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Sonus faber Liuto Tower (£3490)

Standing just over one metre high, this three-way will surely tempt you to a diet of heavy rock – played loud
Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Keith Howard**

Naming hi-fi products after musical instruments is nothing new. For Sonus faber, it's a tradition. Although the Liuto [lute] features a conventional cloth grille instead of the stylised 'strings' of the dearer models, the Towers still led me straight to some guitar virtuoso material for an initial burst. I kicked off my time with the Liutos with doses of live Jeff Beck, plenty of Keb' Mo' bottleneck and loads of Joe Walsh via the Eagles. Acoustic or electric, hard or soft, simple or cluttered, the initial bursts pointed to pure Sonus faber.

What's important to reassure Sonus faber fanciers of limited means is that Liuto offers the signature tapered cabinet in a line-up costing far less than Cremonas or Homages. This hugely impressive model, a floorstander sharing catalogue space with a centre-channel and a small two-way, sells for only £3490, with no visible signs of cost cutting – luxury string grille apart.

Wooden finishes, too, were shown at September 2009's TOP Audio Show in Milan [see p10], but the Liuto was launched in – and looks best in – a luxurious high-gloss black. The vented floor-standing enclosure houses three drivers, including a 25mm coated fabric dome tweeter with soft polymer surround. It crosses over at 3.5kHz to a 150mm thermo-moulded polypropylene textile cone midrange. Below this, up to 350Hz, is a 220mm aluminium/magnesium alloy cone woofer.

As for the cabinet itself, its lute shape was chosen for intrinsic stiffness, the avoidance of standing waves and unwanted resonance, and – Sonus faber being truly Italian – innately sexy looks. Even the side view is original, with the top and bottom sections extending beyond

the back, the profile enjoying an almost-automotive flare (and flair). To enhance the cabinet's rigidity, the enclosure features internal ribs. Spikes are supplied, and the rear connections are via beautifully-made multi-way terminals. So, nothing to add for tweekers, except for decent cables.

AN AMPLITUDE OF AMPS

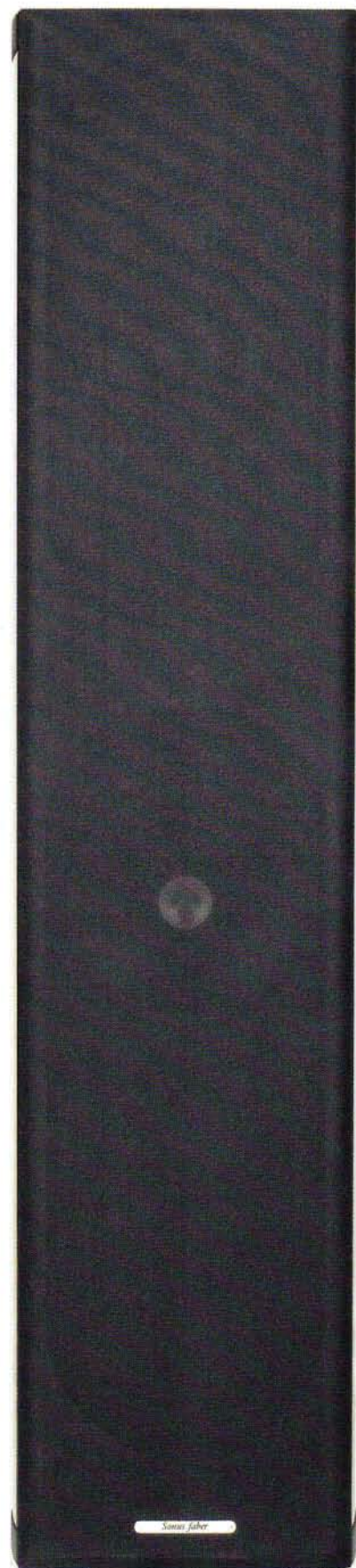
Matching the Liuto to a suitable system was never going to be a problem, as it is not a difficult drive. Given its price, rated impedance of 8ohm and sensitivity of 89dB/1W/1m, with a recommended power handling range of 40W-250W, the specs cover a multitude of amps and a multitude of sins. With a factory-specified frequency response of 40Hz-25kHz, I was compelled to try it with amplifiers capable of delivering decent bass.

Taking all that on board, especially price, one would imagine that a sensible match for the Liuto would be the Krell S-300i, one of the bigger Prima Lunas or any of the myriad pre-power combinations from the likes of Arcam, Musical Fidelity, *et al.* And although I didn't have one to hand, I suspect that the Liutos will work like a dream with the Audio Research VSi60 – not least because they now share the same parent company.

