

Sonus faber Serafino Tradition

The 'entry-level' floorstander of Sonus faber's Homage Tradition series is much more than a shrunk-down Amati
 Review: Nick Tate Lab: Keith Howard

Anyone familiar with Sonus faber will love the superlative craftsmanship of the Vicenza-based company's loudspeakers. Although pretty much all high-end designs are extremely well turned out these days, this Italian company remains on another level – producing speakers that resemble art pieces, rather than just big boxes trying to look expensive.

For a while, some thought that the brand had become *too* synonymous with visually arresting designs – almost acquiring the sense that form overrode function. In recent years however, the sonic performance bar of Sonus faber loudspeakers has been raised significantly, and they're right there in the fray – fighting it out with the very best of the rest...

LA BELLA FIGURA

It is loudspeakers such as the Serafino that carry this solemn responsibility. Its name literally translates as 'seraph' in English – a celestial or heavenly being. Costing a whisker under £18,000 per pair, it's a beautiful high-end product for which no excuses need be made, the very embodiment of the Italian aesthetic of *la bella figura*.

The woodwork is flawless, with deep colour, superb texture and an immaculate lacquer surfacing. Reminiscent of a luxury yacht's exquisite wooden hull, there's a choice of Wengè finish with maple inlays, and a Red finish. This counterpoints with brushed aluminium in a choice of titanium or black finishes respectively, with Sonus faber's traditional front baffle finished in coffee or black leather.

The Serafino may look like a slightly smaller version of the Amati Tradition [*HFN* Oct '17] but in the flesh it still feels big, and it's soon obvious that a lot of work has gone into its design. A large 3.5-way system, it is said to be a full para-aperiodic vented box and has a striking rear end

treatment – the back panel is an aluminium extrusion that forms both part of the speaker's exoskeleton, and also part of its so-called Stealth Ultraflex system where the port ducts are lined to reduce turbulence [see *HFN* Jun '15].

The drive units are all Sonus faber's own of course, the tweeter being the H28 XTR-04, which many audiophiles will surely know is a 28mm silk dome, complete with a natural wood 'acoustic labyrinth' rear chamber. This crosses over to the M15 XTR-04 midrange unit at 2.5kHz – this being a 150mm diameter design complete with neodymium magnet system. At 250Hz the first of two Sonus faber W18XTR-08 woofers pitches in, both with 180mm cones made from a syntactic foam core between external surface skins of cellulose pulp. At 80Hz, the second joins the party.

As it's such a sizeable thing, you might expect the Serafino to be fairly efficient, and the manufacturer does indeed claim a sensitivity of 90dB that was largely met in our tests [see Lab Report, p65]. Alongside its 350W power handling rating, the speaker is obviously designed to go very loud. So while you'll need a large-ish listening room for these 52kg cabinets it's worth knowing that their bass is readily 'tunable' by positioning.

BRISTLING WITH DETAIL

From the moment you fire up this loudspeaker, it's clear that you're listening to something special. It simply does not sound like most examples of the breed, regardless of size or price. There's a certain vibrancy that makes pretty much any type of music you play through it unerringly good fun. Recordings feel

RIGHT: Sonus faber's 28mm 'Arrow Point' DAD tweeter is married to a 150mm mid unit and two 180mm sandwich-coned woofers. Alloy outriggers improve cabinet stability





PAYING HOMAGE

From the vast Aida [HFN Apr '12] to the compact and far more affordable Chameleon B, Sonus faber has a dizzyingly wide range of loudspeakers, serving an equally wide range of customers and budgets. The Serafino is part of its premium Homage Tradition Collection, described as a 'reinterpretation' of the earlier Homage series. It comprises four loudspeakers – the range-topping Amati floorstander [HFN Oct '17]; the compact standmount Guarneri; the Vox centre channel and the newest Serafino Tradition reviewed here. All share different permutations of Sonus faber's 28mm 'Arrow Point' tweeter, its 150mm mid-driver and/or 180mm or 220mm bass driver(s). The large 3.5-way Serafino is said to pay homage to Sanctus Seraphin, a lute master who worked in Venice during the first half of the 18th century. Clearly modelled on the Amati, the Serafino is about 10% smaller and 10kg lighter but shares a very similar technical performance [see KH's Lab Report, p65].

alive, bristling with detail and nuance – with the Serafino, Sonus faber appears to have mastered the secret of making highly transparent loudspeakers that are nonetheless extremely musically engaging. It is powerful, shows great poise, and yet is also the life and soul of the party. This isn't the most common of combinations, as many will know.

