Franco Serblin
Ktêma

As boutique Italian brand Franco Serblin prepares to boost its range we look at the iconic flagship
Review: Ken Kessler Lab: Paul Miller

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ranco Serblin, who passed away in 2013, first unveiled his flagship Ktêma in 2010. He had left Sonus faber, which he founded in 1983, in 2006, so the Ktêma was in development for nearly five years before he felt it was ready to be sold by the new company bearing his name. I remember the tension during its gestation, and Franco’s elation at being able to produce a no-compromise system – not that he was ever restrained at Sonus faber. Think of the phenomenal Extrema, Guaneri and Stradivarius. The wait for the Ktêma proved worth it – as did the anticipation lasting a decade to hear a pair in my own system.

Why the delay in the full HFN treatment of this system? Whatever hindered the distribution here, we in the UK now have full access to this company, having looked at the Accordo mini-monitor and the standmount enclosure to fill the gap in the range.

Against that backdrop, why the delay? Why the release being so long after its introduction? To this day, the Ktêma’s toe-in isn’t intended to form a triangle that crosses just in front of the hot seat, but work and marking the locations with tape is advisable regardless of floor surface.

Unlike the Sonus fabers of Franco’s day, the Ktêma sits on bejewelled feet. Installing them is a two-person effort as they weigh 55kg apiece and you do not want to mar the sublime finishes. They actually arrive protected by velvet drawstring covers, reminiscent of limited-edition champagne, costly perfumes and fine watches. This is what high-end audio should convey: the same whiff of luxury we associate with other artisan creations, and the Ktêma lets you see, feel and hear where your money went.

TRIPLE ARCH

Once out of the boxes, don’t rush to install the spike. He told me, ‘was reduced to the physical limit of enclosure resonances. That narrow driver dimension’. He felt that it was necessary ‘in order to offer the smallest surface possible for the untrammelled dispersion of midrange and high frequencies’. Another benefit is the ‘improved transparency, because of the spike’s distance from the floor. It’s a step-compensated baffle, in cardioid acoustic-resistance configuration’. For some reason, I recall what we see in a proscenium, where the soloists are at the front of the stage, while the rest of the orchestra is at the back. While very low frequencies are largely omni-directional here, most of the energy is guided along the convex sides of the speaker, with only a small fraction transmitted directly through the air, via the slits in the back panel.

WHIFF OF LUXURY

We reviewed the Ktêma in Satin Brown. The 1.11m-tall Ktêma – not too far a stretch for a proscenium, where the soloists are at the front of the stage, while the rest of the orchestra is at the back. While very low frequencies are largely omni-directional here, most of the energy is guided along the convex sides of the speaker, with only a small fraction transmitted directly through the air, via the slits in the back panel.

RIGHT: Behind a tensioned ‘elastic band’ grille lies a 28mm Ragnar Liaan soft-dome tweeter and two 100mm midrange drivers. Bass is handled by two 230mm alloy-coned woofers that vent from the lower rear side of the cabinet.

As recounted in our Accordo review [HFN Jan ’18], I considered Franco Serblin a mentor – thanks especially to his thoughts on soundstage recreation – but even I couldn’t anticipate a belated revival in recognition of his contribution to speaker design. As has been said many times (and not just by me), Franco did more to influence the appearance of dynamic speakers through his first brand, Sonus faber, than any designer since the early 1980s. We owe domestically-acceptable speaker aesthetics largely, if not solely to him, seen first in the Sonus faber Snail and concurrently with cabinets he made for Cizek Audio Systems.

Staying true to his design philosophy with his eponymous brand, Franco made the Ktêma and other models with more extreme overall forms than he produced for Sonus faber. His signature criteria continue in the use of real wood in solid staves, furniture-grade finishes, rounded surfaces to create sculptural, pleasing-to-the-eye forms, unusual grilles and the signature ‘waves’ which grace both Sonus faber and Serblin speakers, tapered back enclosures, leather-clad baffles and integral stands in unusual materials. This is both visionaries, and inspirational.

