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Pianissimo!

At the top of Sonus Faber's entry-level Domus range, the Grand Piano makes sweet music

PRODUCT Sonus Faber Grand Piano Domus

TYPE Floorstanding loudspeaker

PRICE £2,498 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 20.5x106x31cm

• Weight: 26kg each • 25mm ring radiator tweeter
• 150mm doped paper midrange cone • 2x180mm doped paper woofer cones • Real leather trim
• Overhanging steel plinth • Sensitivity/Impedance 90dB/4 ohms (nominal)

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Without doubt, Sonus Faber is the most prestigious and best known of all the high-end Italian loudspeaker brands.

The company is particularly and justifiably renowned for superb construction and finish and also the musical qualities of most of its speakers, which in some cases are little short of legendary. Domus is the entry level Sonus Faber range and the Grand Piano is the top model from the line-up.

It is a four-driver, three-way, floorstanding column. The tweeter is Sonus Faber's customised 25mm ring radiator unit, with a prominent central diffuser. The two identical bass units are 180mm doped paper cone drivers and the midrange is a smaller version of the same thing, this time with a 150mm cone and a nominal coverage between 400Hz-3.6kHz. This means that the whole of the midband in effect is covered by a single unit. It is quite common for three-way systems to use a much lower treble crossover frequency, so the upper midband will to some extent be disturbed by the treble crossover, depending in part on crossover design. In this case, the crossover uses compound slopes – first order initially, though the final attenuation rate is not specified in this instance.

The real head turner, however, is not the drive unit complement, or the large front mounted reflex port – used to tune the enclosure somewhere around 32Hz by our reckoning. Instead, it's the enclosure itself, which is a typically extravagant, Sonus Faber creation. Although this model is from the entry level range, we are dealing with a beautifully constructed, heavy enclosure with a cross section said to mirror that of a lute – it is wider

at the front, narrow at the back and has outward bowed side panels. The front, top and rear panels are covered in real black leather (not leatherette as in some accounts), which is used to apply surface damping and helps control diffraction with its textured surface. It also serves yet another purpose by helping guarantee a good pneumatic seal around the drivers. The sides consist of what appear to be resiliently mounted panels. These use horizontally arranged staves of wood, which are glued together and then highly polished.

Our test pair were supplied in the teak option with a horizontal grain structure, but there's also a nice piano black lacquer finish available.

The enclosure sits on an overhanging steel plinth which provides the wide wheelbase required for stability and of course, anchor points for carpet piercing spikes. These have enough adjustment available for some useful tweaking of the speaker's angle of attack.

What you end up with is an unusually elegant tall column, with no hard edges and a very organic shape, enhanced more than a little aesthetically by the unusual grain orientation of the side panels and by the leather trim. But this is not a loudspeaker that sets out to give the user an easy ride.....

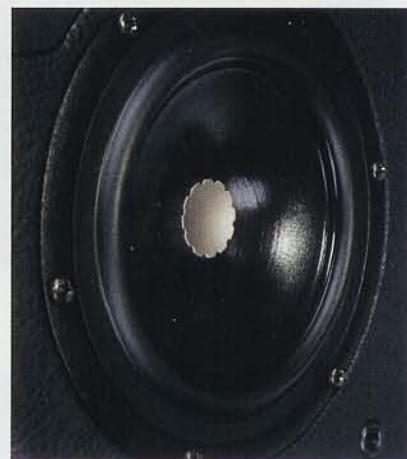
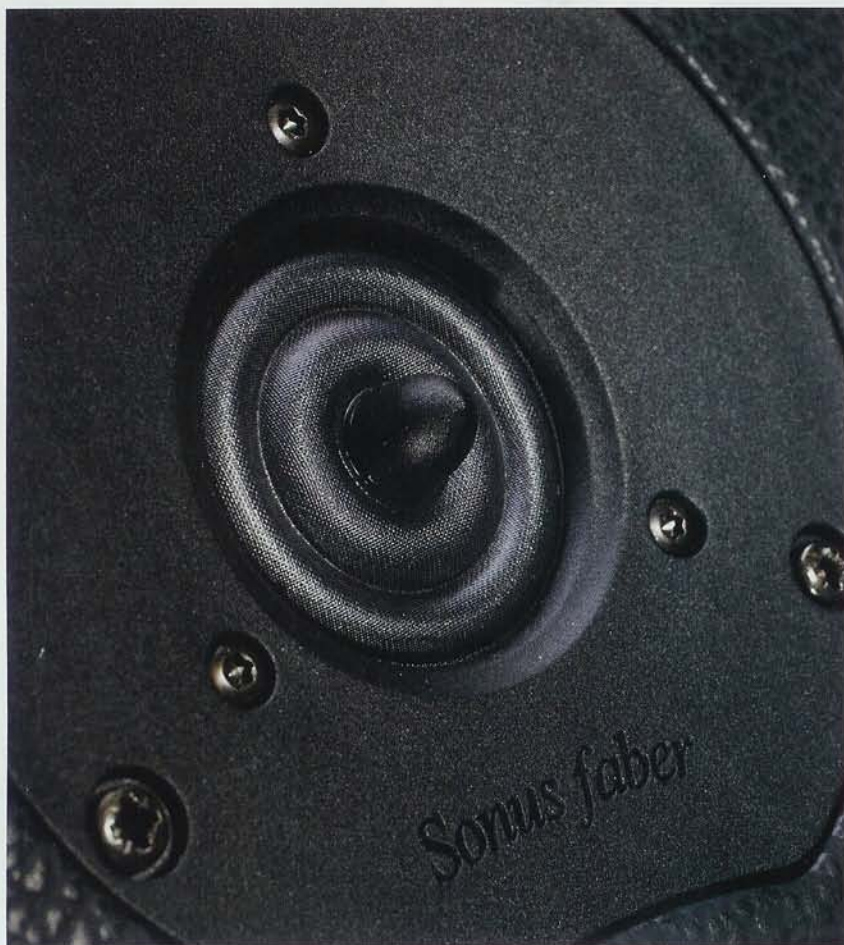
SOUND QUALITY

