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Sonus faber Venere Signature

Sonus faber's Venere Signature, at the top of the Venere family, closes the fiscal gap with its costlier siblings
 Review: Ken Kessler Lab: Keith Howard

Added to the top of an existing, well-received range, Sonus faber's Venere Signature (or 'S' for short) faces great expectations. Exacerbating the challenge is looking like a baby version of its siblings in the company's much dearer collections. But with prices ranging between £4000 and £4200 depending on your choice of black, white or walnut, this falls into the lower third of the Sonus faber catalogue.

It joins the existing Venere 1.5 and models 2.0, 2.5 and 3.0 [*HFN* Sep '13, Mar '14 and Jan '14] – there are also wall-mount and centre channel versions to complete a home cinema – with an extra woofer and larger cabinet than the 3.0. According to Sonus faber, the Venere S completes the series. After a few disruptive Sonus faber models *not* made in Italy, the Venere range regained both the old audience and found a new one.

Inescapably, the Venere S is influenced as much by the brand's past as it is by post-'The Sonus' faber models [see *HFN* Feb '11]. Purists, who (like me) have been in love with the brand since it arrived over 30 years ago to single-handedly redefine the aesthetic of the box-type enclosure, will delight in its being entirely designed and hand-assembled in the factory in Arcugnano, in Northern Italy.

Semantics plays a part here as this is the first time Sonus faber has dubbed a model 'Signature'. In Sonus faber parlance, the term defines a speaker that is a complete rethink, despite it fitting into an existing family – the aesthetics as much as the price point ensure that it belongs exactly where they've positioned it, as a bridge between the Venere and Olympica series.

A major change that distances it from the smaller 3.0 and the rest of the range is a newly-designed reflex port removed from the front baffle, where the earlier models have a slot at the bottom. Instead, the circular port for Venere S is located

beneath the speaker and thus aimed at the floor. This was to reduce interaction with the listening room – but it differs if you have hard floors or carpets. Lateral thinking allows you to experiment: with the former floor material try a small square of carpet below the port; with the latter, a small floor tile will suffice.

LEVELLING IS CRITICAL

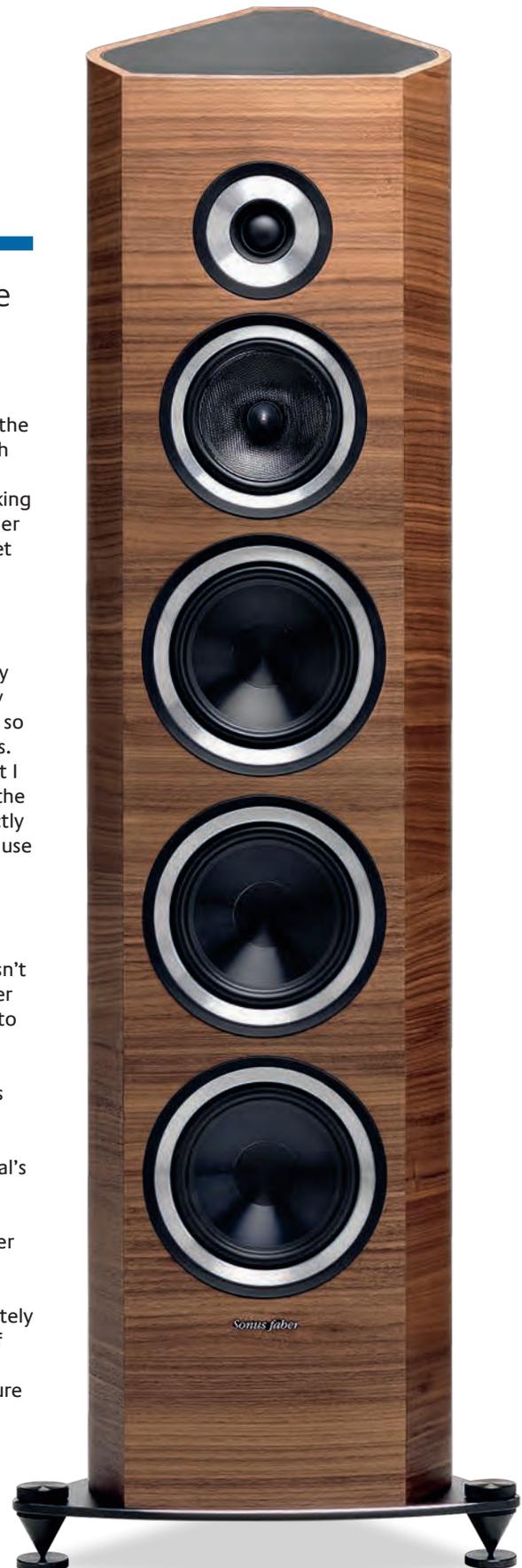
It also complicates set-up in another way as the speaker's integral stand – actually more of a frame – has adjustable spikes, so its height setting also fine-tunes the bass. We're only talking about millimetres, but I also learned that the port works best if the bottom surface of the Venere S is perfectly parallel to the floor. Unfortunately, because the top of the speaker is sloped, a spirit level is of no use!