400mm across the rear, while front-to-back it’s 460mm deep. And they like to breathe, so allow at least 0.5m from all walls. Franco dubbed the construction a ‘triplet arch cabinet structure’. It is made from thin layers of wood and aliphatic glue ‘hot pressed’ together, all chosen to control enclosure resonances. That narrow driver dimension. He felt that it was necessary ‘in order to offer the smallest surface possible for the untrammelled dispersion of midrange and high frequencies’.

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As the speakers’ cabinet throughout is Ytier’s pure silver-palladium mono wiring, I used the same for the review. Connection was straightforward via superbly-made binding posts. And there was an instant discovery, which concurred with PM’s findings [p39]: the imagined ease-of-driving suggested by the 4ohm impedance and the ‘waveguide that characterises the Ktêma system’. It was his desire for the low frequencies to help transport the goal to ‘physically recall what we see in a real proscenium, where the soloists are at the front of the stage, while the rest of the orchestra is at the back’. While very low frequencies are largely omni-directional here, most of the energy is guided along the convex sides of the speaker, with only a small fraction transmitted directly through the air, via the slits in the back panel.

This speaker truly walks the walk and talks the talk.

As the speakers’ cabinet throughout is Ytier’s pure silver-palladium mono wiring, I used the same for the review. Connection was straightforward via superbly-made binding posts. And there was an instant discovery, which concurred with PM’s findings [p39]: the imagined ease-of-driving suggested by the 4ohm impedance and the
92dB sensitivity was optimistic. While I barely got the needles on the D’Agostino Momentum Stereo [HFN Jul ’11] to flicker (and the sensitivity for the meters was set to ‘high’), the Ktêmas love a lot of juice... and enjoy delivering realistic levels.

That’s not to say that the Ktêmas cannot whisper, for they excel at low levels. They seemed to operate independently of pure SPLs, and the grilles – which Franco told me were inspired by violin strings – have absolutely no effect on the sound. If you can hear the difference, I will give you a bottle of Barolo. But the need for loads of power in reserve was manifested in the way the lower registers behaved, especially regarding control and slam.

I found this amusing, because Franco designed his loudspeakers more for finesse than force. The percussion in the remastered Abbey Road [Apple 02577 92 112; CD/Blu-ray box] made some visitors jump visibly in their seats, the weight and scale so rich and substantial it was hard to credit even two pairs of 230mm woofers. But it was the control and transient attack which proved even more dazzling than the extension or bass quantity. Ringo’s break at the tail-end of ‘Carry That Weight’ had nearly the impact of that legendary release, The Sheffield Drum Record. Yes, it was that vivid, especially its stage width and cavernous front-to-back depth.

LIFE CHANGING

When dealing with the Ktêma, though, one needs to keep in mind the raison d’être, which is the spatial element, in the same way that one considers a Lotus for handling or a Ferrari for speed. I put on Ray Anthony’s admittedly schmaltzy Dancing Over The Waves [Capitol ZC-87], a 7½ips, ½-track tape from 1958 possessing the finest big band pedigree, firing up my treasured Denon DH-710F open-reel deck in order to savour it.

It proved room-filling in a way that I’ve only heard before from the likes of Apogee’s Scintilla in 10hm mode, via 200W Krell monoblocks, or Wilson XLFs in founder Dave’s own listening room. Highs were crisp without being aggressive, airy and gossamer-like with no lack of precision or definition, and more-ish enough to inspire playing a half-dozen LPs into the wee hours. One can’t avoid the term ‘silky’ because that’s what you get: a glossy sheen that’s so un-fi-fi-like, so organic you begin to understand what authenticity means by 2020 standards.

MASSIMILIANO FAVELLA

Massimiliano Favella, owner of Laboratorium, the manufacturer of Franco Serblin loudspeakers, Yter cables and Flexum acoustic panels, began his audio career in 1995 at Sonus faber. His last two years at the Italian speaker giant was spent working with Franco, his father-in-law, in the R&D department before leaving in 2001 and setting up Laboratorium a couple of years later.

