

Sonus faber Amati Tradition

Flagship of the new *Homage Tradition* collection, the Amati borrows from the *Aida*, *Lilium* and *Il Cremonese*
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Keith Howard**

Fashion is an amorphous concept, and I'm at a loss to explain why hi-fi brands go in and out of it. One year, everyone wants Amp X or Speaker Y – a year later, you can't give 'em away. I'm not for a second suggesting that Sonus faber ever suffered the ignominy of a loss of popularity, but let's be blunt: it has yet to return to the glory days of the Franco Serblin era. That should change with the Amati Tradition.

SUPREME STYLE

Post-Serblin, the speakers have been uniformly wonderful save for a few well-meaning attempts at delivering budget models with off-shore construction. Sonic supremacy has been upheld by wonderful creations like The Sonus faber [HFN Feb '11] and the wild Ex3ma [HFN Jul '14], but it's no longer the only game in town if looks matter to you. The £23,500 Amati Tradition has to fight it out with heavy hitters from Magico, Wilson, B&W, Vivid and countless others that have (finally) addressed the looks that were Sonus faber's USP.

Still possessing the sexiest styling of any non-panel speakers on the planet, the Amati Tradition is part of the *Homage* range, sitting in the upper half of the Sonus faber catalogue after the larger *Il Cremonese* [HFN Aug '16], *Lilium* [HFN Jun '15] and *Aida* [HFN Apr '12]. Its beauty is such that it demonstrates emphatically how not one single rival has been able to come close to Sonus faber's supremacy in styling, including fellow Italian brands from the same gene pool. Not every Italian has the eye of a Giorgetto Giugiaro, an Emilio Pucci or a Salvatore Ferragamo.

This floorstander looks svelte from every angle, while the deeply lacquered

red wood finish available is even more luscious than the sober, coffee-brown *Wengè* pictured here. Everywhere you look are details others forget to address, like the titanium-finished, brushed aluminium edging and trim for the leather baffles – or the finishing of the back to standards that match the front. Forget the days when British or American box-type enclosures were unfinished at the rear, just because they could get away with it. The Amati oozes luxury, something that all high-end hardware should do.

As is Sonus faber's wont, the cabinet cross-section is lute-shaped, to eliminate parallel sides and banish internal reflections. The company cites its influences including the original Amati and the earlier *Homage* models (each named after a legendary violin maker), honed by research

undertaken for the *Lilium* and the other current top models.

Tapering to a section of extruded aluminium, this structural element is the external manifestation of the brand's 'Stealth Ultraflex' system. This is the in-house form of a laminar tuning device derived directly from the *Olympica* collection. It acts as a vent that manages the flow of air through the duct, both controlling its speed and reducing turbulence, thus lowering distortion. As this is also a design concern for B&W and others, it now seems a key part of contemporary speaker design.

All that hardware also features in the 'exoskeleton system' with a spine

RIGHT: Spiked alloy outriggers improve the stability of the Amati's iconic lute-shaped cabinet. It hosts a 28mm 'Arrow Point' DAD tweeter, 150mm mid and two lightweight 220mm 'sandwich' woofers



KEEPING WITH TRADITION

Next year marks the 25th anniversary of the *Guarneri*, and thus the birth of the *Homage* line. I opened my review of the speaker [HFN Dec '93] with 'It was Franco Serblin's burning desire to thank the great violin makers of Cremona. He chose to do it with a range of speakers bearing their names'. He managed to honour each one of those giants appropriately, small *Guarneri* followed by the *Amati* and the *Stradivari* – my all-time favourite Serblin design. Fortunately, the company chose to continue the series with revised models, though the fate of the *Stradivari* is not yet known. The line now consists of the *Guarneri Tradition*, *Amati Tradition* and – in between – the new *Serafino* named after one of Amati's trainees. All exhibit refinement, elegance and workmanship that reflect their inspiration: the great stringed instruments of Cremona. And I, for one, cannot wait to hear what they issue to mark the line's quarter-century.

to secure the top and bottom of the cabinet, forming the patented ZVT (Zero Vibration Transmission) system. The circular disc visible on the speaker's top surface is the external section of the bracing that's incorporated into the 'optimised suspension system' fashioned from alternating surfaces of overlapping metal-elastomer-metal inside the bracket/spike group. The adjustable feet further mechanically decouple the Amati from the floor, all in the cause of eliminating spurious vibrations.