While this might not sound critical, it affects bass quality primarily in terms of absolute control, if not extension. This isn't rocket science, it's just a matter of a ruler and the willingness to adjust the spikes to the millimetre.

Trickling down from the Olympica range are the 'free compression' baskets for the drivers, custom-made in die-cast metal. The three 180mm woofers use aluminium cones, chosen for the material's lightness and stiffness, ensuring a fast transient response at low frequencies. For the midband, the 150mm cone driver uses Sonus faber's 'Curv' membrane, a thermoformed polypropylene fibre 'that provides the ideal solution for an absolutely natural reproduction of the main part of the audio spectrum'.

Unlike the dearer ranges, which feature the familiar Arrow Point tweeter, the

RIGHT: Three 180mm aluminium-coned bass units are joined by a 150mm polypropylene/textile midrange driver and 29mm soft dome tweeter – all mounted behind alloy rings to conceal fixing screws



FLOORSTANDERS REDUX?

Is there a cult or backlash forming? Have speaker builders said enough was enough, and decided that small two-way boxes are for wimps? Clearly, the latter isn't true, because the best-value speakers of recent years – MartinLogan's Motion 15, the Quad S-1, KEF's LS50 – are standmounts. But Sonus faber seems obsessed with floorstanders of late. Since the 'The Sonus faber' arrived, the company has delivered a steady flow of towers, and the Venere Signature is evidence that the brand is staying true to its promise to exercise trickle-down evolution. The Venere Signature, from its sloped top panel to its severely narrowed back, is clearly the baby sister to the Liliun, Aida, Il Cremonese and the aforementioned, eponymous flagship. If only Sonus faber was indulging in towers, I wouldn't hint at a 'tall speaker revival'. But with Quad and even B&O throwing (dimensional) caution to the wind this season, maybe it's safe for the big boys to come out and play?

Venere S uses a soft dome type with a silk membrane. Sonus faber decouples the tweeter from the cabinet through the use of a resilient material to render the driver immune to 'micro-vibrations generated by the intense activity of the other drivers'. It claims this will improve 'the precision and micro-dynamics that helps achieve an extremely focused soundstage'.

While bi-wiring and bi-amping seem to have faded of late from the audiophile consciousness, the easy-to-drive Venere S is fitted with four multi-way binding posts to allow both. I chose single wiring, using Yter cables to the Audio Research REF 75 power amp [HFN Nov '12].

Soundstage recreation is where the Venere S increases set-up concerns, as it is hyper-critical of the amount of toe-in applied. I didn't find this floorstanding speaker to be unusual in its placement relative to the walls, where its behaviour was consistent (the downward-firing port is oblivious to wall proximity) but the narrow-ish line array baffle needed aiming at the listener.

