

Franco Serblin Accordo Essence

Accordo standmount gains a dedicated woofer and larger, floorstanding cabinet. Hey presto: the Essence
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

No kidding: when I first fired up the Franco Serblin Accordo Essence, I figured it sold for around £20,000, somehow forgetting that the loudspeaker above it – the flagship Ktêma [HFN Sep '20] – cost £25k. Surely they wouldn't price two models so closely? Equally, I failed to recall that the standmount Accordo [HFN Jan '18] from which it is derived sells for only £7500. The pricing, however, illustrates how Massimiliano Favella [see boxout, p41] is sticking to a plan where each model fills a sonic and fiscal gap: the Accordo Essence will set you back £12,998 per pair.

That had to sink in, that such a gorgeous, sublimely-finished construct could sell for so relatively little given today's high-end price lists. Available only in the luxurious solid walnut cabinetry with aluminium and chrome fittings seen here, the Essence iteration of the Accordo adds another drive unit, a 180mm woofer with 'microspheres' cone and aluminium dust cap, to complement the 29mm silk-dome tweeter designed by Ragnar Lian, founder of Scan-Speak, and the 150mm microsphere-coned mid-woofer. The immediate gain is bass extension, not that the Accordo was too shy for its size in the lower registers.

PUMP UP THE VOLUME

As important to this up-scaling of the original Accordo design is the much larger, aluminium-and-magnesium-braced, floorstanding cabinet measuring 1100x230x430mm (hwd) compared to the Accordo's 360x190x360mm (hwd). As you can see, the cross-section, too, has increased, so the Accordo Essence isn't solely gaining in height. The much larger volume suggests greater bass performance, while the crossover has also been addressed.

As with the standmount Accordo, the Accordo Essence is an asymmetrical design, so the speakers are provided in left- and right-hand pairs. Amusingly, the Accordo Essence, like the regular Accordo, is a reversal of the Ktêma, which has an extremely narrow baffle, widening at the rear – by contrast both Accordos have wide baffles and narrow back sections. Like the Ktêma, however, there are rear ports which demand free space around the speakers, the company recommending a minimum of 1m from all walls, but I reckon 0.5m will suffice. Positioning, however, is critical.

One starts with placement that's close to an equilateral triangle. The speakers are then toed inwards so the baffle faces the listener with no view of the sides, while the 'violin strings' that form the grilles allow perfect visibility of the drive units. Thanks to the adjustable spiking system fitted to the Accordo Essence, there is also freedom to apply a small amount of tilt should you wish to fine-tune arrival times, *à la* Wilsons.

COMMAND 'N' CONTROL

Single-wired, via superior, multi-way terminals, the Accordo Essence has one other requirement revealed in editor PM's Lab Report [p43]. Ignore the recommended minimum amplifier power of 20W for these are hungry speakers, and they will return the favour of vast amounts of power with an increasingly commanding performance, independent of the playback levels.

I am no head-banger, so none of my tube or solid-state amplifiers was

RIGHT: Behind a tensioned 'elastic band' grille lies an example of the iconic 29mm Ragnar Lian silk-dome tweeter together with a 150mm 'microspheres' mid/woofer and, lower in the cabinet, a reflex-loaded 180mm bass driver with alloy dust cap



DEFENDING THE LEGACY

It is, alas, not unknown for sons to destroy the companies founded by their fathers, though exceptions exist: VPI's Mat Weisfeld and Daryl Wilson of Wilson Audio are perfect examples that prove it's not inevitable. Massimiliano Favella, owner of Laboratorium (manufacturer of Franco Serblin loudspeakers, Yter cables and Flexum acoustic panels) and Franco Serblin's son-in-law, too, appreciates the legacy with which he has been entrusted, so he has chosen a rigid, respectful path.