During the weeks I enjoyed the Liutos, they saw service with the McIntosh C2200/MC2120 and the Anniversary C22/MC75 pre/power combinations, the Tsakaridis Apollo Plus, the Electrocompaniet ECI-5 and the Howes-modified Quads. Sources included the Marantz CD-12/DA-12 CD player and the Pro-ject Xtension turntable/arm with a range of cartridges, through the Audio Research PH5 phono stage, while speaker cables came from Yter with interconnects from Atlas, Kimber and Yter.

As the review pair had been run-in before I received them, the early session was approached without trepidation in that area: they sounded loose enough

RIGHT: The Liuto three-way has a cloth grille rather than the stylised 'strings' of the dearer Sonus faber models – its one concession to cost-saving – but offers the signature tapered cabinet





to communicate flowing bass lines and plenty of speed in the upper registers, without any of the restraint or constraint exhibited by hardware that hasn't enjoyed a few hours of hard work. Indeed, I detected no changes over the next few weeks.

RAUNCHY SIBLINGS

Instantly, the combination of a carefully-tuned port, a rigid cabinet and a cutting-edge woofer establish the Liuto as a serious performer for both bass extension and control. As the size and power handling would suggest, nor was level an issue. That the Liutos can go loud without strain was made obvious when I heard them at TOP Audio in a room over twice the size of my 12x18ft studio.

No clipping, no compression, no plumes of smoke: the primary sensation is one of control and coherence regardless of the SPLs, and regardless of the genre. From unplugged roots music to self-indulgently loud blasts of Big Star, the Cars and Kings of Leon, the Liutos took everything in their stride.

However... because the Liuto Tower is so eager to play to the headbanger in you, they encourage the accessing of a diet heavy on saturated fats: you want to rock with these speakers, much in the manner of LS3/5As and old Quads that lead you toward recordings which showcase natural-sounding vocals. Another way of looking at them is how you feel when you get behind the wheel of a powerful car:

you just gotta see what happens when you floor the accelerator. This is in direct contrast to what seems to have been a major part of the Sonus faber philosophy ever since the brand first appeared: a quest for refinement and delicacy. These are the Cremonas' raunchy twins.

It was no accident that the company created a series of speakers to honour the great violin makers of Cremona, or that Sonus faber always seemed to hark back to the days when speakers were sold according to the listener's preferred genre. And however much I am pro-rock and anti-classical, I have always found Sonus fabers to be among the ideal balancing acts in

'No plumes of smoke... the primary sensation is one of control and coherence'

audio. Those with long memories will recall that I even found the Guarneri, as genteel a speaker as has ever been made, to be capable of letting its hair down.

With the Liuto, it's the opposite effect. Wheatus' 'Teenage Dirtbag' is a masterpiece of pop-grunge, a deliriously schizophrenic treasure that juxtaposes acoustic guitar with the wall-of-sound that is heavy metal. Nasal vocals, ass-kicking percussion, automotive sound effects, organ flourishes – the Liuto presents them in the correct proportions, preserving an utterly mind-boggling array of textures. This is a track to which I simply won't subject vintage Quads, for example, which fail to convey the power, while even the Guarneris treat the performance the way a stern parent approaches a sloven teen's bedroom.

Part and parcel of this, of course, is physical scale. Wheatus via Liuto is an example of hard rock in all its room-filling majesty. One cannot imagine anyone failing to succumb to the sheer splendour ☺

ALL IN A NAME

Italian nomenclature has always been a bit odd – I'll never forget the moniker 'Glowy' for a valve amp – but Sonus faber prefers something serious. Just as its name is Latin for 'Sound Factory', so do other model designations in its history provide both the basic identification of the product and a level of linguistic sophistication, like 'Extrema'. Leaving aside 'Toy', which is perfectly apt for its entry-level range, Sonus faber has turned to a core value for the series that replaces the Domus: 'Liuto' is Italian for 'lute', the shape the company has favoured since the birth of the Guarneri some 15 years ago. Quite how the Italians have managed to apply their high-end stylistic signature to less expensive models is simple: its construction methods have been revised for greater cost-effectiveness.

LOUDSPEAKER



ABOVE: Presenting an easy load to the amplifier, the Liuto Tower speaker is nonetheless sensitive to room positioning and is not designed for bi-wiring/amping

of this piece even with the levels *not* set to 'stun'. SPLs have little to do with it: the way the soundstage is occupied in all three dimensions adds the meat to the bone.

THE TRADE-OFF

Not, however, that the Liuto is without peer in this area. Because Sonus faber, like Wilson, is hypercritical of positioning, especially toe-in, the listener can dial in precisely the right amount of width and depth. What I found, though, is that the Liuto sounds better *tonally* when optimised for maximum width, rather than when positioned at the ideal balance between width and depth.

