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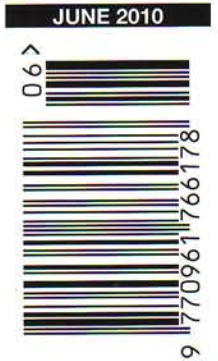


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10 PAGES OF LETTERS - THE BEST WINS A PAIR OF KEF IQ30 LOUDSPEAKERS! (UK ONLY)

Magic Lute

Sonus Faber's beautifully hewn Liuto loudspeakers put a spell on Noel Keywood...



And I thought Cremona was a rice pudding! Not everyone is so woefully weak in their understanding of the finer things of life, and for them Cremona is a town in Northern Italy synonymous with the crafting of fine musical instruments, especially lute and violin. It's to these skills Sonus Faber refer when talking about the design and manufacture of the Liuto reviewed here, or Lute. The Liuto is beautifully finished and I could see its makers want to invoke the fine craft skills of the lutemaker; it's an elegant association.

Paradoxically, loudspeakers shouldn't sound rich and woody, nor have resonant chambers in them to provide a distinctive sound. Quite the reverse in fact: all manufacturers strive to avoid precisely this effect, as do Sonus Faber of course, but at least the finish of the Liuto can be connected to fine craft skills. Ours came with a smooth, black, high gloss piano lacquer and moulded end pieces. The midrange unit has a black moulded polypropylene cone with a textile base that gives it a regular fine pattern and visually it blends in with the front panel.

The bass unit has an aluminium/magnesium alloy cone, also finished in black, and both drivers integrate well visually with the rest of the loudspeaker, when the grilles are removed. Only the stationary aluminium phase plug in the bass unit breaks the continuum of black.

As is common nowadays, this is a three-way with tightly integrated midrange and tweeter that work from the lower midband right up to the top of the audio band. I noted straight away that Sonus Faber have removed a piece of the tweeter's face plate to position it closer to the midrange unit, showing their interest in getting the two tightly phase matched. This improves image consistency over varying listening position and makes for a more focused and solid sound, image-wise.

Another interesting feature is the use of an open chamber behind the midrange unit, rather than the more common closed chamber. The latter often adds a slight sense of midband 'deadness'; open chambers avoid this, giving an airy sound, free from the damped boxiness of a closed chamber.

So just a quick inspection of the Liuto gives a good idea of what its designers believe to be important and what they are trying to achieve, across the midband and treble regions at least. Add in the use of a fabric dome tweeter, rather than a strident metal dome, and you have a floorstander purposed for clarity free from hardness. This appeals to me; I shudder when I see metal domes. Ring domes and ribbons have become common alternatives, in addition to the fabric dome of the Liuto.

The Liuto isn't large, standing 1m high (1031mm to be precise), much like most floorstanders. Its lute shaped body contour aids stiffness to reduce resonance and colouration, Sonus Faber say. The rear carries a single pair of input terminals, so bi-wiring is not possible. There are three ports. The upper one is in fact rear venting of the midrange chamber and the lower two ports for the bass chamber, this being a bass reflex design.

Because the cabinet narrows toward the rear, a horizontal steel pedestal is used to improve stability and this demands the use of different length spikes for front and rear. I preferred the cabinets tilted back slightly, because it improved the density of midband images, but found the spikes had insufficient adjustment to allow this, so I used a pair of supplied metal protective floor pads under the front spikes to raise them.

At 31kgs apiece the Liuto isn't especially heavy, but it stands quite firm on its spikes.

The Luitos got 75 hours of run-in, using pink noise, Monitor Audio De-Tox and finally music. This was a part of our review procedure; they probably need a lot less. Synthetic cone loudspeakers usually need very little run in, around 20 hours, with most improvement occurring in the first few hours. I used them with our

"the Liutos are very Sonus Faber; dry, revealing and totally honest..."

resident Icon Audio MB845 valve amplifiers and Musical Fidelity AMS50 solid-state power amplifier, but felt the Icon Audios to be the better match in this instance.

SOUND QUALITY

Sonus Fabers I have heard in the past I would sum up as clinically clear and concise, and free from character defining colouration and imbalances – and that summary applies substantially to the Liutos. Much of this is determined by its midrange unit. The synthetic cone is quite obviously clean as a whistle in its delivery and tonally even too. There are no midrange peaks here to throw vocals forward and this tends to keep the soundstage back a little, strung as a ribbon between the cabinets. Fed a simple, well recorded vocal like Mark Knopfler singing 'True Love will Never Fade', from the 'Kill to Get Crimson' LP, I started to wonder whether the Liutos have

one of the cleanest midbands and truest deliveries I have heard for a long while. There was a simple purity to their sound that spoke of perfection, giving Knopfler believable presence. The deadening 'boof' of a closed rear chamber – colouration in effect – was absent and this gave the midband of the Liutos an enticingly open quality. Here the speakers are a neck ahead of most competitors and it is an area in which they conspicuously excel.

When you throw out colour and unevenness though, you do end up with a midband that ceases to draw attention to itself and the action moves elsewhere.