As for the guts of the system, Sonus faber has fitted the 3.5-way, reflex-loaded Amati Tradition with its own silk dome 28mm H28 XTR-04 tweeter in an acoustic labyrinth rear chamber. Mids are handled by the M15 XTR-04 150mm midrange with neodymium magnet, while two lightweight W22XTR-08 220mm sandwich cone woofers deal with the bass. The sandwich involves a high-tech syntactic foam core with two external surface skins of cellulose pulp.

DISAPPEARING ACT

At 61kg each, you'll want help to install these. It starts with the screw-in 'legs' and adjustable feet, requiring you to upend them, then turn them right side up, followed by setting toe-in. They need to 'cross' just in front of the hot seat for the ideal soundstage and tonal balance.

Initial impressions remained constant over two weeks of intense listening: one of cavernous openness. It's odd to say that a

spatial concern preceded any thoughts of a sonic nature, but that's what happened. I had just been savouring a dose of *Quad '57s* [HFN Nov '57] and was staggered to hear a box that almost matched their disappearing act.

SHOWCASE FOR 'PEPPER'

A salvo from the vinyl remastering of The Beatles' *Sgt Pepper* [Apple 4553420602557] proffered its opening overture in such grandiose and near-gargantuan scale and scope that I had to pop in the new CD and an older LP version to determine how much was the speaker and how much was the remixing by Giles Martin. It was so majestic that it distracted me from two of the 2017 mix's greatest gifts: the colossal impact of Ringo's deft percussion and the rich flow of McCartney's effortless bass underpinning the lot. This promised to be fun.

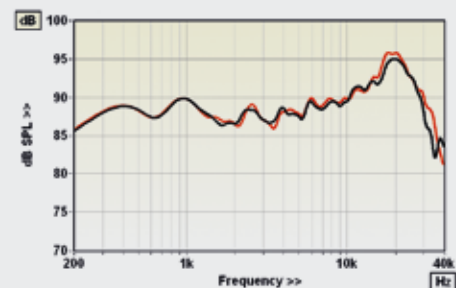
What was not immediately apparent was any slavish return to the sonic nature of the original Amati, nor any of the other Serblin-era *Homage* models. They were characterised by a silkiness that some might have found distracting in their ability to assuage upper frequency nasties. My love for the original *Guarneri* was based on how easy they were to listen to for hours on end. The new Amati is slightly less forgiving, more demanding of ancillary equipment and the precision of the toe-in – to 'Wilsonian' levels of exactitude.

Ah, the 'W' word. No, I am not going to offer some bizarre analogy, like 'this is what you'd get if a Wilson Audio Sasha mated with a Sonus faber *Stradivari*', though I'm tempted. I've been using Wilsons for decades, and the *Strad* is my all-time fave Sonus faber. I hear both in the new Amati – the former for upper frequency accuracy and detail, the latter for allure. The Amati is one sexy-sounding speaker. ↪

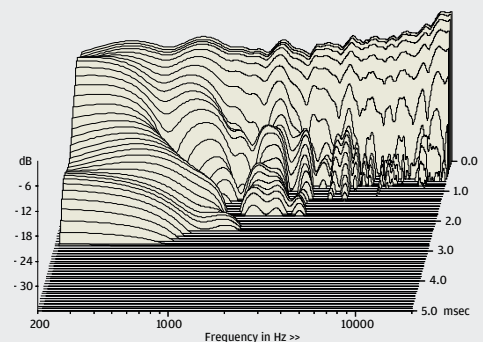
SONUS FABER AMATI TRADITION

You'd wish a large speaker to offer both high sensitivity and extended bass but for any given internal volume the two are in opposition. In the Amati Tradition the emphasis seems to have been given to high sensitivity. Sonus faber quotes 90dB SPL for 2.83V at 1 metre; we measured 89.5dB for a pink noise input, 1dB lower for a 'music shaped' test signal, so 89dB is realistic. This is achieved without punishingly low impedance, its minimum modulus of 3.2ohm being consistent with the specified 4ohm nominal. Impedance phase angles are modest, and the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) dips to a low of 1.7ohm at 28Hz, indicating that the Amati Tradition is no more difficult to drive than the 'average' floorstander.

