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SONUS FABER

LIUTO MONITOR

Luxury loudspeaker that's easy on the eye and ear in equal measure

PRICE £1,690 per pair (stands £550 per pair) **CONTACT** Absolute Sounds ■ 020 8971 3909 ■ www.sonusfaber.com

Squint at our picture and you may just be able to make it out. The Liuto Monitor standmount loudspeaker takes its design cue from the lute, hinting that some serious musical prowess is on the cards. It's part of the three-strong Liuto range (Italian for lute): the Monitor reviewed here, a floorstanding variant – the Liuto Tower, plus a speaker called the Smart, which can be rotated for use as a general purpose or surround speaker.

Our Liuto was supplied with a pair of pedestal stands, made from wood with bolts supplied to fix the speakers and stands securely together. The stands have a wide footprint and come with carpet-piercing spikes.

Technically, this is a conventional design but it is a painstaking one with more than a hint of retro, in the time-honoured Sonus faber tradition. The supposedly lute-like shape that gives the speaker its name is intended to form a well-damped internal cavity, largely free from internal resonant modes.

The front panel is made from an amorphous material and then externally clad in leather – a Sonus faber trademark, helping to damp the baffle and reduce secondary radiation. The narrow rear panel appears to be made from the same material and the main side panel has a curved section, again for resonance control and to improve panel stiffness. Build quality and general fit and finish are of an undeniably high standard, applying to both the stands and the speakers.

Our test subject is a two-way, vertically oriented design that's clearly intended for stand-mounting, though it could be shelf-mounted at a pinch. Bass tuning is by a rear-facing reflex port, with the crossover described as a non-resonant second-order design (12dB/octave), with phase characteristics designed for optimal space/time performance.

A skim through the numbers tells a story of a loudspeaker that is modestly sensitive – 86dB/watt at one metre is about as good as you can reasonably expect from a speaker this size with any pretensions to useful bass output. Although the 55Hz bass limit given in the specifications doesn't make thrilling reading, the Liuto is more fully formed than you might expect. Impedance is 8ohms and the Liuto is said to be capable of handling up to 150 watts – all of which seems perfectly believable.

SOUND QUALITY

As is usual, we gave the speaker an extended run-in period and listened critically over a long review time-frame, allowing time to bed-in. Sure enough, the picture improved after more running-in, the turning point being the arrival of some remastered Esoteric-branded discs originally from the Decca archive.

This is historical analogue material, beautifully remastered that helps to highlight some of the best qualities of the Liuto Monitor. And if you want to take from this sensitivity to programme content a mute criticism of the Liuto, then so be it, but it's certainly not the whole story.

If you think you are beginning to see a pattern here and that there is some special synergy between the Liuto and analogue source material, then think again. First, although the Esoteric discs were sourced from analogue masters, they were encoded and played as SACDs. Second, the main amplifier used for this test is the remarkable – and wholly digital – Lyngdorf. There is certainly synergy at play here, but it is not limited to anything as simple-minded as any supposed superiority of analogue over digital.

This is a remarkably music-friendly loudspeaker. Although it doesn't impress instantly for its balls or its fiery temperament, it has something else going for it. The Esoteric SACDs, of course, are far from the only discs to show what's going on – they were simply the first to convincingly illustrate the qualities that lay under the skin. Without

“Without being demonstrative, there is a graceful musicality about this speaker that marks it out as special”

being especially demonstrative, there is a graceful musicality about this speaker that marks it out as special. There is a hint of extreme treble output loss – probably no

more than half a decibel or so at the upper limit of hearing – but the result is a speaker that sometimes speaks softly and one which has a particularly fine singing voice. We discovered this with favourite recordings such as Jennifer Warnes' *Famous Blue Raincoat*, as well as a Brahms and Mahler lieder recording from a recent freebie magazine cover-mount disc.

In the best sense, this is a speaker that is easy on the ear. At first there were suggestions of boxiness, but they dissipated quickly enough, leaving a quality that, if it underlined anything, was the passion of fine music-making. We are also impressed with the Liuto's fine voicing at the low frequency end of the spectrum. It is no bass demon, of course, but is voiced in such a way that any objective lack of real bass goes practically unnoticed. The Liuto Monitor has a full, muscular voice and it projects a well-scaled image, with a natural sense of image placement.

It is not the tightest or most dynamic speaker in its class, nor does it offer the super sharp imagery of many recent high-tech designs, but, there's no doubt that the Liuto Monitor is one of the most relaxed and, above all, one of the most musical in its class. This lute may cost a lot of loot – enough money, in fact, to buy any number of decent-quality floorstanding loudspeakers with deeper bass, higher maximum output levels and greater sensitivity – but for beautiful design and sheer musicality, the Liuto is worth the expense. ■■

Alvin Gold

See the August 2009 edition of *Hi-Fi Choice* for the original review of this product

