

Sonus faber Electa Amator III

35 years on from Sonus faber's birth, a blessed return to the values on which it was founded: the Electa Amator III
 Review: Ken Kessler Lab: Keith Howard

Two blasts from the past in one month, both small two-way monitors, both with a massive presence in my hi-fi history, but so dissimilar that loving both seems like a case of schizophrenia. As with the LS3/5a [p44], I have been a devotee of Sonus faber for over 30 years, though of late the passion has cooled. But something tells me that the company has again found its mojo, and the Electa Amator III is its herald.

It's a name that conjures up two illustrious predecessors, both of which raised the standards of the day and were drop-dead gorgeous. The 'III' departs from its direct prequel of 1997, which had a rear-firing woofer à la the Extrema [HFN Jul '14] and sloped surfaces, in that it is a two-forward-facing-drivers affair, in a parallel-sided enclosure with an enormous rear port instead of a second woofer. Its £9000 price tag also includes the dedicated stands, which bolt to the speaker and complete the 'new/old' look, the marble baseplate referencing Sonus faber wood/marble stands of the past.

WOOD WORKS

It's 'old' in a good way, then, a return to the Italian woodworking standards and materials that established the brand so quickly [see boxout, p61]. One can only imagine what founder Franco Serblin might have created had panels been his passion. Anyway, the chief designers at Sonus faber – Livio Cucuzza, and veteran Paolo Tezzon – added a new twist: the underside is a slab of exquisite Carrara marble, matching the base of the pedestal.

Make no mistake, nine grand is a lot of dosh for a small two-way, even with stands included, but you soon realise that – like the models of the Serblin era – this can be regarded not just as a speaker but also

as fine furniture or even sculpture, albeit in wood and marble rather than just the latter. With its teardrop grille, held in place by magnets, its sensuous curves, and a finish to make them drool at Heal's, the Electa Amator III justifies its tariff.

BOWLED OVER

Issued to mark the company's 35th anniversary – actually, last year – the loudspeaker is disconcertingly substantial for such a tidy package. Its dimensions are compact, a mere 375x235x360mm (hwd), the svelte stand a useful 720mm tall on a 300x350mm base, yet each cabinet weighs a chunky 14.6kg, which is even more than the stand's 9.5kg. Fitted to the leather-clad back is the aforementioned port, a rather impressive 100mm across and almost enough to swallow one's hand, above beautifully-adorned terminals.

This speaker can be single- or bi-wired, or bi-amped, and it features the proprietary hardware that allows the user to tighten the terminals by hand, thanks to a 'wing' on the screw-cap. I ran these single-wired for the bulk of the listening, though bi-wiring may certainly suit some systems.

Under the grille are the H28 XTR-04 DAD silk dome 28mm 'Arrow Point' D.A.D. (Damped Apex Dome) tweeter and the MW18 XTR-04 180mm mid/bass driver with 'real-time, air-dried, non-pressed blend of traditional cellulose pulp, kapok, kenaf and other natural fibres'. Phew: sounds like a vegan casserole. While this complement might at first suggest a Guarneri Tradition

RIGHT: The partnering stand features a Carrara marble base, matching that of the speaker. Drivers include the H28 XTR-04 'Arrow Point' Damped Apex tweeter and MW18 XTR-04 air-dried pulp and fibre mid/bass driver



AMATOR ANNIVERSARY

What can be said about Sonus faber that isn't already oft-repeated? The brand appeared out of nowhere in 1983, at a time when Italian hi-fi was limited to a couple of obscure amp makers. It was like the coming of Elvis, or The Beatles, or the Citroen DS, or Sassicaia: a revolution was afoot. Here were speakers that didn't cause the domestic decision makers (forgive my pre-#MeToo caveman-ism) to scream, 'You're not bringing those into my house!'. It was a period of walnut, teak or black boxes, so unrelentingly ugly that even verbose audio scribes could not disguise the fact that these intrusive objects mitigated against 'hi-fi in the home' more than anything other than cost. But Franco Serblin single-handedly devised cabinets with curved edges, made of fine woods rather than veneered chipboard, and pulled one other trick out of his hat: they sounded as good as they looked. The rest is history, and now we have speakers that don't make us want to go all Oedipus on our eyes.