‘In 2010 Laboratorium produced Franco’s final loudspeakers, the Ktêma and Accordo’, recounts Massimiliano. ‘The latter are permanently set up at Mozart’s birth place in Salzburg, so visitors have the opportunity to listen to his masterpieces through the Accordo’.

Franco passed away in 2013 since which time Laboratorium has continued his legacy, finalising the Lignea project in 2016 and the Accordo Essence floorstander in 2018. ‘Over the years we have maintained Franco’s “Modus Operandi” in our R&D’, says Massimiliano, ‘using high quality electronic components and precious wood with harmonius shapes. ‘In order to maintain the highest quality standard, Laboratorium releases only a few loudspeakers – our production and QC is very time-consuming. Of course new projects will be announced in the future, in fact we are working on a new design at this moment, but it takes time to reach a good result. In truth it is not easy to carry on Franco’s name, but I can affirm that the value we give to things is also the meaning we put into them, and reflects the profound esteem I always had of Franco.’

LEFT: Side view of the concave, satin sycamore side cheeks with subtle venting for the midrange drivers. The two alloy woofers are ‘compression loaded’ against the convex rear panel [see p39] exhausting from the sides.
I sat there thinking that the original purchaser of the Dancing Over The Waves tape 62 years ago certainly never heard how good it could sound on contemporary equipment. Even the finest speakers of the era – Quad 57s – couldn’t deliver the weight or the level, however gorgeous the midband. This was life-changing.

LIGHTNING QUICK

Turning to vinyl and BB King & Eric Clapton – Riding With The King [Reprise 093624895206], the test was the obvious battle of the guitars. In either case, beyond guitar masters of restraint and fluidity on this set. The Ktêmas managed the deft trick of sounding like the audio equivalent of extra virgin olive oil, while at the
time serving up heart-stoppingly, undamped, lightning-quick transients.

All of you know what I mean: balancing the necessary liquidity of bottleneck, slide, Hawaiian or other flowing guitar forms with the punctuation of the rapidly-plucked notes. One visitor was shocked to see a soft-dome tweeter, marveling that it could have the sort of speed now associated with metal domes or ribbon tweeters. But Franco was a true maestro and he coached just the right quantities of both. Throw in two distinct vocal types and you have a speaker that walks the walk and talks the talk.

If ever a loudspeaker designer left us with a swan song to be sung by the angels, it’s Franco Serblin with his Ktêma. Which, indeed, lives up to the quote from Thucydides that ‘soundstage’ is too bland a term for what the Ktêma despite the instantly simpatico first impression. It does everything right and nothing wrong. It creates soundscapes – ‘stagebound’ as opposed to ‘stage’ – suggesting whole audio vistas beyond one’s walls. The Ktêma conveys intimacy. It is one of the finest speakers I have ever heard.

**HI-FI NEWS VERDICT**

It’s a challenge to describe how dazzled I am by the Ktêma. A quick demo ain’t the same as living with it: you need to ‘learn’ the Ktêma despite the instantly simpatico first impression. It does everything right and nothing wrong. It creates soundscapes – ‘stagebound’ as opposed to ‘stage’ – suggesting whole audio vistas beyond one’s walls. The Ktêma conveys intimacy. It is one of the finest speakers I have ever heard.

**HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specification</th>
<th>Specification Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – 1kHz/IEC)</td>
<td>87.7dB / 88.8dB / 87.0dB</td>
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<td>Impedance modulus: minimum &amp; maximum (20Hz–20kHz)</td>
<td>2.8ohm @ 20kHz / 8.0ohm @ 860Hz</td>
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<td>Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz–20kHz)</td>
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<td>LF/HF extension (–6dB ref 200Hz/1kHz)</td>
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<td>THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (SPL/1m)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)</td>
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