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SPECIAL EDITION

SUMMER 2006 | £3.95 | WWW.HIFICHOICE.CO.UK

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Sonus Faber Guarneri Memento

The latest and most diminutive speaker to join the top-end *Homage* range makes musical magic

PRICE £6,500 per pair CONTACT Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0TW ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.sonusfaber.com

The Sonus Faber Guarneri Memento is a two-way standmount speaker. But the stand is so integral to the design, it's more practical to think of it as a floorstander.

The Memento takes the already beautiful Guarneri *Homage* loudspeaker and simply knocks it into supermodel league. It's a root and branch change to the design, in line with last year's excellent *Amati Anniversario*. Facile inspection might not highlight many of the changes, as the lute shaped main cabinet looks very similar to the original speaker. But the cabinet already looked more stunning than practically every other speaker on the planet, and change for change's sake seems pointless here.

The quality of finish is staggering. That two-way cabinet is made up of 21 staves of solid maple, carefully sandwiched together to control resonance and the slight re-shapings you get when you build a speaker out of real tree. These 21 pieces of maple are shaped and dried for two years before being affixed using natural glues and hand presses. They are then dyed using natural colourings, just like the violin makers did half a millennia ago. This itself would make the speaker seem as heavy as lead, but don't forget the damping, which is made from copper and – you guessed it – lead.

The cabinet comes in a graphite or red violin finish. It has a black piano gloss rear panel for the single set of speaker terminals and rear port. The front baffle is leather finished, but you'll probably not want to put this on display, because of the attractive string grille that makes the speaker look like a musical instrument, not a speaker. The driver component is pretty much standard issue *Homage*: a single 25mm ring-radiator tweeter coupled with a 150mm doped paper bass/mid unit. This last features a CCAW/Kapton voice coil with Kellogg and Faraday rings, supposedly for greater linearity, and a vented speaker cone to minimise resonance in the driver itself. The two units cross over at 2.5kHz thanks to a minimalist 6dB/octave crossover network made with silver-palladium alloy conductors, specially chosen for their sound. Cleverly, Sonus Faber runs in each drive unit before inserting it into the speaker itself, making the initial listening stage less of a hurdle. All of which serves up a speaker with 88dB sensitivity, a fair four-ohm nominal impedance, a frequency response from 39Hz to 30kHz (including the port resonance) and capable of handling any amp from 30 watts to 200 watts. One small point to note, however:

these are not shielded speakers and those with CRT (non-LCD/plasma) tellies should keep them well away from the Guarneri Memento.

In the manner of Sonus Faber's *Cremona* speakers, the Memento has a distinct backwards tilt, which really works both sonically and visually. The stand comes in two parts, the tall black upright metal piece and the wedge-shaped slab of what feels like beige Corian. This is prettier than it sounds, especially when you add in the strings (which match the 'grille') that surround the pillar. Locked together, the speaker is rigidly bonded to the stand, although those after a set of carpet-piercing spikes may be disappointed – there's not even provision for spike holes.

“These speakers are perfect for acoustic music, but don't mistakenly think they are limited for powerful, electric rock.”

There's one last beautiful aspect of the Guarneri Memento... the box they come in. Inside the standard cardboard packaging is a rather beautiful wooden case, and inside the case are two lovely red silk drawstring bags, which gently caress the speakers. Better still, the case also contains a little cleaning kit (that glorious high-gloss finish is a dust and fingerprint magnet). Even the instruction manual is bound into a thick red binder. These may be trivial features (and ones that you are doubtless paying for), but little things mean a lot, especially when you are buying into the Sonus Faber dream.

SOUND QUALITY

There's a paradox, here. Sonus Faber reputedly designs all speakers using its own 50-watt *Musica* amplifier. If so, Sonus Faber hasn't heard how good Sonus Faber's speakers really are. Because, although these speakers sound magical with 50 watts or so delivering the goods, they sound an awful lot more magical with 200 or more up the speaker terminals.

Using the word 'magical' twice in the same sentence would be overkill for any other speaker; with the Memento, it's almost understatement. This is a sensational speaker, possessed of a musical passion that's all too rare in hi-fi.

Once again, you can set aside all the usual hi-fi requirements (it does all that, perfectly) and become absorbed into the music, into its harmonic richness and texture. You feel a connection with the music that can happen

with other small speakers, but is fleeting. On the Guarneri Memento, you feel as if you are having a masterclass with Bach and Glenn Gould when playing the Goldberg Variations, or a lesson in abject funkiness when listening to Fred Wesley and the Horny Horns. And you get this on almost every disc played. If there is a downside to the Guarneri Memento, it's that it won't let you play music in the background – the sound (even at low levels) draws you in.

The Memento has surprising bass for such a relatively small cabinet. Sonus Faber hasn't gone for the enhanced bass option. Yes, there is a very mild lift at around the 50Hz point, but a subtle one that prevents the speaker sounding thin. Bass notes are not emphasised,

but – perhaps more significantly given the speaker's size – nor are they glossed over. Much of this only comes through in playing string quartets, or in reasonably contained be-bop, where the sublime bowing or plucking of the double bass notes can be defined just as easily as the other instruments in the small group. So, even dinner jazz comes to life in a way it never really did before!

The Guarneri Memento is among the world's most talented speakers for smaller listening rooms. They are forgiving of position (although the greater the care spent on placement, the better the end result), they don't need a room the size of Norfolk to come to life (although they make a surprisingly big sound in huge rooms) and they don't need a nuclear power station of an amplifier to drive them (although bigger is better, up to a point).

These speakers are perfect for acoustic music but don't mistakenly think they are limited for powerful, electric rock. Out came everything from Neil Young to the Kaiser Chiefs, *Bump* from Spank Rock's odd *YoYoYoYoYo* CD and in-between came the Gotan Project's cool Franco-Argentinean electro-tango. Nothing shook the Guarneri, at all.

This isn't a product you simply listen to. It's a product you fall in love with. It's not simply a high-end sound; it's a magical sound, backed up by one of the best-looking cabinets money can buy. The Guarneri Memento will seduce you. Give in to its charms! **HFC**

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