This is in most respects an utterly wonderful and beguiling loudspeaker, but it is not without foibles and criticism. It's not too hard to see just which strings are being pulled and how.

First and foremost, we had some difficulty in determining appropriate positioning. Used with a wide baseline, the speaker sounded phasey and back near a rear wall, the sound was soft and recessive. The optimum turned out to be with the speakers pulled well forward from the back wall, relatively close together and toed-in so that they were pointing directly at the listening hotseat. Vertical orientation is possible using the adjustable feet, and this should also should be tweaked with some care.

The speakers will need to be extensively run-in and for a considerable period. Straight from the box, or after an extended period of inaction, we found the speaker sounded congested and lacking in 'air'. But, after a couple of hours under drive and sometimes with a slightly higher than normal volume setting (which turns out to suit the balance of this speaker) it wakes up noticeably. The right choice of amplifier and also speaker cable is key to this design. It doesn't need – in fact cannot realistically cope with – enormous quantities of power, but it does need a replay chain that is lean, crisp and detailed if the aim is to avoid playing to the Sonus Faber's weaknesses. Experimentation here will pay dividends and we'd avoid valve amplifiers that sound too much like valve amplifiers.





“The common factor in each case is the Sonus Faber’s natural grace, harmonic complexity and tonal beauty.”

All of this effort still doesn't deliver a sound that could be described as completely neutral. In fact, the Grand Piano Domus has a highly distinctive and unusual balance which we cannot believe is inadvertent. It is almost as though the design was conceived from the outset as a special case of a musical instrument. What has been delivered is a speaker with a slightly woofy bottom end.

It doesn't go particularly deep, though it matches other speakers of similar overall proportions. However, it seems to compensate, or over compensate, with what is best described as an inherent loudness contour – a warm and somewhat waffly mid and upper bass that projects the sound of those instruments within its compass; cellos, basses, the lowest octave of the piano for example – forward of the enclosure.

Pulling the speaker forward of the rear wall has a similar effect on the midband, which is perhaps why it works so well. The treble meanwhile is clean, detailed and extremely sophisticated, with many of the qualities that we have learned to associate with ring radiating tweeters – a kind of dry, tightness.

It's all there, but there's nothing demonstrative about this unit. Having adapted to the peccadilloes of this almost wilfully idiosyncratic loudspeaker, we had a great deal of thoroughly musical pleasure from this entry-level model, whose musical attributes are an excellent match for its stunning aesthetic qualities.

You'll not be surprised though to hear that it favours certain types of music over others. It was least convincing with driving rock and pop, where bass lines would sometimes overwhelm the sound. The rich, resonant upper bass gave rock material an overcooked quality. It was much better with orchestral music and best of all with small-scale material, chamber or otherwise.

It has a particular affinity for voice, acting as an excellent advocate for the likes of Beth Nielsen, Madeleine Peyroux, Herbie Hancock (an excellent track with Christina Aguilera – you couldn't make it up!) and Liz Wright. It was pure magic with the Bach *Goldberg Variations* played by Ito Ema. The common factor in each case is the speaker's natural grace, harmonic complexity and tonal beauty. It has an unusual clarity and in so many ways

it really does sound more like a musical instrument than just another box that's good for reproducing music.

The Grand Piano Domus fits neatly into the familiar strand of upper-class Italian hi-fi. It is meticulously voiced and rather than attempt to be all things to all listeners, it concentrates its talents on being a superb match for small to medium scale acoustic material. There's enough raw power and bandwidth available too for forays into full scale orchestral and choral music. And for once, it is real furniture you will not want to hide. **HFC**

Alvin Gold

VERDICT	
SOUND >> 87% [Progress bar]	PRO Lean, agile speaker with voicing that is particularly well adapted to showcasing the beauty of human voice and acoustic instruments.
EASE OF DRIVE >> 80% [Progress bar]	CON Doesn't set out to do everything equally well. It's no pile driver, and the bass balance can sound clumsy and heavy handed, especially with heavy, driving rock.
BUILD >> 94% [Progress bar]	
VALUE >> 90% [Progress bar]	
CONCLUSION Exquisitely contrived, if specialised upper mid price speaker. Looks superb, can sound the same way, if care is taken with setup and system matching. Bass tuning can let it down and a foam port bung (sadly not supplied) might help.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE >> 88%	