

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO REVIEW MAGAZINE

Volume 11 / Number 2 April - June 2017 £17 (UK)

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Pass Labs INT-60
Fostex PC100USB-HR2
Rupert Neve RNHP
Naim Uniti Core
Jordan Aurora 800
Marantz SA-10
Auralic Aries
Sennheiser HD 800 S
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AVM Inspiration CS2.2
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MUNICH REPORT

Jason Kennedy reports highlights from the massive 2017 Munich High End show

HDMI CABLE COMPARISON

Jon Thompson uncovers amazing sound quality differences between HDMI cables

SPEAKER DISTRIBUTION

Keith Howard on controlling speaker directionality through DSP and active drive

NAIM UNITI CORE

Martin Colloms examines Naim's new reference hard-disk ripper/server

MARANTZ SA-10

Marantz' new reference series CD player takes upsampling to a new level

SONUS FABER OLYMPICA I

An elegant Sonus Faber stand-mount, assessed by Martin Colloms

MUSIC & MORE





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Published by

HIFICRITIC Ltd.

Registered in England No.6054617

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Printed in the UK by
Premier Print, London

HIFICRITIC is a printed publication available by subscription only.

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It might be more than fifty years since Bob Dylan originally wrote that ‘the times they are a changing’, yet that phrase is arguably even more relevant to the music business today. Sure, analogue vinyl will continue to steam on regardless, but the various digital sources are constantly evolving and coming up with new solutions. Indeed, one reason behind this editorial was a misunderstanding in the (virtual) office over naming the latest digital sources.

From the mid-1980s and for twenty or thirty years thereafter, Compact Disc was really the only digital audio game in town. However, as computer memories expanded and internet speeds increased, various alternatives presented themselves. In its early days computer audio gained a poor reputation, due to MP3 digital compression and the practice of ‘pirate’ file-sharing.

However, as internet speeds increased, the downloading of high resolution files became a reality. And at around the same time, hi-fi-oriented ‘servers’ started appearing as an alternative to the CD player. By connecting them to a home network with internet connection, comprehensive information can then be accessed using a smartphone or tablet, and the latter also controls the server. The idea is therefore to put one’s complete collection of CDs and other music files onto the server, primarily to improve access to the music.

The server may have its roots in computer technology, using a built-in hard disk (or solid state) drive, but it’s dedicated to ‘ripping’, recording and replaying music files to a hi-fi standard. Some may have built-in DACs, outputting stereo analogue signals for feeding to a conventional integrated amplifier or (pre-amp). Others may output digital music files, usually via S/PDIF connection, whereupon some form of external DAC will be required. This might be a standalone item, be built into amplification, or indeed some other component such as a streamer (or network music player as it’s also known).

The streamer is the latest digital audio device to appear (see feature on P48). In some ways it may be regarded as an extension from internet radio, albeit with software-based feedback from the receiver to the source. It essentially consists of tapping into a large and comprehensive library of music files that is stored on a server well away from the home network and accessed via the internet. Once again, a DAC may often be required to convert the digital datastream music file into the required stereo analogue signal, again separate or built-in.

Streaming first began when Spotify was launched nearly a decade ago, as either a free service with advertisements, or a subscription service without. Numerous rivals with various different offers have since appeared, arguably the most interesting being Qobuz and Tidal, which seem to be more sound quality oriented than the others. New services continue to appear, and existing ones increase the quality of their offerings.

My personal preference remains vinyl-oriented, though this may well be because my large collection dates back to the mid-1960s. And although I still find the sound quality of streaming a trifle ‘sub analogue’, I am impressed by the size of the libraries, as well as the convenience of the whole operation. Streaming vs vinyl is not an either/or thing, as the various means of accessing music are complementary, not conflicting. All add to the experience, as well as helping one to discover new music to enjoy.

Paul Messenger
Editor

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An elegant Sonus Faber stand-mount, assessed by Martin Colloms on page 42



Martin Colloms examines Naim's new reference hard-disk ripper/server on page 30

Sonus Faber Olympica I

A CHARACTERISTICALLY ELEGANT SONUS FABER STAND-MOUNT,
ASSESSSED BY MARTIN COLLOMS

HIFICRITIC
RECOMMENDED

Homage series apart, this £5,500 a pair stand-mount is Sonus Faber's top compact model. The quoted price includes bolt-on stands finished in satin black alloy, with long and lockable floor spikes milled from stainless steel. We reviewed the larger floorstanding *Olympica II* in 2014, *HIFICRITIC Vol8 No4*), and the series includes a centre channel and an even larger *Olympica III* floorstander.

