

Franco Serblin Accordo stand-mount loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

Designers come and go, but the true artisans and masters of an art... they are the 'once in a generation' folk. People talk about Stradivarius violins not just because of the output of generations of the Stradivari family, but specifically because of the work of Antonio Stradivari (1644-1737). In loudspeaker making, few true artisans had the same impact as Franco Serblin (1939-2013), and like all good masters of the art, his legacy lives on in the company that still bears his name. The Accordo from Franco Serblin is the distillation of a life spent making outstanding loudspeakers and exceptional two-way stand-mounts, made by family and friends (under the Laboratorium banner) in Vicenza, Italy.

Franco Serblin's name is forever associated with creating some of the best-loved designs of the 1980s and 1990s under the Sonus faber brand, including the Minima, Electa, Electa Amator, Guarneri Homage and the Extrema. There were other designs (such as the awesome Stradivari loudspeakers), but Franco Serblin made his mark as a producer of elegant-looking and excellent-sounding stand-mount loudspeakers.

Despite founding and running the company from 1983–2006 the Sonus faber brand has all but airbrushed Serblin from its history, although it does credit him with 'the Snail' loudspeaker from 1980 that predated the company. However, after leaving Sonus faber, Serblin continued to create elegant and fantastic sounding loudspeaker designs, and the move from an increasingly commercially-driven brand to an artisan company meant those designs could be created without keeping one eye on market segmentation, brand positioning or anything apart from making a damn good loudspeaker.

Enough about Franco Serblin (the man), let's talk about Franco Serblin (the loudspeakers). Starting with the first Ktêma floorstander – an elegant proscenium-arch style meeting of concave and convex – Franco Serblin models have a deceptively small front aspect that belies a lot of clever loudspeaker behind that front baffle. The Accordo – the second product from the brand – is a two-way standmount that is narrow at the front and wide at the rear (making it 'look' very narrow) and deceptively 'big' sound.

However, taking a design as complex as the Accordo from 'working prototype' to 'realised production model' without sacrificing performance or design – all the while not making the end-user cost prohibitive – is not an easy exercise and required a steep learning curve in production design. All of which goes some way to explain why a product first seen back in 2011 took years to make it to market. The long gestation period wasn't helped by the company's uncompromising stance toward products. For example,

those cabinets are solid walnut, air-dried in Vicenza for months to cure in the traditional way. Everything from the finish on the bolts to the internal wiring is subject to scrutiny that borders on the obsessive. That extends to the drive units; a 29mm silk dome tweeter and a 150mm sliced-cone mid-bass driver. These have a lot in common with classic products from that other Vicenza-based loudspeaker brand, although Sonus faber has largely moved to different driver technologies in recent years. There are other elements that show a common background, such as the elegant rubber strings used as a grille and the chrome accents, but that's only to be expected. However, this uncompromising stance means the only way to make designs like the Accordo without obsessing the business out of existence is to build to order in batches. Which means those of us wanting to try out a review sample had to get to the back of a very long waiting list.

Franco Serblin loudspeakers doesn't pump out yet another loudspeaker range every few months. It's more old school than that. As of the time of writing this review, the line-up comprises the Ktêma flagship, the Accordo two-way stand-mount and the small integrated Ligneà. However, soon they will be joined by the eagerly-anticipated Accordo Essence (effectively a floorstanding version of the Accordo). Also, abandon the notion of a 'Mark II' version from the brand; the concept remains get the product right from the outset. This idea has been core to the brand from the outset, meaning the current Franco Serblin designer Massimiliano Favella takes his job very seriously indeed.

We live in a world where loudspeakers are rectangular boxes and 'edgy' loudspeaker design is chamfering that rectangle to make something boat-backed or lute-shaped. The idea of 'handed' loudspeakers is typically reserved for moving a drive unit (typically) the tweeter away from the centreline of the front baffle, allowing the tweeters to be closer to the inner edge of the baffle for better imaging properties (it makes the tweeter seem more like a point source for the central image). The Accordo points to such a rudimentary design brief and giggles; unlike most loudspeakers, the Accordo's two cabinets 'mirror' one another in the same way your left foot 'mirrors' your right. From the top looking down, the Accordo are more like a large reversed quotation marks, meaning the front baffle is deliberately angled toward the listener, with the longest side wall pointing outward.

There are some exceptionally clever touches here, some of which have become more integral to other designs today, showing not only that the Accordo remains current, but just how forward-thinking and durable that original 2011 design has proved to be. For example, the integral stand that contains the crossover and low-slung output terminals was about as far from mainstream as it was possible to get even a few years ago, but manufacturers are increasingly approaching the stand of a stand-mount loudspeaker as an integral part of the design, with more aspects of the loudspeaker itself removed into its support system. The company wasn't the first to think of this concept, but it made it work and it made it look good... and that helped make the concept realised among the mainstream.

Accordo is dubbed 'A Tuneful Speaker' and this has dual meaning; it's 'tuneful' in the obvious musical sense, but it also speaks to its need to be relatively carefully 'tuned into' the room. Careful positioning and fine tuning of loudspeaker relative to walls and one another, and equally careful positioning and fine tuning of listening position reaps extraordinarily large rewards here; while always capable of delivering a 'good sounding' performance, spending a lot of time getting ▶





“The Accordo strikes a fine balance. Everything about the performance is a perfect ‘fit’.”

begin to see the classic elements of the Accordo peek through. With the exception of the original Extrema, Serblin’s classic creations were easy to drive designs, typically with only a lower than average sensitivity being the only ‘difficult’ part of the objective performance. The same really applies here; sensitivity is lower than average, but the rest of the speaker’s load wouldn’t tax any modern solid-state amplifier or well-designed valve amplifier.

