



SONUS FABER CREMONA ELIPSA

The shapely new Elipsa sits at the top of Sonus Faber's prestigious Cremona range

PRICE £9,500 per stereo pair CONTACT Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.sonusfaber.com

Sonus Faber loudspeakers seem to engender in some people an effusive passion amounting to the kind of adoration that others reserve for, say, fine watches or cars. One can't really quarrel with this. The Sonus Faber house sound — although, in reality, its speakers are too diverse to have a truly homogenous house sound — is distinctive and speaks of a certain passion that many probably believe the Italians reserve for the finest fruits of their labours, from Ferrari cars to Stradivarius or Guarneri violins.

“There is a real ‘wow factor’ with this speaker in the right system, because its balance is so well judged”

Some might feel that Sonus Faber loudspeaker designs lack a certain discipline, transparency and freedom from overt character that allows them to work properly with all kinds of music. But that ignores one possibility: that perhaps the speakers were intended to complement only the kind of music that their designers considered truly worth reproducing well.

Until recently, the finest expression of the art of loudspeaker design, according to Sonus Faber, was the Stradivari Homage, the company's tribute to the most famous and revered of all Italian stringed instrument makers.

During our first encounter, at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, we initially thought we were listening to the Homage, but it soon transpired that it was a smaller speaker that looked superficially Homage-like. The mistaken identity was understandable: the Elipsa looked very similar, albeit scaled down slightly in overall dimensions, weight and internal engineering. There was no confusion or uncertainty about the performance, however: the Cremona Elipsa sounded nothing less than superb.

The Elipsa is a three-way, floor-standing speaker, rear vented with three reflex ports as part of its elaborate enclosure control measures. The enclosure has an elliptical cross section, and leans back a little to ensure that the ScanSpeak Revelator silk-dome/ring-radiator tweeter, in its very impressive penultimate iteration, is directed towards seated ear level. The enclosure is a sandwich construction using 30 pieces of solid maple, which are hand selected and glued in position on the main chassis, the glue providing some cabinet damping, and each piece oriented

to optimise resonance control. The finish is applied using ecologically sound varnish with leather panels covering the centre front and rear. The enclosure itself is painstakingly — for which read expensively — constructed by any standards. Internal ribbing is used to increase stiffness and to help control internal standing waves. The rest of the driver complement consists of a 150mm midrange driver and a 260mm aluminium/magnesium-coned bass unit, with second order (12dB/octave) crossover slopes at 250Hz and 2.3kHz. The Cremona

Elipsa is nominally a four-ohm load, with a 91dB/watt sensitivity, and the frequency response is given as 35Hz to 20kHz. You're looking at a loudspeaker that stands 124.5cm tall, 55cm wide and 46.5cm deep, and the system is supplied with steel outrigger feet and fearsome looking spikes, which can be adjusted to vary vertical orientation.

The overall shape is very similar to the Stradivari Homage, betraying the common thinking in the designs: the standout feature being the unusually wide and gently curved baffle, and the shallow enclosure construction — like a cello or a lute, depending on who you listen to. The resemblance to the generic ground plan of most string instruments is too obvious to need highlighting, but so is the mirroring of the general plan of a flat baffle loudspeaker, though the enclosure has some depth to load the bass/mid drivers. Certainly the enclosure shape helps dominate room coupling. In fact, it provides the primary acoustic loading for the tweeter and midrange unit in particular. The wide baffle means restricted mid and treble dispersion, and the profiling of the baffle in the lateral plane has the effect of gently boosting low and high frequency output, with a mildly dished output in the mid and upper midrange, especially when the speakers are positioned well clear of the rear wall. The rear panel reflex ports help 'shape' the bass and add some midband presence, while the enclosure shape limits off-axis dispersion and the side-wall reflections that are common with dipole speakers.

This is hard loudspeaker to sum up sonically, not least because it really is more characterful than many high-quality speakers. There is a

concentration of energy in the mid-bass, a warmth, plus some prominences higher up that gently shape the music in a way that the design team clearly intended — it all sounds too well planned to have been a mistake and Sonus Faber's design skills don't lend themselves to this kind of error. But musically, the Cremona Elipsa is a different matter. Used with Krell and Pass Labs amplification and various SACD players, it demonstrates a high degree of synergy with symphonic and chamber music, solo piano, acoustic guitar and also with female voice. Jennifer Warnes and Madeleine Peyroux, to give just two examples from a long list, sound unusually expressive and human, the unusual part being the warmth and grace of their voices, and the virtual complete absence of the usual box artefacts.

There is a real 'wow factor' with this speaker in the right system; not because it does anything dramatically better than others, but because its balance is so well judged, so meticulously shaped and so thoroughly musical that it makes one feel that almost any other speaker will be a disappointment. A spell with a model such as the Focal Nova (see p62) will soon disabuse you of this idea, yet there is an undeniable passion and 'rightness' that is delivered by this gorgeous Italian thoroughbred. ■

Alvin Gold