While Favella first made his mark with Yter cables, he was groomed by Serblin to take over his life's work, Franco having sold his Sonus faber loudspeaker brand in 2006. Sadly, Serblin passed away in 2013, by which time Favella had learned enough to take over the designs completed before Franco's death. It is to Favella's credit that he has taken his time in refining and readying for production each of the four models (so far) that he inherited. As none of us are privy to the cache of projects left by Serblin, we cannot predict what may follow. But Favella did let slip that the next model might fit in between the Accordo and Accordo Essence.

straining, but there was no ignoring gains in two specific areas as the power increased. The first was in absolute bass control, using Kodo drums and other speaker busters. The second was in the sense of impact. Was I hearing my two ~75W amps 'running out of steam'? Was it an impedance issue? I know not, beyond none of the amps being especially troubled by ornery loads. Every one of them drove the Accordo Essences but, as in Orwell's world, some were more equal than others.

ZING WENT THE STRINGS

Aside from the Ligne, which is the outsider in the Franco Serblin range, I have now lived with each model and am as impressed by the clarity of thought put into the ascending nature of the range as I am with each model's behaviour in isolation. More relevant is that each serves its own sector properly in price and performance, and the gains are logical, eg, if you crave more bass, you go to the next model up.

But that's all secondary if, like me, you followed the artistry of Franco Serblin from the beginning, 35 years ago. The Accordo Essence adheres to each and every one of the values which Franco, and now his son-in-law, declared to be the mission statement for the brand. It was evident from the very first seconds of 'Sultans Of Swing' from Dire Straits' eponymous debut [Mobile Fidelity MFSL2-466; 45rpm LPs] that the two primary concerns had been addressed, beyond the physical beauty and construction of the speakers: soundstage recreation and finesse.

It's immediate – you experience without any doubt the recreation of a physical

soundstage (even when the recording is studio-formed and thus not representing a real space) with vivid three-dimensionality, precision, specific image placement and 'air' or atmosphere. Every sound had its own domain, and yet at no time did they seem disembodied or artificially placed. Those who remember first-generation Sonus faber speakers, and the Guarneri in particular, will recall a silkiness over the entire proceeding. This was present, and yet had no effect on either the clarity or fluidity of Mark Knofler's guitar playing.

It's simply part of a whole, which is where the finesse enters. These were Serblin's *causes célèbres*, which I learned he placed above other values because – like the equally soundstage-conscious Arnie Nudell of Infinity – he argued that if the soundstage and imaging are correct, so should be everything else. As for the finesse *per se*, he craved ultimate refinement, which I am prepared to

presume is also part of the argument about 'everything else' being correct. More to the point, Serblin argued that music should be heard from the ultimate vantage point, his beloved 'proscenium', so this speaker, as with every design he drew for his previous company, Sonus faber, is hot-seat-biased.

IN CONCERT

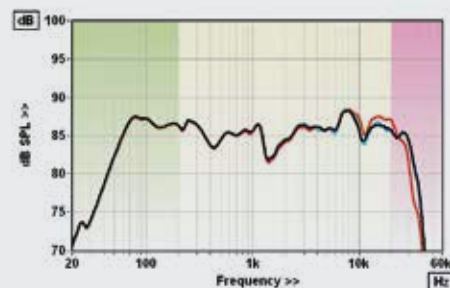
Turning to a live classic, the *Allman Brothers Band At Fillmore East* [Classic/Capricorn SD2-802 LPs], the notion that one was in a concert hall was unmistakable, a perfect example of hi-fi fooling you into thinking that you have been transported. What surprised me, irrespective of the increased driver count →

'Here was proof that Franco knew how to rock'

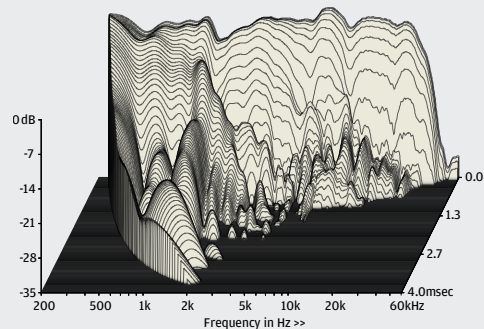
F. SERBLIN ACCORDO ESSENCE

Expanding the cabinet volume to accommodate a 180mm woofer brings the following top-line changes over the original Accordo standmount [HFN Jan '18]: bass extension is boosted from 62Hz down to a weighty 45Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz), THD is reduced from ~1.5% through bass and mid to just <0.5% here (re. 90dB SPL) but sensitivity is not improved over the original 86dB (1kHz/2.83V/1m) just as the amplifier loading is now that bit tougher. In practice the bass unit has a -6dB bandpass of 52Hz-270Hz [green shaded area, Graph 1], its output free of obvious spurious, and is supported by the lower port which offers a useful 13Hz-75Hz (-6dB), albeit with a mode at 750Hz. The latter was also detected from the upper port, though this vent for the 150mm mid unit offers no significant LF reinforcement.