Better yet, in the manner of those classics, the unforced ease and character of the Accordo helps to take some of the edginess from some of the current crop of exceptionally detailed amplifiers. If you find the sound of many modern audio systems a little too exaggerated, but don’t just want to go for a too rolled-off romantic sound of old, the Accordo strikes a fine balance. Everything about the performance is a perfect ‘fit’. The soundstage is large and three-dimensional without being overt and exaggerated. It’s big enough to handle orchestral passages with aplomb, but it’s more ‘string quartet’ than ‘Mahler’s Eighth’ by virtue of physical size. No record perhaps sums up the Accordo’s performance better than the Takács Quartet’s take on Beethoven’s late string quartets [Decca]. This is arguably the best of the comparatively recent recordings, albeit with closer microphones than classic 1950s Decca recordings.

▶ it in the right point has the potential to raise that sound to ‘the breath of angels’ levels. You’ll know when the alignment is just right; the music will stop; you’ll be struck dumb and the hairs on the back of your neck will do the speaking for you. In my room, this meant a wider than usual equilateral triangle arrangement, with a marked toe-in and the rear-port bungs in place. A centimetre’s movement made the difference between ‘that’s a nice-looking loudspeaker’ and ‘that’s a great-sounding loudspeaker that looks nice, too.’

However, seemingly somewhat paradoxically, that fine-tuning doesn’t apply quite so rigidly to the choice of partnering equipment. And, in fact, it’s here where we

However, the combination of soundstage, detail, microdynamic detail, and sheer musical passion the Accordo help bring out in this recording leaves you enthralled. While all those audiophile boxes are ticked in terms of detail retrieval, coherence, soundstage precision, and so on... beyond all that, you can hear why these pieces were so important and so beloved, and why many passionate classical music lovers place these recordings so highly.

There’s a subtle difference in language here that is too often blurred; the difference between ‘neutral’ and ‘natural’. In listening to the Accordo, you realise you can get both in the same loudspeaker, but at the extremes, ‘natural’ always wins out. I think for many that is precisely how it should be; while the carney barkers of audio will protest that absolute neutrality is the goal of every loudspeaker, the quieter counter-argument is you still need to like what you hear. A loudspeaker that could be considered the textbook of accuracy and fidelity, yet sounds so unappealing that no-one could stomach listening to it for more than 10 minutes at a stretch is fulfilling a goal of ‘fidelity’ by ignoring another. The Accordo’s inherent poise in all this means the loudspeaker makes a piano sound like a piano when it’s the title track Bill Evans’ *Waltz for Debby* ▶

“The Accordo’s truly uncanny ability to balance ‘neutral’ and ‘natural’ means both sound good!”

► [Riverside] and makes a piano sound like a much bigger piano when it’s the Wurlitzer piano break in ‘School’ from Supertramp’s *Crime of the Century* [A&M]. Too often, loudspeakers (or at loudspeakers of comparable size and performance) will nail one and fail one; either the subtlety of Evans’ tone is lost in all the excitement, or Roger Hodgson’s amplified and amped up performance runs out of control. The Accordo’s truly uncanny ability to balance ‘neutral’ and ‘natural’ means both sound good.

The trade-off in all this is one of headroom. This is a loudspeaker that excels at making a bigger, more harmonically rich and enticing sound that you would expect from the cabinet size. It delivers good bass and a very extended treble in a small to medium sized room. It won’t tear the roof off that small to medium sized room (although it can rattle the windows) and while the sound it produces scales well, the speaker will not scale to larger rooms unless you have a near-field zone within that room. Normally, that wouldn’t be worthy of observation, but given so many of Serblin’s legendary designs have that endlessly-satisfying ‘squeezing a quart into a pint pot’ ability, it’s perhaps worth noting when you get a very good pint in a very nice pint pot.

In fact, that ceiling on headroom makes this one of the ultimate small-room designs. While many will be drawn by their striking and consciously asymmetrical looks, or the sublime finish, that only buys you some time on the end of a system. And the Accordo does so much more than that. Where the cynics only see a pretty box, the Accordo also sounds sensational and fills that small room with big sound. The timeless looks coupled with the excellent sound make this – more so than most speakers at its price – your potential ‘forever’ loudspeaker.

The Franco Serblin Accordo is a sumptuous looking loudspeaker with a sound that at once harks back to some of the best small speakers ever produced, yet does so without becoming a rose-tinted wayback machine and has a clean and extended treble that’s as modern as they come without sounding harsh or brash. It’s also a deceptive looking loudspeaker because it looks smaller than it is, and it’s very much a deceptive sounding loudspeaker because it sounds bigger than it is! But, most and best of all, it’s as entertaining to listen to as it is to look at +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: two-way, two-driver stand-mount loudspeaker

Drive units: 29mm silk-dome tweeter, 150mm sliced paper cone mid-bass

Crossover: low-order, phase coherent, built into supplied loudspeaker stand

Cabinet: Rigid arch-shaped Solid wood structure decoupled with Aluminium/Magnesium parts.

Frequency Response: 40Hz–33kHz, in room

Nominal impedance: 4Ω

Sensitivity: 87dB /1W/1m

Minimum power amplifier: 20W/ch minimum

Finish: Solid walnut – Metal parts chrome aluminium.

Grey Multilayered hardwood – Metal parts chrome aluminium

Dimensions (HxWxD): 36 cm x 19 cm x 36 cm (HWD)

Stand height: 74 cm

Weight: 32kg per pair

Price: £7,498

Manufacturer: Laboratorium

URL: francoserblin.it

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

URL: absolutesounds.com

Tel: +44(0)208 971 3909