ROCK-SOLID

For example, feed it a clean slice of well-recorded classic pop music, such as Malcolm McLaren's 'House Of The Blue Danube' [from *Waltz Darling*; Epic 460736 2], and one is instantly struck by the physicality of the loudspeaker. It is not one of the largest I've encountered, yet it appears to be able to shift vast amounts of air with utter ease. The song's thumping electronic bass line – beautifully syncopated with snare drums and hi-hats from the drum machine – proved a joy to listen to. This speaker is able to excavate from deep down low and pound out huge amounts of low frequency information. Yet it remains rock-solid, as if the drive units were set into the cliff face of some windswept coastal cove!

Life is made all the more fun by the Serafino's excellent, lens-like midband, highly focused and detailed yet delicate. It doesn't assault the listener with midrange detail, rather it dissolves and lets the recording speak for itself. This classic '80s Trevor Horn production sounded really pacy, and with a lovely lustre and sparkle to the proceedings. Swap to more modern

electro from Gorillaz' 'Clint Eastwood' [from *G Sides*; Parlophone TOCP-65932] and the same attributes shine through. This recording is dramatically different, instantly showing how dated the previous one is, yet the Serafino works the same magic. It lets the listener right into the mix, where he or she can delight in what's going on with heady abandon. The infectious way that it handles rhythms, down to its great transient speed, makes it all the more seductive – as does the great thump from the bass drivers when, and *only* when, it

is called for. So the Serafino is something of a gentle giant for despite being 'big boned', it's supple and agile too.

The midband isn't just excellent in two dimensions;

this loudspeaker images extremely well in three! Grant Green's 'Ease Back' [from *Carryin' On*; Blue Note CDP 7243 8 31247 2 5] is a beautiful slice of late '60s jazz, with strong funk overtones. All Blue Note releases from that period seem to have superb stereo soundstages, and this is no exception.

LIKE BEING THERE

Through the Serafino it was writ large in the air of the listening room, seemingly escaping through its boundary walls. The great midband focus really helped here, locating instruments accurately in space. The music sounded wonderfully vibrant, funky and full sized – the recorded acoustic was really well carried. Even at lowish volumes, the Serafino conjured up a really believable sense of being there at the time of the recording, immersing you in the atmosphere of a great ➔

'Powerful, but with great poise, it is also the life and soul of the party'

SONUS FABER SERAFINO TRAD.

If you're trying to decide whether to buy the Amati Tradition [HFN Oct '17] or this, its smaller sibling, there's little to choose between them in measured performance. The Amati Tradition offers a little more bass extension and will almost certainly go a little louder but otherwise the Serafino Tradition runs it close. Both have a specified 90dB sensitivity: we measured 89.6dB on pink noise for the Serafino (against 89.5dB for the Amati). Both have a nominal impedance of 4ohm but the Serafino is slightly easier to drive, despite its modulus dropping to a low of 3.0ohm (3.2ohm for the Amati). Better control of impedance phase angles at LF means that the Serafino's minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) is 1.9ohm at 272Hz, 0.2ohm higher than the Amati's.

The Serafino's forward frequency response [Graph 1, below] – measured at 1m on the tweeter axis – is very similar to its stablemate's, both displaying a ~2dB presence band suckout followed by rising output to 20kHz. The Serafino's response errors are slightly lower at ±4.3dB and ±4.5dB but with both speakers the response can be flattened by listening a little off-axis. Pair matching, over the same 300Hz to 20kHz frequency range, was a tight ±0.6dB for the Serafino, better than for the Amati (±1.4dB). Only in bass extension does the Serafino fall a little short: our diffraction-corrected nearfield measurement showed 48Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz), just one-fifth of an octave higher than the 42Hz of the Amati. Both can be improved in-room by careful exploitation of boundary gain. The CSD waterfall [Graph 2, below] is also similar for the two speakers, showing a couple of low-treble breakup resonances. KH

LEFT: Trickled down from the Liliun and Il Cremonese, the three ports in the Serafino's alloy spine form Sonus faber's 'Stealth Ultraflex' low frequency tuning. Split crossover offers bi-wiring/bi-amping

very finest speakers can criticism be levelled at the Serafino, and even here designs that do better in one respect may be inferior in others.