With its gently asymmetric profile, this speaker looks most elegant on its matching support, the assembly showing a firm commitment to the best of Italian style and finish, the vertically corded pillar decoration matching the now characteristic corded loudspeaker grille. Bi-wire connections are electrically joined with plated jumper strips, and the binding posts will take either spades or 4mm plugs. Knurled bolts allow failsafe fixing of the enclosures to the small stand top plates.

This two-way design has a 150mm (6in) bass/mid driver with a complex pulp mix and a doped surface. It's partnered by a larger than usual 30mm soft dome tweeter, with a rather sharp central spike on alloy arms, which actually clamps the dome centre; the result is a sort of ring radiator. Both drivers are nicely blended into the elegantly faceted, low diffraction enclosure profile. Although some less costly loudspeaker models are made in China, the *Olympica* series are of all-Italian build.

This is a bass reflex design, which is considered important to improve the dynamics and power handling of a small speaker system such as this. The low frequency port is structured as a vertical slot at the rear of the enclosure, terminated in a patterned array of small holes drilled through a narrow but quite long stainless steel cover plate. Under heavy bass drive the ports can be heard blowing if near the enclosure, but less so at the listening location, and those small apertures will add some resistive damping to the bass port. On the tall stand, with slightly shortened spikes towards the rear and the speaker located 67cm from the floor, the designed primary axes are directed a little above seated head level.

Built of dark, solid walnut sections, the enclosure has a beautiful satin finish and is just slightly asymmetric in plan, subtly identifying the left and right hand models of the pair. Auditioning with these deliberately reversed revealed very little difference in

sound quality – perhaps slightly more bass was audible with the ports oriented outward, compared with the alternative inward orientation.

Audiophile build touches found on the electrical filter network include the use of selected film-and-oil capacitors from Mundorf and low-loss Janzen inductors, crossing over at a lower than usual 2.5kHz thanks to the larger than usual tweeter diaphragm.

For the record, Sonus Faber is a principal component of the formerly Italian *Fine Sounds* audio conglomerate. It's now called the McIntosh Group and its head office is located in New York. Associated audio brands include Audio Research, McIntosh, Sumiko and Wadia Digital.

Sound Quality

My main 25 x 35ft L-shaped room is larger than most, so I located the *Olympica I*s in a rather smaller listening area, taking care to match the lower frequency output to this space and the more intimate nearer field listening location I chose.

These loudspeakers could play quite loudly with good control, and some potential purchasers may not need or wish for more. Smaller classical works were most convincing in terms of soloists' subtlety and expression, and larger orchestral forces sounded spacious, articulate and well focused. Like a classic BBC monitor, heavy rock material quickly showed limitations in bass extension and dynamic headroom, but classical arrangements, particularly those using violins, were especially good, and somehow seemed to convey the spirit of the designer.

There were delightful moments, where the initially heard suggestion of a mild boxy coloration (rather unlike a BBC studio monitor) was soon blended into a convincing and involving delivery, with spacious imaging and notably unflagging musicality. Especially memorable was the appropriately and delightfully honeyed rendition of the *Moon Is Made Of Gold* from Rickie Lee Jones' *Balm in Gilead*. Conversely it also made a good fist (at non-thrash volume levels) of the Elbow track *Little Beast* from *Asleep in the Back*. It also seemed to suit 1980s jazz very well, from Davis, Garbarek, Corea *et al*.

It goes almost without saying that Neville Marriner's evergreen Vivaldi *Four Seasons* (Decca) sounded very spacious, with very delicately rendered harpsichord continuos by Simon Preston. The low



diffraction form and small source size helped provide welcome well defined image focus, together with a spacious and nicely layered soundstage. Listener fatigue was low with this smoothly integrated and well balanced sound.

Conclusions

It is clear that the *Olympica I* has been tailored to sound spacious and natural in a domestic room and not an anechoic chamber. Timbres are natural and relaxed, and the sound is well focused, free from fatigue, and is sympathetic to musical values. Arguably ill suited to heavy rock, other types of music including jazz, classical, folk and choral material fared very well, and for accuracy, build quality and those notably relaxed musical timbres it may be confidently recommended.

