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Sonus faber Olympica I loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom

One of the most hackneyed phrases in audio reviewing is, "My wife, who does not comment on such things, said...". It's usually accompanied by a proclamation of how wonderful something sounds. My wife, however, frequently comments on the look – and, perhaps tellingly, almost never the sound – of audio products. And it's rarely positive. She might not be the world's most talented interior decorator, but has a keen eye for 'ugh'. So, when the Sonus faber Olympica I rocked up, the best I could hope for was no comment. Instead, they got a "these look nice."

It might not sound like much and it might not be the most shining aesthetic praise heaped on a pair of loudspeakers, but this terse comment from Domestic High Command is the equivalent of Royal Warrant (or at least, a Royal Pardon) *chez* Sircom.

It's not hard to see why. Sonus faber has long since been the one of the few bringers of Italian elegance and style to the audio world, and this best-dressed standmounted two-way is no exception. That medium gloss cabinet finish (in walnut or graphite) with contrasting leather top-plate, gentle backwards tilt and black strung stand is an exercise in restrained elegance in its own right. However, this is topped off by the asymmetric lyre-shape of the cabinet and the chrome-plated vent (more accurately, an aperiodic or as Sonus faber puts it, 'paralaminar stealth flow' vent) cover along one rear side edge of the speaker. It's as elegant beneath the surface with solid walnut bracing ▶

▶ internally. It's a more refined design that fits well into the sort of elegant homes where a high-end loudspeaker should look appropriately muted, rather than the piano gloss and chrome loudspeaker-as-statement of products like the Guarneri Evolution and the Amati Futura. If these are the shiny new Pagani Huayras on display in the driveway, the Olympica I is the understated and elegant 1960s Maserati you keep under cover in the garage.

In fact, the only slight blemish in the otherwise stunning design of the Olympica I is the method of gently back-tilting the loudspeaker. Sonus faber supplies two long and two short sets of spikes; the idea is to put the longer spikes to the front, thereby causing the loudspeaker to lean back. It works – and the centre of gravity is suitably low to prevent this being in any way precarious – but it means the base of the loudspeaker seems to look like it's tilting backwards from the listening position. I imagine the non-OCD of this world will not notice or care, looking instead at the excellence of the design.

The looks are so good, the loudspeaker could pass muster if it were a mediocre design in a fabulous box. Almost. However, Sonus faber are not able to make that kind of cynical compromise, and instead designed a loudspeaker that is as technologically advanced as it is aesthetically pleasing. As the name suggests, the Olympica I is the smallest of a range that also includes two floorstanders and a centre channel loudspeaker. The two-way Olympica I features the company's "Arrow Point" DAD 29XTR2 29mm tweeter, sourced from a famous Scandinavian speaker name, and made to Sonus faber's own specifications. 'DAD' might seem like an odd prefix for a tweeter, but relates to the company's Damped Apex Dome technology. This is designed to combine the benefits of conventional tweeter dome and ring radiator in one, but the arrow point looks like a phase plug for a tweeter. This tweeter is derived from the company's flagship Aida floorstanding giant, retaining the top model's neodymium magnet, but without the wooden anti-resonance chamber.

The 150mm MW15XTR mid/woofer is also a Sonus-specified driver from the lands of the Vikings. It features a cone material made of an air-dried and specially selected range of mashed tree and plant fibres (including kapok and hibiscus), chosen for their sonic properties. This is then doped, connected to a composite former with a voice coil claimed to be free from eddy currents thanks in part to a magnetic field motor sporting three copper (Kellogg) rings.

This is not a difficult loudspeaker to install (just remember to get the back tilt even and get toe-in mild, but consistent), but the combination of the aperiodic loading and a mild lift in the upper-midrange means you need to be a little canny in choice of amplification. Something too clean, and the