Some Sonus fabers of yore worked best if the line of sight crossed just in front of the hot seat. These were more like Wilsons that work best with the baffle facing the listener, so when viewed from the seat one does not see the sides of the enclosures. This was the most critical aspect of set-up, because the soundstage almost 'monos' when the drivers fire straight ahead.

The Venere S employs the lyre shape used by Sonus faber for decades to avoid parallel inner surfaces. In addition to the structural integrity and sonic gains, the form results in a shape which is pleasing to the eye. The review pair was finished in walnut and looked like fine furniture. The top

was inset with a black glass panel, which also added to the air of luxury.

WARMTH AND ATTACK

Via the Audio Research REF 75 fed by a REF 5SE preamp, Marantz DV8300 SACD/DVD player, SME 30/12 turntable/arm [HFN Mar '11], EAT E-Glo phono stage and Clearaudio Goldfinger MC [HFN Jan '15], it was straight into my current fetish: proto-disco. I enjoyed repeated playings on CD and vinyl of The Detroit Emeralds' 'Feel The Need' [Greatest Hits, Westbound CDSEWD 119 (CD)] and *Feel The Need* Atlantic K50372 (LP)] and 'Rock The Boat' by The

Hues Corporation [The Very Best Of The Hues Corporation, Camden 74321 603422 (CD)] and *Freedom For The Stallion* RCA APL 1-0323 (LP)].

Of course, these are similar in feel and vintage, but The Hues Corporation sounds silkier, The Detroit Emeralds funkier. The opening percussion salvo of conga, the obligatory whucka-whucka guitar, lush strings and equally lush harmonies of 'Rock The Boat' ensured it was the track that set the tone for the Venere S: it should have been a recipe for cloying, warmth 'n' fuzziness because both track and speakers are to the ears what kittens are to the Internet. But I loved it.

What saves the song from being too sickly is that slicing guitar-work, and it allowed the Venere S to juggle – effortlessly – both warmth and attack. So coherent and of-a-whole is the Venere S's portrayal of the sonic picture that such contrasts enjoy even greater impact without destroying the net impression. It's always the details in the vocals that convince (or not) a listener of the singers' presence. Contesting my initial belief ☺

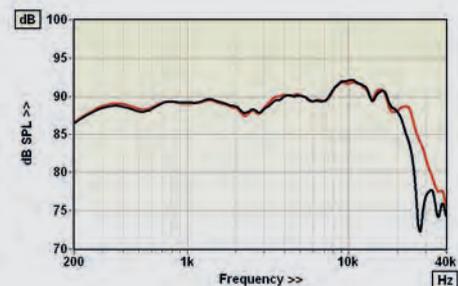
'It unveiled new sensations in tracks I've played a 1000 times'



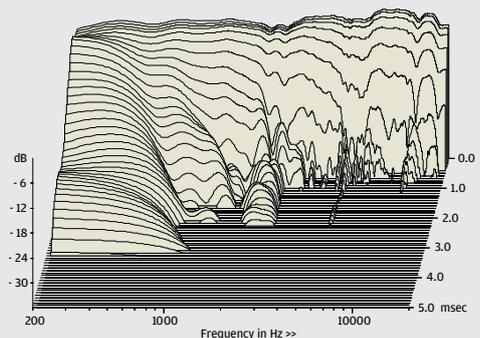
SONUS FABER VENERE SIGNATURE

Sonus faber claims a 90dB sensitivity for the Venere S, close to our measured 89.5dB pink noise figure. Remarkably, this high sensitivity is achieved without recourse to low impedance. Sonus faber specifies a 4ohm nominal figure, with our results showing a minimum of 3.9ohm at 44Hz, but what sets the Venere S apart is its unusually well-contained impedance phase angles. Whereas phase angles in excess of 50° are not unusual, the Venere S's largest absolute phase angle is just 28°. As a result the minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance), over the same 20Hz-20kHz, is 2.7ohm – a full 1ohm higher than typical of floorstanders of this size and class. As modern speakers go, the Venere S is unusually easy to drive.