Nearfield measurement of bass response is complicated here by the need to sum the outputs of three drive units and three ports (the dimensions of which are difficult to measure as they are recessed within the aluminium extrusion at the rear of cabinet – see picture, opposite) but our diffraction-corrected result shows its bass extension to be just 42Hz (–6dB re. 200Hz). That's a little disappointing for so large a box but the in-room extension will be bolstered by boundary gain. Forward frequency response [Graph 1, below], measured at 1m on the tweeter axis, is dominated by increasing output from 3kHz to 20kHz, giving rise to quite large frequency response errors of ±4.4dB and ±5.0dB, but these can be reduced significantly simply by listening a little off-axis. Pair matching error, over the same 300Hz–20kHz is a little high at ±1.4dB but reduces to ±0.9dB below 13kHz. The CSD waterfall [Graph 2] shows only a few low-level treble resonances. KH



ABOVE: The forward response's 'brightened' presence and treble can be tamed by toeing-in the speakers



ABOVE: Any cabinet resonances and midrange/treble break-up modes are quickly damped – a fine result

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	91.5dB/89.5dB/88.5dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.2ohm @ 15.6Hz 10.7ohm @ 20Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	–45° @ 24Hz 17° @ 1.5kHz
Pair matching/Response Error (300Hz–20kHz)	±1.4dB / ±4.4dB/±5.0dB
LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	42Hz / 32.0kHz/35.2kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.6% / 0.1% / 0.4%
Dimensions (HWD)	1176x411x512mm

LEFT: Trickled down from the Liliun and Il Cremonese, the three ports in the Amati's alloy spine form Sonus faber's 'Stealth Ultraflex' low frequency tuning. Split crossover offers bi-wiring/bi-amping

the wheezing of the mouth organ – you will revel in the realism.

What struck me here was the notion of 'body'. I must have heard it a few hundred times, but his version of 'House Of The Risin' Sun' seemed to have acquired more menace, just in the way he says the word 'drunk' (at 1m 51s), sending an added chill down the spine. The warmth and clarity balanced each other perfectly, though some might find it richer than they recall.

SWINGIN' STEREO

Moving from the single-point nature of *Bob Dylan* to the big band bombast of one of music's coolest duos, I wallowed in the smooth, swinging stereophony of *Bobby Darin And Johnny Mercer: Two Of A Kind* [Omnivore OVCD-216], in its stunning, 2017-remastered form. Recorded 15 months before Dylan's debut, with Billy May and His Orchestra, it's a throwback to the previous decade's Capitol sound.

Lush, with a palpable sheen, filling the room from wall-to-wall, it elicited the best of the Amati, reproducing the sound with grace and finesse. A burst of Twisted Sister proved that the speaker can rock – all that woofage begs to be exercised – but the overall sensation is one that I never expected to experience again, for it sounded like it was voiced by the late, great Franco Serblin himself. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

If you want a floorstander that looks like it belongs in the Design Centre, sounds like the essence of Carnegie Hall and defies you not to play just one more LP, the Amati is knocking on your door. Its composure and coherence manifest themselves in an overall sound that delivers all the impact and detail you could hope to absorb, but doing so without any unnecessary effort or drama. This is a speaker for grown-ups.

Sound Quality: 88%



With its unusual mix of virtues, the Amati proved a perfect showcase for the newly-forged *Pepper*, its qualities opening up the soundstage so you could hear into the recording to find the elements of newness, while presenting it with the grandeur it merits. But even 'small' pieces benefited, like the mono SACD of Bob Dylan's eponymous debut [Mobile Fidelity UDSACD2177].

This is pure Dylan, just vocals, harmonica and acoustic guitar. The mono is preferred by many to the stereo, as the latter seems disembodied in places, whereas in single-channel form, it's dead centre, as he would have been in a club of the era. The Amatis cosseted every trace of the guitar body's woodiness, every twang of a string,