So, with 4hero's 'Give In' [from *Play With The Changes*; Raw Canvas Records RCRC02] I did find the tweeter sounding just a little 'tinselly' – just failing to achieve that ultra-quiet, fade back-into-nothingness sort of sound that you get, for example, from a top ribbon design. And yet the better the recording, the more this loudspeaker rises to the occasion. And partnered with the finest ancillaries it is capable of spectacular results.

THAT NTH DEGREE

It's the last few percent of the recording that it captures so well. Lesser speakers may give a good account of this, yet the Serafino Tradition goes right in and gets the last *n*th degree of detail out. At the same time, it keeps the music lilting and melodic – so I loved the superb string timbres and tone (always a Sonus faber speciality) in the Mahler, the delightful handling of the flute trills and the great sense of all component parts of the orchestra playing together in the Barbican Hall in 2011.

There's so much right with this speaker that is almost churlish to complain, and if you want a really capable big box that covers all the bases, there's little to compare. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

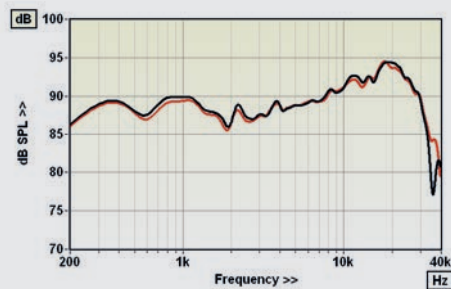
Considering its price, Sonus faber's new Serafino should be a superlative loudspeaker, and so it proves. It's not absolutely distinguished in any one area, yet is so impressive across such a wide range of performance parameters that it makes an unbeatable case for itself, and against price rivals. This realistically-sized floorstander has huge panache and a quality of build and finish that puts many to shame. What's not to like?

Sound Quality: 86%

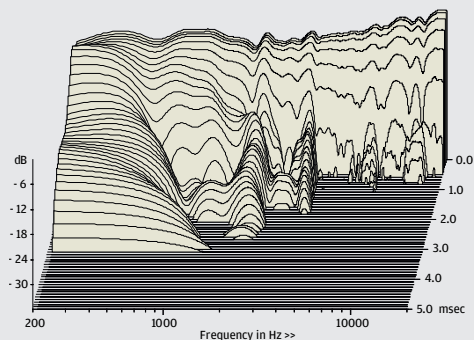


musical event. Aside from the quality of its drive units and the relative 'silence' of its cabinet, I think the tweeter's open, extended and spacious sound really helped out in this instance.

This loudspeaker's true quality is most apparent with classical music. The opening movement of Mahler's Symphony No 9 [LSO/Valery Gergiev; LSO Live LSO0730] showed the Serafino's sublimely textured string sound playing with vibrant woodwind and brass. Most striking of all, though, was the marvellously three-dimensional recorded acoustic and pinpoint imaging. All this time, the music was lilting and melodic, yet could really jump up and bite you with its dynamic power. Only when you put it up against the



ABOVE: The forward response's 'brightened' presence and treble can be tamed by toeing-in the speakers



ABOVE: Any cabinet resonances and mild break-up modes at 2-4kHz are quickly damped – a fine result

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	91.5dB/89.6dB/88.8dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.0ohm @ 151Hz 10.2ohm @ 2.5kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-28° @ 30Hz 30° @ 353Hz
Pair matching/Response Error (300Hz–20kHz)	±0.6dB/ ±4.3dB/±4.5dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	48Hz / 32.5kHz/34.4kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.7% / 0.2% / 0.5%
Dimensions (HWD)	1091x396x485mm