[HFN Aug '18] in a parallel-sided enclosure, that lute-shaped speaker uses the same tweeter but the smaller 150mm W15 XTR-04 woofer. Meanwhile, the 2.5kHz crossover is fitted with high-precision components including ClarityCap PP non-polarised capacitors and low resistance Jantzen inductors.

The drivers are mounted into a leather-covered baffle, fitted to a robust cabinet described as a 'high rigidity spread resonance spectrum system', the construction consisting of a three-layer constrained-sandwich. Even without lifting it, you sense that it is built like a keg for Armagnac. The main chassis comprises solid walnut cut from 25mm sheets, atop the 30mm-thick Carrara marble base. In between the upper wooden section and the marble bottom is a sheet of brass.

As expected, based on experience of the predecessors which clearly inspired it, the 'III' proved a relatively tricky speaker to drive [see KH's Lab Report, p63]. I wired it up to the D'Agostino Momentum Stereo [HFN Aug '12], which drove it with ease, and was immediately bowled over by something I didn't expect.

SCALE MODEL

Imagine you've been living with a Bull Mastiff, and suddenly it's replaced by a Chihuahua. Or, overnight, your 1967 muscle car metamorphosed into a FIAT Topolino. Then, imagine your surprise when said Chihuahua demonstrates the forcefulness of the Mastiff or the FIAT blows the doors off a NASCAR-ready Dodge Charger. The analogy fits because I've been living with Wilson Sasha DAWs [HFN Mar '19], as dazzling and impressive and commanding a pair of speakers as I have ever used, and I had just reviewed a pair of LS3/5as [p44], with the predictable, commensurate drop in impact.

It was with this mind-set of anticipating great losses that I fired up the 'III's. The move from Wilson-to-LS3/5a meant a blatant quantitative sacrifice, with reductions in the absolute scale of the soundstage, a truncation of maximum levels, reduced bass extension and everything else you would expect to be abridged proportionately. Even so, the LS3/5a, thanks to my total insistence on placing things in the right context, maintained its dignity and my respect. It still sounded amazing – only smaller.

AUDIOPHILE SWOON

This was what I assumed would be repeated with the 'III. How wrong I was. The Kodo drummers were playing, from the CD *Warabe* [Sony Records SRC467 1], as I had just been revelling in the gargantuan soundstage and cavernous bass that the Sasha DAWs provide with such aplomb. Who, in a million years, would have foreseen a not-too-dissimilar quantitative experience from a speaker barely the size of the Sasha's upper section?

Let me stop you right there, before you think I'm about to tell you something impossible. The Electa Amator III is no substitute for the Sasha DAW. It's less than a quarter of the size and price, has less wooferage, yadayadayada. But damn, it sounded so good, so convincing, so large, so open that I went from one to the other without feeling the need for any mental adjustment. The best analogy I can provide is to liken it to finding a £20 bottle of wine that nearly impersonates one costing £80.

With Kodo drums, bass quantity, extension, overall impact, transient decay and other percussive characteristics are tested to the maximum. While the Electa Amator III couldn't plumb the depths of the Wilson Sasha DAW, it certainly came mighty close to satisfying on a similar level. At no time did this sound like a speaker →

SONUS FABER ELECTA AMATOR III



LEFT: Crossing over at 2.5kHz, the mid/bass driver works out of a substantial rear vent. A quartet of multi-way binding posts allows for bi-wiring/amping. These are Sonus faber's own flanged type and are typically very easy to tighten

the recording offers it – image height which makes a certain type of audiophile swoon. The opening track had Rawls and Dianne Reeves positioned in their own spaces, the instruments had the correct scale and the 'lls seemed to disappear. The closest sound I've heard to it is the midband of stacked pairs of LS3/5as on AB1 subwoofers, but without the Electa Amator III's top-end refinement.

VOCAL CHAMP

As you will have surmised, then, this loudspeaker isn't just a device for superior reproduction of scale, space and, yes, rich bottom octaves: it's also a champion with vocals. The interplay between Rawls and Reeves has long been one of my aural litmus tests, and the 'lll sailed through it with aplomb. Detail, controlled sibilants, ideal contrast in the vocal textures – the title track oozed warmth and realism, even sounding valve-like when driven by the D'Agostino Momentum Stereo.

On to Keb' Mo's *Peace... Back By Popular Demand* [Okeh/Epic EK92687] to hear the twang of the bottleneck guitar, the sublime piano on 'Imagine' – the Electa Amator IIIs simply sang. I could surely live with these, concerned with only one downside: I'd be up every night until 3am, trying to hear my entire record collection just one more time. ☺

so small that you could almost hide it behind an LP sleeve.

