround speakers. They're quite close in their sonic character to the Concerto Grand Pianos: same tweeter, similar woofer, and a ported cabinet loading that, acoustically speaking, works very much like the GP's passive radiator.

For my taste, this system is almost perfect—just the right amount of bass (substantial, but not earthshaking), the right amount of treble (enough for detail, not enough for fatigue), the right amount of coloration (very, very little), and the right size and aesthetics for the smallish places I tend to inhabit. It's perfect for those who demand style, who demand excellent music reproduction, and who favor an occasional guilty-pleasure romp with an action movie. And you get enough visual appeal to cancel out the ill effects of a living room of IKEA's cheapest furnishings.

—Brent Butterworth, CFG Labs 



Sonus Faber Concerto Grand Piano Main Speaker
\$3,500/pair

Sonus Faber Solo Center Speaker
\$995

Sonus Faber Concertino Main/Surround Speaker
\$995/pair

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