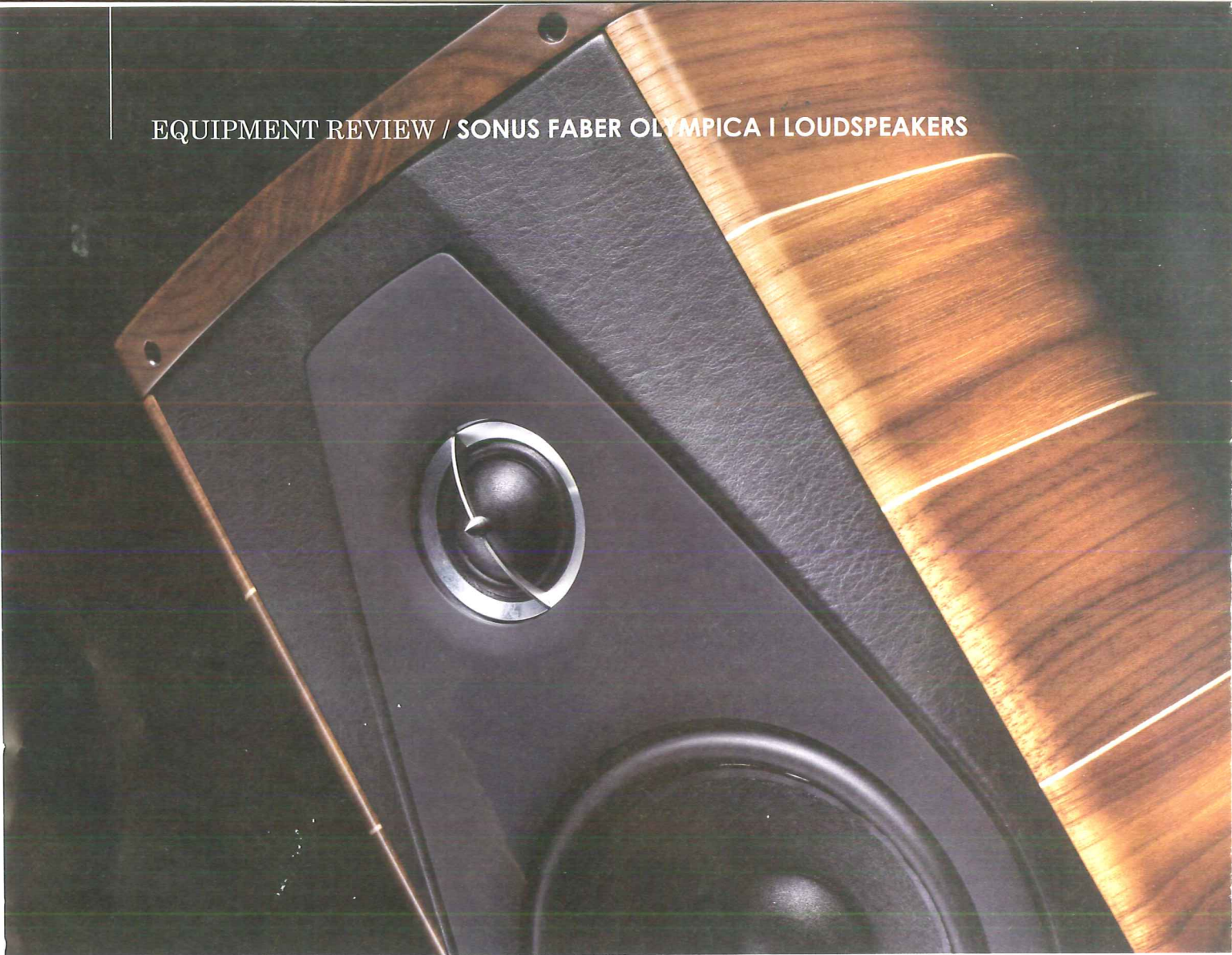
"It's a more refined design that fits well into the sort of elegant homes where a high-end loudspeaker should look appropriately muted, rather than the piano gloss and chrome loudspeaker-as-statement of products like the Guarneri Evolution and the Amati Futura."

midrange might come across as too forward, while something too ill-controlled in the bass and the loudspeaker will lose that deep, dynamic bottom end. This is a combination of quality and quantity, although you don't need kilowatts of power or massive current swings to drive this.

Sonus faber traditionally had a 'lush' sound that was warm and romantic across the upper bass and midrange, with perhaps a hint of roll-off at the top end to make an extraordinarily listenable and 'beautiful' sound. There's nothing wrong with that and it was very well documented, but times change. The Venere loudspeaker range began to show there was more to Sonus faber than just lush, and that is echoed in the Olympica I, albeit not to the same extent.

This is the loudspeaker that fits between the stark honesty of monitors, and the exuberance of some over-compensating designs. It goes for the enjoyment (and to some extent the beauty) of music, rather than the most accurate depiction of sound or the most immediately exciting and zingy sound. You could liken this to the driving position in a car. Some want to feel every twitch, turn, lump and bump in the road, and prefer a car with stiffer suspension, responsive steering, and a seat that hugs the body. Others want the outside world to go away, and select cars with active suspension and cossetting seats to make the experience more sublime. The Olympica is right in the middle of that continuum; not too hard, not too soft. Goldilocks would be proud.

How this pans out sonically is a loudspeaker that delivers outstanding stereo imaging, excellent detail and surprisingly deep bass. But more importantly, it does all these things with a sense of natural drive and energy. You will hear more open sounding midrange and treble performance from many standmounts, but that isn't the point; if that midrange insight comes at the expense of the overall presentation, the rival loudspeaker falls flat. And many just do that. ▶



► What this loudspeaker does so well is forgive music its sins. Casualties of the Loudness War don't seem so badly wounded through the Olympia I, while the best recordings are still allowed to shine. So when playing 'The Lover of Beirut' from Anouar Brahem's *The Astounding Eyes Of Rita* CD [ECM], the sense of space around the oud, bass clarinet, bass, and middle eastern percussion is atmospheric. However, the ability to separate bass from bass clarinet is not easy with less than full-range loudspeakers and the Olympia I's portrayal here is little short of mesmerising. It can also handle itself when things get a little hairy; I tried comparing 16/44.1 and 24/88.2 versions of the classic Kleiber/Beethoven 5th Symphony [DG] and Liquid Spirit from the album of the same name by Gregory Porter [Blue Note] and after some close-knit listening, it was time to kick back. The Olympia I can more than handle itself at surprisingly loud levels without changing tone. I don't recommend destruction testing, though!

If I had to sum up the Olympia I sound in a single word, it would be 'exquisite'. The speaker makes the right balance between the rose-tinted sound of old and the requirements for a more accurate and clean loudspeaker today. It looks great, sounds amazing, and makes a nice big and powerful sound in many rooms. Highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: two-way, two-driver stand-mount monitor with aperiodic loading
Driver complement: One 29mm dome/ring radiator tweeter, one 150mm doped mid-bass cone mid/bass driver.
Inputs: Bi-wire loudspeaker terminals.
Frequency response: 50Hz – 30kHz
Crossover frequency: 2.5kHz
Impedance: >4 Ohms
Sensitivity: 87dB/W/m
Dimensions (HxWxD): 354 x 222 x 368mm
Weight: 19kg/each
Finishes: Natural walnut or graphite medium gloss.
Price: £4,398 per pair, £849 (stands)

Manufacturer: Sonus faber
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