Staying in the same musical vein, Clapton's 'No Alibis', from the Journeyman LP, opened beautifully, sweeping in like a vigorous March breeze, cold and brisk. Clapton's guitar sang out with a ringing presence, notes plucked with razor sharp clarity, making pace and timing seem fleet of foot. The Liutos came over as very revealing of detail too. The bass line was fulsome here but not overbearing, with satisfying power and good fluidity too; this is a loudspeaker that is just weighty enough, but not bogged down by a low tuned port and boomy subsonics. The richer instrumentation of this album, after Knopfler's leaner production, put more treble through

the Liutos and their bright balance became obvious, cymbals having luminous presence on the sound stage, but happily the cloth dome tweeter never offended.

Perhaps surprisingly, considering their refined background, the Liutos took off and ran with Lady Gaga's 'Bad Romance'. I had noticed earlier that these loudspeakers throw out-of-phase material way out into the room, to far left and right, and 'Bad Romance' similarly sprang out from the loudspeakers to fill our listening room. With solid, metronomic timing to the thunderous background beat, sharp stabs from synthesiser, and buzzing synth washing around the room the Liutos came over as propulsive and energetic. Lady Gaga with her anthemic yell sat clear as a bell centre stage, becoming especially vivid in the closing sequence as the heavy instrumental arrangement falls suddenly silent and the spoken lyrics sound bereft, stripped of the musical

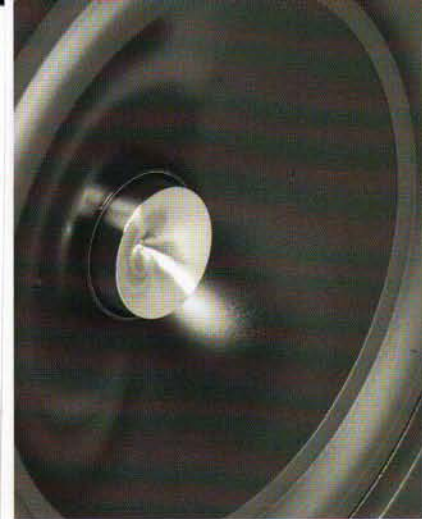
wash. Changing between amplifiers, the MB845s on their 8 Ohm outputs clearly showed they drove this track better than the Musical Fidelity AMS50, with greater apparent stage depth and bigger bass. Often the big Musical Fidelity AMS50 drives bass harder but the Liutos sounded overly retentive and also a little unforgiving in their forward upper midband with our AMS50.

Spinning a simpler, but well composed rock song like Skunk Anansie's 'Hedonism', and the dry plaintive vocal of Skin, centre stage, was captured with a lovely even tonality and all but total lack of colour. There was plenty of space around her, behind the plane of the loudspeakers. After the synths of Lady Gaga, Goldfrap and many other modern tracks I ran through these loudspeakers, it was good to hear, from this track, guitar chime out sweetly from the right speaker, plus a bass line that was large but firm. The Sonus Fabers produced an impressively tidy picture free of hash and as ordered as a doctor's waiting room.

Completely appropriate to the Liutos and a natural match for them – well, I hoped! – was the great Mr Kennedy with his amazing violin. Mendelssohn's vivacious Violin Concerto No. 1 had massed violins seemingly dancing in bright sunlight, sounding wonderfully clear and detailed. The balance of the Liutos was obviously adding to the natural edge of Nigel Kennedy's instrument though, and perhaps ironically the Liutos were less than perfectly balanced here, due to their rising frequency response, than I would have been totally impressed by. Yet they are undoubtedly finely detailed and insightful and an impressive listen in this respect, aided by that very flat upper midrange free from the common crossover dip that softens violin nicely, making for a more amenable if less challenging sound than that of the Liutos.

Also close to the spiritual heart of these loudspeakers was Renee Fleming singing 'Un bel di vedremo' from Madame Butterfly





and here the Liutos showed just how utterly pure they sounded with a simple, solo vocal. The open rear chamber of the midrange unit allowed her performance to breathe, and there was a lovely feeling of Fleming's voice being able to soar freely in space. Violins were clear and forceful, but I was also aware that the loudspeakers sail close to stridency at times, because they push out just a little too much upper midband energy. Here, they take no prisoners and, as much as I like the extreme insight and detailing that comes from a super high quality midrange unit and relatively blameless tweeter joined seamlessly by good crossover, the drawback is that blemished recordings, often the result of mediocre microphones with treble lift, can sound challengingly forward. Older loudspeakers, with a crossover dip in the upper midband, smoothed out poor recordings, but a very modern loudspeaker like this does not.

At the risk of boring regular readers stiff, I had to play Angelique Kidjo's 'Sound of the Drums' and this showed that although the speakers are a little fulsome in their bass, they do keep a grip on powerfully recorded bass lines. Deep subsonics do not exist, but that means normal bass moves along well, unhampered by the slow decay of ultra lows. The walking bass line in this track had a big presence in our listening room, and went low. The big bass strikes in 'Wombo Lombo' hit me in the chest and there's no getting away from the substantial bass output of the Liutos. As measurement suggested, it was a little over resonant when fed massive bass signals from a CD like this one, which our analysers show reaches down to 30Hz, making it a severe test of bass balance and control.