The dip in impedance also occurs at LF in the Essence, the 'easy' 4.1ohm/192Hz minimum of the standmount Accordo traded here for a more testing 2.76ohm/160Hz (<3ohm from 106Hz-250Hz). The biggest swing in impedance phase is also more aggressive at -72°/64Hz/7.7ohm. This result, and change in forward response [Graph 1], reflects the necessary recalculation of crossover points from two- to three-way in the Essence. Measured on-axis between the tweeter/mid units, the speaker shows an essentially flat response trend, albeit with notches at 520Hz/1.2kHz and a peak at 6-7kHz that account for the ±3.5dB response variations. The 1.2kHz dip is also resolved as a resonant mode in the CSD waterfall [Graph 2]. Otherwise, pair-matching is exceptional at <1dB (200Hz-10kHz) and the impact of the 'rubber band' grille minimal [cyan trace, Graph 1]. PM



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed driver/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left, black; right, red; w. grille, blue



ABOVE: Resonances are quickly suppressed, albeit with a (woofer) mode remaining at 1.2kHz [see Graph 1]

LEFT: Front woofer is reflex-loaded via the lower of two oval ports at the rear of the arc-shaped cabinet. With the baffles toed-in towards the listener, the ports are almost directly rear-wall facing. A single pair of 4mm terminals serve the three-way crossover

'Whipping Post'. Blues *in excelsis*, proof that Franco knew how to rock.

Vocals are what rule my heart, Allman's being powerful and energetic, but I could not think of any trial more worthy than Sophie Madeleine's 'Stars' from *The Rhythm You Started* [Xtra Mile XMR045CD]. This is a voice of such delicacy and clarity that she makes Dolly Parton sound like Louis Armstrong. I had heard this CD so many times that I was worrying about seeming obsessive, but the Accordo Essence unveiled more fine details, not least my belief that Ms Madeleine should come out of retirement. I cry too often, and this had me reaching for the Kleenex. It was exquisite.

So the Accordo Essence couples refinement with realism, delivers convincing recreation of the sound-space, and wraps it in craftsmanship of the highest order in the cabinetry itself. Franco Serblin was always motivated by the great violin makers of Cremona, and he taught Favella well. He'd be pleased to know that you don't need to be Jascha Heifetz to hear it (or see it) in this speaker. It is magnificent. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The Accordo Essence honours Franco Serblin's legacy by adhering dutifully to his credo. If you desire a speaker that's physically gorgeous in the manner of the finest furniture, with sound that puts spatial concerns and refinement at the top of its abilities, this elegant floorstander must be on your shortlist. Critical in set-up and of ancillaries, it is worth the effort, for it is truly a *tour de force*.

Sound Quality: 89%



and cabinet size, was the bass. It was not the dominant characteristic, and both the Ktêma and Wilson's Sasha DAW [HFN Mar '19] reach down deeper, but it was equally satisfying, if more for quality over quantity. This is not a demerit, I hasten to add, because I would posit that it's exactly like Goldilocks' preferred porridge: just right.

SECRETS OF THE STARS

Nobody would ever suggest that it's possible to hear too much of Berry Oakley's bass, but neither could anyone find fault with the precise, rich and robust manner in which the Accordo Essence communicates it. That, however, was not what had me wishing I owned these: it was hearing the ache and the passion in Gregg Allman's vocals throughout

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V - 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	85.7dB / 85.4dB / 83.4dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz-20kHz)	2.75ohm @ 160Hz 16.8ohm @ 51Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz-20kHz)	-72° @ 64Hz +34° @ 515Hz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz-20kHz)	1.5dB / ±3.2dB/±3.5dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	45Hz / 35kHz/30kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.3% / 0.2% / 0.3%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	1100x230x430mm / 30kg