As far as trade-offs go, the loss is minimal, but it was not present, for example, in the much-dearer Cremona M. What you lose if you choose not to favour width over depth is a slight snap in the upper midband, a mild openness in acoustic instruments. Live Eagles recordings provided the most vivid glimpse of this, but I must stress that it's almost a matter of personal taste if you favour panoramic playback over the intimate.

It's not that the Liutos don't 'do' intimate. It's just that they sing when asked to overwhelm. Take out the Beatles' *White Album* and play 'Martha My Dear' followed by 'Helter Skelter' or more conveniently 'Why Don't We Do It In The Road' followed

by 'I Will'. The Liutos will speak for themselves: they almost prefer the louder, larger and 'heavier' tracks.

So far, so unhelpful: I've portrayed the Liuto Tower as a rocker's refuge rather than the serious all-rounder it actually is. That's the curse of reviews, where one is required to use dry statements to explain sounds: the dream will be reviewing in the future, when download speeds allow for instant terabytes, so you can actually hear the sound of what the reviewer is trying to describe. My own inarticulacy should not deter you from auditioning the Liuto Tower, even if you have no desire whatsoever to play ZZ Top or AC/DC at 115dB. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Dismiss any thoughts of the Liuto Tower as being an 'economy' Sonus faber. Aside from ultimate refinement and reaches of its soundstage depth, which cannot quite match that of the Cremona floorstander, this is a thoroughbred that sounds like it should cost £5000+. It possesses the sonic merits of a classy floorstander while, in common with all Sonus Fabers, looks better than any speaker has a right to.

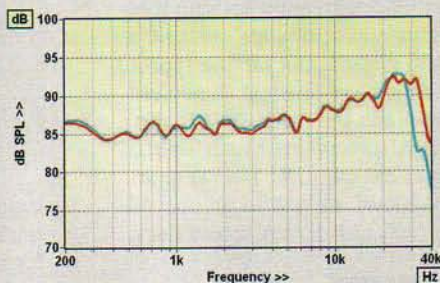
Sound Quality: 83%



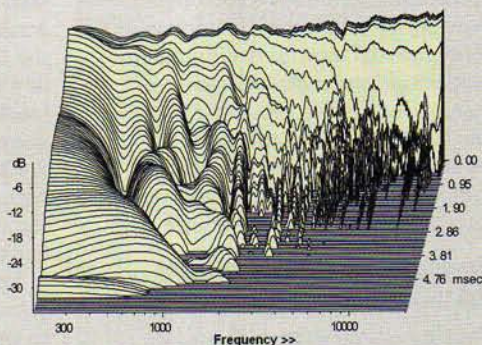
SONUS FABER LIUTO (£3490)

The Liuto Tower's specified 89dB sensitivity looks to be on the optimistic side as we recorded 86.8dB for a standard pink noise input and a little less (86.4dB) for music-shaped pink noise. This isn't surprising given that the Liuto records a creditable 46Hz bass extension (-6dB ref 200Hz) and, as usual for Sonus faber, presents a relatively easy load to the amplifier, with a minimum impedance modulus of 4.5ohm and a minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) of 2.2ohm. Still, a nominal impedance of 6ohm would be more representative than the quoted 8ohm. Moving these tower speakers closer to the wall behind will also have the effect of increasing the bass extension in-room.

The on-axis frequency response [see Graph 1, below] is largely flat to about 4kHz above which it rises gently but relentlessly to above 20kHz - something which is sometimes done to 'perk up' a reticent midrange driver. Although Sonus faber doesn't recommend this in the user manual, toeing the speakers out slightly from pointing at the listening position will have the effect of curtailing this treble rise for any listener who is bothered by it. Despite this feature the overall frequency response errors are quite low at ±3.0 and ±3.3dB respectively for the two speakers over the range 200Hz to 20kHz, as a result of the responses lacking any large peaks or dips. Pair matching is also good to within ±0.9dB, the largest disparities occurring between 1 and 4kHz. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [see Graph 2, below] suggests that the curved sides help control cabinet resonances but a hash of low-level breakup modes is visible above 3kHz. KH



ABOVE: Pair matching is good but the forward response 'brightens-up' above 4kHz to 20kHz+



ABOVE: Waterfall shows a freedom from cabinet resonances but mild driver modes are seen from 3kHz

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms - Mean/IEC/Music)	88.3dB/86.8dB/86.4dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	4.5ohm @ 124Hz 26.8ohm @ 20Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	-54° @ 68Hz 24° @ 20kHz
Pair matching (200Hz-20kHz)	±0.9dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	46Hz / >40kHz/35.4kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.5% / 0.9% / 0.2%
Dimensions (HWD)	1031x236x413mm