The Liutos reproduced the bass within the 'Fifa' album well, seemingly with vigour. Backing singers were sharply differentiated, one from the other, and Angelique Kidjo's vocals rang out sharply and clearly at centre

stage, well fleshed out, if a little lighter in tone than is ideal perhaps. Quick rolls across the backing drum kit were succinctly defined, razor sharp in timing and free from overhang or ringing, making for a dry, concise and ruthlessly correct rendition. The Liutos are very Sonus Faber in this respect: dry, revealing and totally honest.

And the 'Ride of Valkyries'? "Oh, here we go" as one bemused Whittlebury Show visitor said jokingly when faced with this confection as a demo track. I was struck by the convincing brassy rasp of horns and by the way woodwinds sunk into a nice dark silence; and by the quick, controlled roll of background kettle drum. As tension built, horns sounded fruity, strings nicely separated and very expressive in their pristine clarity. Small background nuances from strings were delicately but firmly identified so their gentle, darting interjections could be enjoyed. The Liutos do have a sheen to their upper treble and, for the first time, I heard what I felt was a little boominess to cellos, likely from the bass unit; Rock music doesn't demand ultra low colouration bass but cellos (and male voice) can both set off internal box resonances and port colouration, and some small amount appeared fleetingly with the Liutos.

As Wagner's slow central theme progressed and violins moved agitatedly up and down the musical scale – a beautiful motif if there ever was one – the Liutos remained light and fluent in the way they revealed every small detail. As the grandeur of the piece builds though, they did sound light in their upper bass and not so grand in terms of warmth or body. Rising output from midrange and tweeter draw attention to action higher up the musical scale, at the expense of that lower down, larger instruments like grumbling cellos often getting a little lost in the background. This was, I believe, partly – but only partly – due to the recording, a 1990 DDD (all digital) recording made of the London Philharmonic, being balanced this way

in the first place.

More impressive was a 2005 DDD of Leif Ove Andnes playing Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No.1. It was altogether more solid sounding, warmer in balance and richer in lower midrange/ upper bass content. This happily made for a piano that had a good sense of body, with enough power behind the lower notes on the keyboard to make the whole sound fairly grandiose, as Rachmaninov should. Piano still could have been a little grander I feel, but the Liutos remained satisfying to listen to. The under damped low bass of this loudspeaker suits Rock better than classical however, being placed too low to be excited by classical instruments except kettle drum.

CONCLUSION

Our measurements suggest the Liuto has been carefully crafted to provide what is basically a very accurate delivery, free of colour. The result is a super clean sound, one that is beyond reproach with much music. A small amount of emphasis higher up the audio band lifts clarity and detailing, but also makes the loudspeaker critically revealing, and here the Liuto needs appropriate partnering equipment. Then it proves to be a fine way to play music.

VERDICT 
Highly detailed, colour-free and revealing, if not quite perfect in balance, this is an impressive modern loudspeaker.

SONUS FABER LIUTO £3,500
Absolute Sounds
☎ +44 (0)208 971 3909
www.absolutesounds.com

- FOR**
- clinically clean
 - well finished
 - concise
- AGAINST**
- light sheen
 - cool demeanour
 - bass bloom

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response of the Liuto was flat over a wide vertical angle, showing good drive unit phase integration and the result will be an even sound less affected by listening position than many. However, there is a steady upward trend toward high frequencies with a +4dB peak above 10kHz and this will add a bright edge to the sound and will likely make for obvious brightness of presentation. The midrange unit works into an open (ported) chamber to reduce colouration and our decay spectrum showed a clean midrange, except for ringing indicated by sharp peaks at 1.5kHz and 2.1kHz visible in the green response trace.

A third octave analysis of pink noise shows distinct bass peaking below 150Hz and a lower bass limit of 55Hz, the port being tuned to 40Hz our analysis (red trace) shows, and the impedance plot. This shows the Liuto has been tuned high and is under damped, to give enthusiastic bass without subsonic content. The impedance curve shows that port damping isn't optimally centred on bass unit resonance for maximum damping effect, so there may well be a little softness.

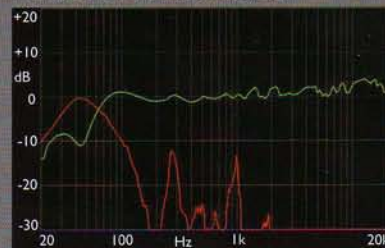
Sensitivity measured a normal 87dB, good considering an unusually high impedance of 8 Ohms, partly due to a high basic d.c. resistance value of 6.8 Ohms. The loudspeaker is a fairly

easy load, although it is very reactive at low frequencies.

Distortion measured 4% at 40Hz but this was a peak, distortion sinking to 1% at 50Hz. Above this it sank to less than 0.2% up to 6kHz, a good result.

The Liuto has been designed to sound clear and fast, as well as highly detailed. It will, however, have obvious and 'bouncy' bass. NK

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



Green - driver output
Red - port output

IMPEDANCE