Test Results

The many good test results obtained with this loudspeaker clearly show that it is accurately manufactured. The frequency responses are a relatively uniform $\pm 2.5\text{dB}$, 50Hz to a well extended 24kHz, while the left and right hand examples are very

well matched, helping promote sharp image focus.

The bass reflex tuning is correctly over-damped to align helpfully with the usual room gain at lower frequencies, here providing in-room bass extension to 45Hz. While 75W/ch is a fair power rating, and clarity begins to fade when the speaker is driven hard, it takes higher powers gracefully without the intrusion of spurious noises – it's more of a mild compression than identifiable distortion.

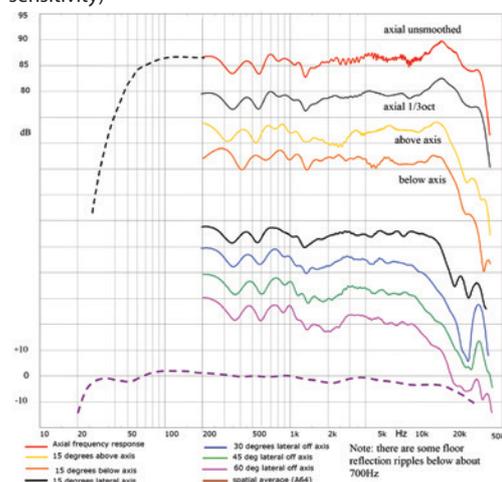
Sensitivity is a close-to-average of 86.5dB/W, which is commendably close to the specification, though it is achieved with a 4ohm rather than 8ohm impedance load. As a 4ohm specified design the minimum value of 2.1ohms is satisfactory, but because in theory it should not fall below 3.2ohms, it will therefore better suit amplifiers that are comfortable delivering plenty of current, and will operate best with low resistance speaker cables.

Maximum sound level in room for a pair is 102dBA, suited to smaller rooms. However, provided it's not overdriven by using heavy rock material at high levels, it drove my chosen room area with pleasingly natural timbres and very good spaciousness.

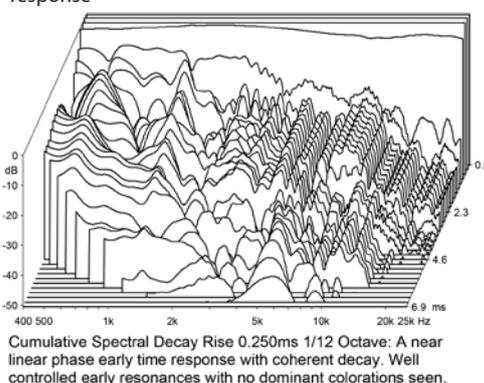
The Review System

Townshend *Allegri* (passive auto-transformer pre-amp), Naim *NAP500DR*, *NAP300DR* (power amplifiers). Naim *SuperLine* phono stage, Linn *LP12* player with *Keel* chassis and *Radikal* motor control, Naim *Aro* arm, Lyra *Delos* cartridge (analogue source). Naim *UnitiServe* network server and S/PDIF source, Naim *NDS Streamer-DAC* with *555 PS(DR)* (digital sources). Magico *S5II*, Quad *ESL63*, BBC *LS3/5a* (loudspeakers). Naim *FRAIM* racks; Transparent *MM2* and Naim *NAC A5* speaker cables, Naim *Super Lumina*, Transparent *MM2* and Van Den Hul *Carbon TFU* interconnect cables.

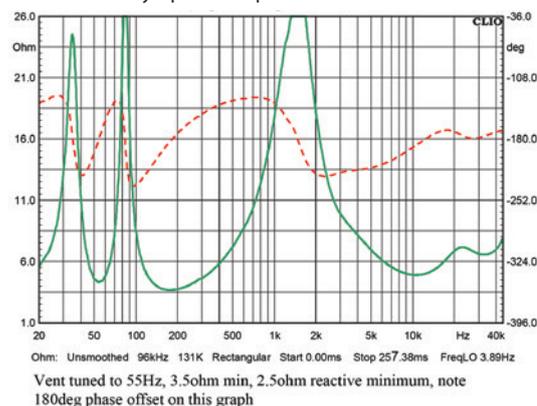
Sonus Faber Olympica 1: Frequency Responses (86.5dB/W sensitivity)



