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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Sonus Faber Liuto Tower loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom



Sonus faber's Liuto range, the replacement for the popular Domus line, stands between the entry level Toy range (not the best name; they aren't Toys but legitimate loudspeakers in their own right) and the Classic series and the Homage series above that. There are a standmount, a floorstander and a centre channel in the Liuto series, and the standmount and floorstander are available in two finishes. We looked at the wood-finish tower speaker.

Sonus faber is well-known and well-respected for its finish and the company has been very shrewd about the way these ranges are put together. The Toy series is leather-wrapped, but a smooth, box or barred black leather. The leather finish on the other ranges is embossed, almost like a Morocco grain. The Liuto series adds natural walnut or black piano gloss finish, the Classic brings lacquer to the party and the Homage series shows what happens when you tell musical instrument makers to make a piano lacquer finish. Each range is beautifully finished in its own right, but if you spend more, you get more. Of all the speakers in the current lines (except, of course, for the Minima Vintage), the Liuto wood speakers look most like classic Sonus fabers.

Everything about this speaker bespeaks class and luxury. The speakers coming in their own covers inside the box, the elegantly laid out kit of parts, the overall fit and finish of even the single set of custom-made multi-type speaker terminals... all of this sets the speaker apart from the norm. It's a loudspeaker that your friends will look appreciatively on and comment on how fine (and expensive) it looks.

The Liuto lines are of 'restrained elegance'. Liuto is 'lute' in Italian and the speaker shares the distinctive lute-shaped panels (ribbed internally for added stiffness and listening pleasure, double entendre ▶

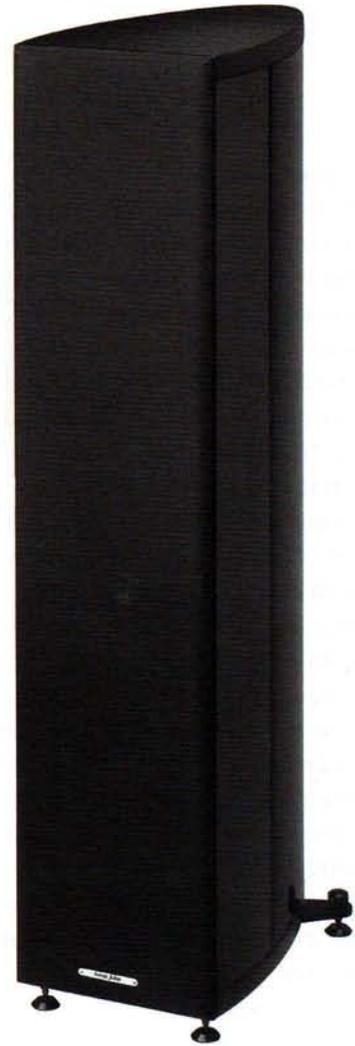
▶ entirely intended) of many Sonus faber designs, but its fine proportions and overall fit and finish will make it acceptable in homes where a glossy lacquered cherry or maple finish could look garish. The piano black is refined while the natural walnut finish blends well with furniture that doesn't feature on the cover of *Homes & Gardens*. The rear outrigger to hold the back set of spikes is the only line-breaker, but even this doesn't ruin the overall look.

“Good imaging and a big soundstage are Sonus faber family traits, but the Liuto shines even by those standards.”

The Liuto Tower is a rear ported three-way design, using drive units built to the company's specifications. All three drivers call on a different material specification; the 25mm tweeter is a soft fabric dome, the midrange is a 150mm polypropylene/textile cone and the 220mm bass unit is an aluminium/magnesium affair, complete with 'coaxial anti-compressor' or flattened phase-plug finished in an elegant golden-brass. Recently, Sonus faber has been using smaller ring radiator tweeters in its models, but the low crossover point on that fast woofer (350Hz) meant the midrange driver reaches its upper limits sooner and the larger 25mm tweeter has to kick in at around 3kHz, a tough call for the smaller tweeter. Sonus faber uses a second-order crossover design, with a claimed accent on time alignment. The result is a loudspeaker with a relatively high sensitivity (89dB suggested) a nominal impedance of eight ohms, and in use it seemed to be delightfully untroubled in flirting with integrateds and power amps of all shapes and sizes. Sonus suggests amps with less than 40W and more than 250W on tap should be avoided and I'd agree with those ratings. This isn't the loudspeaker for flea-powered triode or Tripath amps.