It was the fullness of the sound – not, I regret, available via the LS3/5as – which best mimicked the capabilities of a larger system. At the same time, as evinced by Lou Rawls' *At Last* [Blue Note CJ32-5050], the speaker also behaved like an LS3/5a in its imaging capabilities. It wasn't just the musical diet I chose which replicated my listening to Sonus faber of the Serblin era, for the 'lls use the same extreme toe-in familiar to the brand's devotees.

As Franco proved to me time and again, his speakers can image like perfect point sources, with the sort of width, depth and – if

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

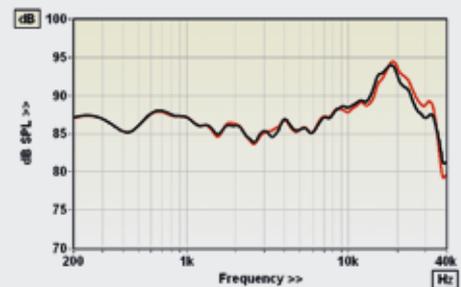
After many ups-and-downs with Sonus faber over the past decade, it warms my heart to be able to call the Electa Amator III 'the best I've heard from the brand since the original Guarneri'. Yes, it's that impressive, that commanding, that *correct*. Above all, it does exactly what the late Franco Serblin demanded of all his creations: it reproduces music so convincingly that the listener is transported. *Bravissimo!*

Sound Quality: 88%

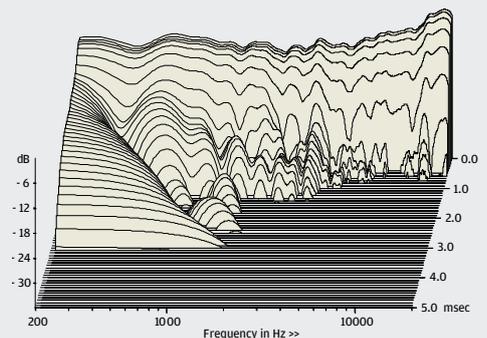


A benefit of the Electa Amator III having a straight-sided rather than curved-sided cabinet is that internal volume is maximised, helping achieve the best combination of sensitivity and bass extension for its compact exterior dimensions. And an impressive combination of the two is exactly what this speaker achieves. Sonus faber specifies 88dB SPL at 1m for 2.83V input and our measured pink noise figure of 87.7dB justifies that. This is bought at the expense of low impedance, however. Sonus faber's nominal 4ohm is entirely consistent with our measured minimum of 3.3ohm but low frequency impedance phase angles are quite high, as a result of which the EPDR falls to a minimum of 1.6ohm at 116Hz. While this is pretty typical of modern loudspeakers, a second dip to 1.9ohm at 610Hz makes the Electa Amator III a tougher than average amplifier load.

Forward frequency responses [Graph 1, below], measured at 1m on the tweeter axis, show a clear presence band dip and rising high treble output thereafter which will almost certainly make the on-axis sound too bright – but listening a little off-axis will cure this. Because of the treble rise response errors are on the high side at ± 5.1 dB and ± 5.4 dB, respectively, but should reduce off-axis. Pair matching error over the same 200Hz-20kHz frequency range is fair at ± 1.2 dB, but is an impressive ± 0.4 dB from 200Hz-10kHz for all but one very narrow band. Diffraction-corrected nearfield measurements show the bass extension to be 42Hz (-6 dB re. 200Hz) which is a good result given the generous sensitivity figure. The CSD waterfall [Graph 2, below] shows some low-treble resonances almost certainly the result of bass-mid driver breakup. KH



ABOVE: Forward response indicates a depressed presence band relative to a rising (high) treble



ABOVE: Cabinet modes are mild but the driver resonance at ~ 4 kHz also appears in the freq. resp.

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – Mean/IEC/Music)	90.0dB/87.7dB/86.6dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	3.3ohm @ 213Hz 28.5ohm @ 83Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	-63° @ 94Hz 49° @ 30Hz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz–20kHz)	± 1.2 dB/ ± 5.1 dB/ ± 5.4 dB
LF/HF extension (-6 dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	42Hz / 38.0kHz/37.5kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.6% / 0.5% / 0.2%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	375x235x360mm / 14.6kg