

Sonus faber Olympica Nova 1 loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

Since the announcement at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest 2019 of the new range of Olympica speakers from Sonus faber, the Nova, have offered an intriguing glimpse of the future direction of this famous Italian company. Since the brand was founded in 1983 Sonus faber speakers have made their name through their fabulously elegant cabinets, as well as higher-end models being named after great violin makers (like Stradivarius or Guaneri) or Italian locations associated with musical history, such as Cremona.

Franco Serblin, the founder of the company, left in 2006 to explore new loudspeaker designs and sadly passed away in 2013. But Sonus faber continued under new ownership. Sonus faber is an important part of the McIntosh Group and recently seems to have re-committed the brand to the original high-end concept of ultra-stylish Italian design. These new speakers are made in Vicenza in Italy and not in China, as has been the case with some of the brand's lower-priced designs. There's certainly a distinct flavour to any Sonus faber speaker. The house sound has always been very smooth, relaxed and detailed with superb driver integration, and of course the allure of those wooden cabinet designs. I couldn't help but wonder if the new Nova range was going to continue that trend or perhaps evolve into something sharper and tonally challenging. I chose the smallest speaker in the Nova range, the 1, a stand-mounted twin driver design. It's a classic, simple configuration that I have always admired and reviewed many, many times over the years as most manufacturers have one in their range.

People buy stand-mounted speakers for many reasons but obviously the convenience of size is often the main decider. Also, like me, they love their speed and focussed detail which often brings perspectives and views of the music and the soundstage that are very different to the floor standing alternatives that are more room-dominant and can often sound slow and even ponderous in comparison. Obviously there are always going to be limitations to any small stand-mount but the good ones are always full of surprises and musical delights that can only really succeed if the drivers are of superlative quality, incorporated into a thoughtfully designed cabinet and crossover. They will usually have a port and this too needs to really work with the music and not just be there for a bit of extra bass weight. All of these areas have been addressed in the Nova 1.

The cabinet is a thing of beauty. Standing around 35 cm high with an elegant, sweeping boat back the wood finish mixes with some subtle aluminium elements. They are constructed with a nod towards stringed-instrument making techniques. The eight-piece laminated sides are gently bent towards the rear, a bit like the beginning of a spiral, where they are folded asymmetrically to

allow a full length slotted port. This is called Stealth Ultraflex system and is vented through aluminium fins to allow the pressure within the cabinet to be released in a controlled way. Each pair of speakers features a left and right version as the ports are mounted slightly to one side of the cabinet's natural rear apex. It also allows for an extra degree of latitude when tuning the room installation as the port can be sited to either the inside or the outside of the speaker. Connections at the rear are single or bi-wired should you have pre-configured cabling. The mounting plate on the front baffle that carries the twin drivers has another Sonus faber trademark, a real leather surround while the detachable grill has the immediately recognisable thin rubber strands, held under tension by a pair of aluminium curved bars that slot into the baffle.

The slatted-wooden finish speaks directly to the beautiful Italian Riva speedboats for me. It's another iconic look and a reference that speaks to luxury and endlessly stylish Italian design. To round off the aesthetics the top and bottom plates of the speaker are rimmed with a quite lovely aluminium insert that completes the look perfectly. Overall it's a very balanced organic, warm, detailed and elegant design. This is continued with the custom aluminium stands. As if Sonus faber would allow the Nova 1 to end up sitting on a crude open-frame metal design! The speakers bolt to the cabinet via two top-plate outrigger extensions and continue down a slim, fluted central pillar with a rear cut-out to hide cables. It feels as though there is some damping material inside, probably sand. The pillar is fitted to a thin baseplate, rimmed in silver and tuned by some superbly

finished spikes with full adjustment through a threaded fitting and locked off by a knurled bolt. Floor protectors are also part of the whole package. Visually I think the Nova 1 is stunning and is quite superbly finished with every small detail being delicately and tastefully executed.

The drivers are interesting. The tweeter is a 28 mm silk soft dome that features the Sonus faber DAD technology. Damped Apex Dome is a self-explanatory technique aimed at increasing both extension and smoothness of response by introducing some selective damping to the apex of the dome. A solid aluminium arch across the face of the dome helps regulate phase behaviour. Internally, the motor is powered by a Neodymium magnet.

The mid/bass driver has a new open cage metal chassis and a much longer throw cone formed from a sandwich construction technique using a twin layer of cellulose pulp with what is described as a synaptic foam between them. A fabric-coated dust cap seals the unit.

One of the nice things about this speaker/stand amalgamation is that it is relatively light in weight which makes siting them within your listening room extremely simple. You can make large or micro adjustment quickly and easily. Also good news is the fact that the Nova 1 is extremely forgiving where positioning is concerned. It's not a speaker that needs much in the way of tiny locational or toe-in changes. I initially placed them in what looks like their natural positions in my listening room and let them run for a few days before looking more closely at fine-tuning. The excellence of that full-length slotted rear port means that they ▶



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▶ are very, very tolerant of rear-wall proximity. Even at high listening levels it's hard to feel much air movement through the Ultraflex port which is very different to the compressed air piston that conventional small-speaker round ports usually produce. You can hear this too. I wouldn't necessarily sit them hard back against a rear wall but a foot or so out will not be a problem and a metre will give them more breathing room. Likewise, they are very forgiving when it comes to their toe-in or the orientation of the port (inside or out). I reckon these are just about the most versatile stand-mounted high-end design I have heard and that's just one of their notable qualities.