The speaker is domestically friendly, in that it needs a good set-up, but doesn't demand micrometer precision installations. That said, the speakers work best when carefully leveled and it seems particularly important to get tweeter height uniform. A good trick here is to use the front baffle as guide, as the top plate is gently curved. Where the Liuto towers get demanding is in room size. They need a deceptively large room to come to life, as they seem to need a lot of distance from side walls. Curiously for a rear-ported speaker, distance to the wall behind the speakers is less important (a metre or less is fine) but the Liutos appear to require a good 3m between the speakers and about 1.5m from the side walls.

There's a reason or two for so much air needed around the speakers. The first is the soundstage. It's vast and family friendly. This has the sort of off-axis performance usually found in coaxial drive units, meaning the Liuto isn't the sort of speaker that confines you the driver's seat. Get up, walk around, dance, invite friends and family into the Audio Lair... everyone gets the good



stereo soundstage. Good imaging and a big soundstage are Sonus faber family traits, but the Liuto shines even by those standards. ▶

The Liuto are not your typical Sonus faber loudspeaker in other ways, too. Or at least, they are not your typical current Sonus faber loudspeaker. They have a touch of the old school Sonus about the presentation, in all the right ways. Early model Sonus speakers had a 'how does it do that?' ability with the bass; a grip, drive and depth that made people grow passionate about models like the Elector Amator and the Extrema. That a mini monitor could deliver so much bottom end energy came as something of a shock.

Same here.

In most cases, once you make a pair of loudspeakers that have useful energy below 40Hz, the size – and cost of the enclosure – rises while the ability to keep time falls. In other words, bottom octave bass demands big, slow and expensive loudspeakers. While the Liuto are not exactly Poundstretcher speakers, the speakers overall size in no way suggests there's a lot of tight, deep bass on tap. Even the spec sheet points to 40Hz as the bottom of the frequency response. But there's real earthmoving stuff going on here; the kind of bass that makes you reach for Dub Syndicate and Leftfield tracks, and even some bad-boy KLF beats. Oh boy – subterranean, gut-churning, powerful, deep, deep bass. The sort of bass that either comes with a health warning, or is a part of a far bigger, more expensive speaker design. Full range? Not quite, but close enough for most people.

This inexorably leads to the other big feather in the Liuto's fretboard. The Liuto's bass unleashes the animal in you, and it doesn't disappoint. Out come the sturm und drang albums, Mahler's Eighth, Bach's organ works, BBC Sessions of John Bonham beating merry hell out of a drum kit while the rest of Led Zep try to hold on, Basie's orchestra playing at maximum tightness, maximum energy. The stuff that's almost a guilty pleasure, because you play it loud and play it to show off your system, even if only to yourself.

Pretty soon, you find yourself air guitaring along to AC/DC and singing to Guns 'n' Roses 'Paradise City'. Then you stop and take stock... this is a Sonus faber you've just spent a few merry hours headbanging along with. And Sonus faber speakers are warm and polite, aren't they? Well, that's the point. The Liutos can do warm and polite if you give them warm and polite, or they can play to your animal side. Or both.

Closer analysis (when the monkey lord is put back in his place) reveals the reason why they do both so well is because the balance is rich and dynamic enough to make delicate sounds charming and make loud sound 'natural' instead of 'raucous'. Note that I said *sound* natural instead of just natural; put up against a pair of neutral transducers on a par with the Liutos and you'll hear where the bass trades depth for accuracy and where it gets out of line. You'll also probably become more aware of the Liuto Tower's driver crossover points, because those accurate speakers will possibly have better integration across the board; the Liuto is very good from speaker to speaker, but you can hear better. However, the net result of any such comparison with the notionally 'more accurate transducer' in most cases would be to put it back and rock out with the Liutos.

What's truly remarkable about the Sonus faber Liuto Tower is that fun factor never wanes. You'll always want to come back for more and one track will inevitably lead on to the next. If you want to fill a big room with big sound but don't need a huge speaker, the Liuto is as sound as a pound (but preferably not sterling). +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way vented box

Drivers: 25mm fabric dome tweeter,

150mm polypropylene/textile midrange dome, 200mm aluminium/magnesium alloy woofer

Frequency response: 40Hz–25kHz

Sensitivity: 89dB

Impedance: 8 ohm

Dimensions (HxWxD): 103.1x23.6x41.3cm

Weight: 30kg

Price: £3,371 per pair

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