Sonus Faber Olympica 1: Waterfall display of decay response



Sonus Faber Olympica 1: Impedance and Phase



Manufacturer's Specifications

Brand	Sonus Faber
Country of manufacture	Italy
Model	Olympica I
Finishes	Satin Veneer, Walnut or Graphite
Size (HxWxD),	35.4x22.2x36.8 cms (plus stand)
Weight	9.5kg
Type	2-way 15cm pulp cone bass/mid, 29mm soft dome (central stabiliser) tweeter, damped reflex
Sensitivity	86.5dB @1m (2.83V)
Amplifier loading	Min 2.1 ohms; (specified 4ohms)
Frequency response axial	50Hz- 24kHz ± 2.5 dB (listener axis) (very good tolerance)
Frequency response off-axis	Very good see graphs and in-room response
Bass extension	45Hz -6dB, (40Hz, in-room limit)
Max loudness, in-room	102dBA for a stereo pair
Power (max, min)	75W, 20W
Placement	Floorstanding on supplied stands, located in free space
Price (pair)	£5,500 (inc. stands)

Contact: Absolute Sounds
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Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

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AUDIO AND MUSIC JOURNAL

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Martin Colloms, Publisher

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I reviewed an interesting and rather different little speaker called a *JERN14 DS* in the last issue. Its most obvious feature is a curvaceous enclosure made from cast iron, an immensely tough and extremely heavy material that also has effective self-damping, due to a relatively high graphite content. And because the tiny enclosure encompasses just 3.7litres and is also a sealed box, it's specifically designed to roll off below 100Hz and be operated alongside one (or more) subwoofers.

During the course of that review, I mentioned that one intention of the designer (one Ole Lund Christensen) was to create more upmarket models using the cast iron enclosures. I had assumed that these would have different drive units, but in fact the drivers are the same, and the modifications that distinguish the £2,500 *JERN14 ES* from its lesser *DS* sibling lie elsewhere.

Three changes distinguish the *ES* from the *DS* version. First, it uses thicker wire for the series inductor that's part of the crossover network, improving the damping factor with modern solid state amplification. Internal cables are also now of higher quality and a thicker gauge than those used in the *DS* model. And a slug of high quality lambswool has been inserted into the space behind the main drive unit, in order to damp the velocity component of the rearward sound wave.

Incidentally, when I visited the Munich show in May I discussed the use of a cast iron enclosure with the designer from another brand. He questioned the use of a magnetic material like iron as an enclosure, a point that I hadn't even considered. But Christensen had, and had also figured out how to handle such a situation.

While wandering the show, I noticed several other variations on the *JERN* theme. One involves a new spherical casting that forms the base of a stand, initially converting the 'satellite' speaker into a three-way (the *JERN 63 AH*, with an additional 200mm bass unit), and ultimate plans for active bass drive.

However, there are now no fewer than six different 'satellite' *JERN* range models. All share the same small-but-very-heavy, sealed-box, teardrop-shape, cast-iron enclosure, but that's all. The three versions designated *JERN 14* are specifically intended for use alongside subwoofers in largish rooms. The two *JERN 15* models are intended for use alone in smaller rooms, as the bass extends down to 60Hz alongside a somewhat lower sensitivity (86dB/W/4ohms rather than 88dB).

(The sole *JERN 16 AH* is the top model in the range, intended to be used with a subwoofer but using different drivers from the *JERN 14s*.)

I attempted to compare the *ES* and the *DS* versions of the *JERN 14s*, initially without using any subwoofery (and without any great success at first either). The two versions are certainly very similar, though my wife immediately picked the *ES* version as superior in the upper part of the vocal range, because she had noticed that some colorations were significantly more obvious when using the less costly *DS* version. That was certainly true when using music sources, though it was rather more difficult to distinguish between the two versions using speech.

I have to say that although it does certainly exist, the difference between the *ES* and the *DS* versions is rather small. Whether it's worth the difference in price might be somewhat debatable, but the overall package is excellent value for money.

That's because the combination of compact cast-iron satellite speakers with one or more simple powered sealed-box REL *T5i* subwoofers gets very close indeed to the state of the art, at a fraction of either the price or the size of a serious stereo speaker system.