At 87dB efficiency they are happy with some grippy power in their driving amplifier and depending on your particular tastes, I would personally look for an amplifier of no less than 50 watts that wasn't over-smooth. That tweeter is more than capable of dealing with large doses of high frequency energy and resolving that with very impressive articulation.

The Nova 1 is one of those speakers that you can listen to for hours and hours without fatigue. They took a couple of days to come on song but when they did, they promptly disappeared. Solo piano often exposes all those small speaker traits that can be irritating. Compression, note-pinching and bleached tonality often combines with the cabinet size to leave the piano itself sounding unsatisfying and just plain small. Not so with the Nova 1 where the general scale and tonal qualities are interesting and impressive. There is also the way in which they actually project the music into the room with such ease and smooth rhythmic movement, meaning the instrument just appears with no congested, miniature tinkling pianos to be found. Close your eyes and you'd be hard pushed to point to where the sound is actually coming from.

This broad and deep, relaxed view of the musical perspectives soon became one of the most admirable aspects of the Nova 1 for me and gave me that sense of confidence in the system that, if you don't have, quickly becomes tiresome and a real barrier to relaxed enjoyment.

Listening to Robbie Robertson's timeless *Music For The Native Americans* [Capitol] showed how all the design elements that have been incorporated in the Nova 1 come together musically. This is a broad and deep recording, full of the mystery of the American plains and with an atmosphere of tradition and mysticism. It is full of big, slack-skinned drums and background chants. I have to admit that I wondered if the diminutive Sonus faber would make much of it. I wasn't disappointed. Lovely deep perspectives and rolling bass filled the room and as I drove the amplifier harder the speaker responded quite beautifully. The rear port works so smoothly, with no chuffing that the response, as the frequencies fall and the transients rise, never found the speaker in trouble at all. It unquestionably adds a great deal of refinement to the sound.

Adding power just made it louder and more imposing, even when the really low sub-drums were beating out their rhythmic message the scaling and clarity of the entire soundstage is very good. That tweeter too is a fine driver, made all the better by the brilliant way the twin drivers function as one. Integration is about as good as I have heard from such a small two-way and as the Robbie Robertson album showed, it's dramatic and emotionally moving too.

'Cherokee Morning Song' with its interwoven vocal chants was spacious and articulate again showing the Nova 1's interesting presentation. This isn't a speaker that stuns with pinpoint detailing or needlepoint high frequency shimmer. Instead, these Sonus fabers display the music like a painting and invite you to view the whole where you will find the tweeter working with fine resolution and never drawing attention to itself. But the treble performance is embedded and not sitting atop the mid and bass. Where the Nova 1 is concerned transitional smoothness and the whole musical picture take precedent. Once you are used to their balance you can begin to appreciate the sheer range of colour and tonal nuance that they are capable of that are quite surprising.

You may be thinking that this is a speaker for the classical listener and you'd be right and wrong. They specialise in atmosphere and are extraordinarily adept at describing the subtlest of pitch or tempo shifts whether it be from Einaudi's *Seven Days Walking* [Decca], a collection of discs that chart the passing of time and landscapes in a series of musical piano poems. The MQA version of this from Tidal Masters is as dreamy a way of passing a wet afternoon as I have heard. Or Billy Cobham's seminal 1973 album *Spectrum* [Atlantic], a work that perhaps marked the beginning of the fusion between jazz and rock. It's powerful and visceral and the Nova 1's lapped it up and spat it out. Not many small speakers make such a good job of 'Quadrant 4'. More ▶



▶ edgy and tonally uncomfortable perhaps, but not as colourful and unflustered. Check out 'Stratus' and the moment that Cobham, after a series of pressed rolls on the snare, works his way around the tom-toms before opening those broad shoulders of his and inviting bassist Ron Carter to lend foundation to a ridiculously infectious groove that just drives. You wouldn't believe that the Sonus fabers could maintain order with Cobham working the kit over Carters evil bass line but I'm listening to it at silly levels while I'm writing this and I can tell you that this is one hell of a foot-tapping loudspeaker.

The more I listened to the Nova 1, the more I liked them. Beautifully made and very smooth looking, they are a class all-rounder. There is something almost non-hi fi about them and the way they tell their musical stories. Give them a great amplifier and source, kick back and let them go. They're much more than just a pretty face. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, vented, stand-mount loudspeaker

Drivers: 28mm tweeter with Neodymium motor with DAD150 mm bass/mid driver with eddy current-free voice coil

Impedance: Nominal 4 ohm

Crossover Freq: 2500Hz

Freq. response: 45 Hz–35,000 Hz

Sensitivity: 87dB

Suggested amplifier power: 35w–250w

Dimensions: 355 × 200 × 380 (including grill) mm

Stand: Single pillar aluminium

Weight: 10.5 Kg (17.1 Kg with stand)

Finishes: Walnut or Wenge

Price: £5950 per pair. Stands £995

Manufacturer: Sonus faber

URL: sonusfaber.com

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

URL: absolutesounds.com