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## EQUIPMENT PREVIEW

# Sonus faber Fenice

by Jason Kennedy



**S**onus faber has placed itself firmly on the super high end map with a product that you cannot buy – unless you are one of the lucky 30 who has already bought. In June, this most Italian of loudspeaker companies chose the Punta Della Dogana museum in Venice to launch its most ambitious speaker to date. The Fenice or 'phoenix' is a 1.7 metre tall, 300kg creation that incorporates some completely new thinking and delivers a sound that is likely to totally change our ideas about Sonus faber, and what might follow, so the Fenice is a preview of future events, as much of a review of effectively unattainable products.

What, you might wonder, has prompted this well-respected maker of refined and beautifully built loudspeakers to branch out in such radical fashion. This is almost certainly a consequence of new management which was introduced to the company by its owner Quadrivio SGR, an Italian private-equity firm that purchased Sonus faber in 2007 and which also owns Audio Research. Sonus faber's CEO Mauro Grange has achieved remarkable things with the company's turnover in the year that he has been there, and he has clearly inspired the R&D team to

*“He has clearly inspired the R&D team to push the limits of loudspeaker technology.”*

push the limits of loudspeaker technology as far as it could; cost no object seems to have been the theme. Something that has resulted in a variety of radical ideas that are being introduced in this €140,000+ loudspeaker. Of which only 30 pairs are being made and these have all apparently been pre-sold, which doesn't come as a surprise given that Sf has more than 30 distributors worldwide.

So what makes a Sonus faber cost this much? The most unusual thing about it is the clamshell design of the cabinet. Sf's head of R&D Paolo Tezzon told us that he wanted to create a “silent case, a cabinet that introduces ▶





▶ no spurious noises or distortion to the sound.” In order to do this his team combined curved side panels in laminated wood with cast aluminium endcaps which clamp the wood. A shaft is used to pull the endcaps together and Tezzon describes this as a ‘soul pole’, it allows the 40kg endcaps to form a tuned mass damper. Such things are usually found at the top of skyscrapers to stop them swaying in the wind and in F1 cars to keep them glued to the road but are equally useful in stopping resonances in a loudspeaker.

Those laminated sidepanels are not all they seem either, they are in fact two sections with a visco elastic layer in between which creates that most fashionable of resonance killers a constrained layer damper. Engineer Joseph Szall introduced the drive units for the Fenice, the tweeter is a Larsen/Goeller ring radiator which is decoupled from the cabinet with visco elastic, approach also seen with the distinctive looking 6.5inch midrange. This has a pulp cone that uses papyrus in its construction and is driven by what Sf describes as a ‘well hung’ magnet system. What really differentiates it however is the chassis that is machined from avional and bronze gun metal, it looks so good it’s a pity to hide it. Bass is provided by a pair of 10inch sandwich drivers using cellulose pulp skins and a syntactic foam core to create a stiff but light cone. A three inch voice coil ensures plenty of control. For the lowest octaves each Fenice has a side firing infra-bass driver in the ‘king of diameters’ which according to Sonus faber is 15inches. This is also a sandwich unit but with nano carbon fibre skins and a four inch voice coil.

In most speakers that would be more than enough drivers but this is not most speakers. Umberto Nicolao also from R&D explained the soundfield shaper which is a two way loudspeaker that’s built into the back of the Fenice and designed to add depth to the soundstage. A soundstage that you can adjust at that, a panel on the back offers variable depth and azimuth as well as the output level of the infra bass driver.

To stop this monster speaker from shaking the house down the machined aluminium base sits not on spikes but on magnetically isolating feet, or ‘zero vibration transmission technology’. The first example of this approach that I’ve seen on a production loudspeaker. Another technology that Sf has developed for the Fenice is its ‘stealth reflex system’ which it is in the process of patenting,

this is described as a para-aperiodic tuning system which provides the usual advantages of reflex loading but nullifies port noise.

The aesthetics of this beautiful beast were created by Paolo Villa who describes the idea the design thus: “The lyre shape is also the shape of opera houses such as La Fenice in Venice. The Phoenix element, along with its analogies with the sphynx, were important sources of inspiration.” The lyre shape can be found if you look at the speaker from above but you are more likely to be distracted by the superb finish on the wooden panels, the leather trim on the baffles and the machining of the endcaps. All elements that are produced by Sonus faber and its partners in north east Italy. The company is very keen to emphasise the craftsmanship of its products and feels that the skills of its workers are the lifeblood of the company. Something that’s true of other companies within this industry but not something that gets enough credit because so much focus is placed on technology.

The Fenice represents a huge amount of work for Sonus faber and you can be sure

*“Mauro Grange promised four new speakers and if those models don’t feature the ideas seen in the Fenice, I’ll eat my hat.”*

that it will follow a trend started by B&W when it trickled down its 800 series technology into more affordable models. Mauro Grange promised another launch this year and a further three next year and if those models don’t feature the ideas seen in the Fenice, I’ll eat my hat. As the company says in the lavish tome it produced for this speaker “A Sonus faber has never previously been design considering such a multitude of ‘points of view’.” While the Fenice is hardly rising from ashes it has raised the status of this Italian company to a whole new level.+