Forward frequency response [Graph 1, below], measured at tweeter height, evinces a mildly rising trend up to 10kHz, after which output falls by 4dB at 20kHz and dives thereafter. But the response error of just ±2.2dB for both speakers of the pair (300Hz-20kHz) is a fine result, especially for a speaker of this price. (Ignore the response fall-off below 350Hz which is an artefact of a shorter than usual measurement time window.) No less remarkable is a pair matching error of just ±0.6dB over the same frequency range. The diffraction-corrected nearfield measurement showed the Venere S's bass extension to be 53Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz), a typical figure for a floorstander of this size and sensitivity. Because the response falls off a cliff above 20kHz, extension to ultrasonic frequencies is less impressive. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2, below] shows fast initial decay at treble frequencies albeit with a low-level resonance visible at 2.5kHz. KH



ABOVE: Forward response is slightly lifted through presence and treble but drops steeply above 20kHz



ABOVE: Cabinet resonances are quickly damped leaving a very mild (midrange) driver mode at 2.5kHz

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	90.2dB/89.5dB/89.4dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.9ohm @ 44Hz 10ohm @ 2.2kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-28° @ 23Hz 23° @ 1.1kHz
Pair matching/Response Error (300Hz–20kHz)	±0.6dB / ±2.2dB/±2.2dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	53Hz / 21.9kHz/26.1kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.2% / 0.2% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1236x391x448mm



LEFT: This is a three-way design so the bi-wire/bi-amp terminals address the bass and mid/high frequency sections of the crossover, respectively. Metal outriggers improve stability of lyre-shaped cabinet

compared to its pointy siblings: the clarity was a blissful balance between speed, precision and an absence of sibilance that I associate with electrostatics.

ALL THINGS ITALIAN

Both tracks excelled in demonstrating the worth of a floorstanding cabinet, a correctly-positioned port and all those woofers. I am spoiled, living with Wilson Alexias [HFN Mar '13], when it comes to deep, controlled bass. So to experience lower registers nearly as satisfying in a system a fifth the size and a tenth the cost was as vivid a proof of the Law of Diminishing Returns as I've ever heard.

My ultimate test remains Lou Rawls' *At Last* [Blue Note CDP 7 91937 2]. Rawls' throaty, rich Satchmo-esque textures countered by Dianne Reeves' soaring, crystalline riposte? This is boot camp for midrange drivers. And behind them? Vibes, keyboards and bass played by maestri. The Venere S did what I thought was impossible: it unveiled, in a track I've played at least 1000 times, completely new sensations. It was entirely down to presentation rather than excellence in specific areas: what I heard was the 'Italianness' of the speaker, an indescribable deftness of touch that makes me prefer Italian wines, food, luggage, cars and – indeed – culture to all others. ☺

that the Venere S was too gentle or too forgiving was the steady flow of precisely-captured details. In this case, it was the singers' breath control while the massed voices formed a harmonising whole while remaining distinct enough for the forensically-inclined listener to separate them.

With The Detroit Emeralds' 'Feel The Need', the presentation was more aggressive, more forceful, so following The Hues Corporation with that track, I expected it to sound subdued. Again, the Venere S surprised me by putting on its wide lapels, flared trousers and bling medallion by delivering brass that sliced through the air. That dome tweeter need fear nothing when

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Quite why I've fallen in love with the Venere Signature is hard for me to clarify. It's almost *too* lush, *too* nice, *too* easy – like an old valve amplifier... or comfy slippers. Everything I played through it sounded natural, yet seductive, detailed but non-aggressive. It's as if the designer said, 'Basta! Listening to music should not be hard work!' If not for the bass, I'd swear I fired-up my trusty old Quad 57s.

Sound Quality: 87%

