

Sonus faber Sonetto V floorstanding loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

A few years ago, Sonus faber made the somewhat bold move of switching some of its production out of Italy. This was a great idea and gave the world speaker lines like the successful Principia, Chameleon, and Venere ranges, all built in China. However, what it also showed to Sonus faber was there was a strong call for a loudspeaker system that combined the elegance of the Italian-built designs with the clean lines of the more affordable ranges, in a package that didn't cost as much as a Ferrari. It needed to look as 'now' as the Venere, but with the quality of fit and finish that only the Italian's can muster. That range is the Sonetto.

This is a bold move on Sonus faber's part, as it is a line that comes with a lot of crossover (in terms of sitting between Venere and Olympica... two of the brand's core ranges) and is ultimately expected to transfer more Sonus faber production back to Italy, so the company has not just invested in the R&D in the line itself, but in a new factory for manufacturing Sonetto, and more attainable Sonus faber lines in the future.

The Sonetto V is perhaps the core product in this new line. While reviewers get excited about elegant two-way standmounts, out there in the real-world, people buy tall, slim towers. Whether for the looks, the better bass response, or simply the concept that you typically buy more speaker for the money when you buy a floorstander, the floorstander has outsold the standmount by a significant margin in every marketplace except the super-budget end.

The Sonetto V is the middle out of three floorstanders in the range, with two standmounts, two centre channels, and a wall-mounted rear loudspeaker for home cinema use. There is no subwoofer in the line, in part because that is expected to be handled by stable-mate brand Sumiko. However, with a total of eight models in the line, Sonetto is the most comprehensive range in the Sonus faber line-up.

Sonus faber could have simply revised the Venere's geography and have done with it, but instead the company took the longer route and started afresh. There are commonalities of design between old and new – when building a loudspeaker of this quality for this price, the same economies apply regardless ▶





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decoupling. Meanwhile, the midrange is a 150mm cone driver, with an ultra-free compression basket, and a special custom diaphragm, made with a real time air dried non pressed blend of traditional cellulose pulp and other natural fibers. Then the 2x180mm woofers also use the same ultra-free compression basket but feature aluminium cones unique to the Sonetto design. These are all handled by Sonus faber's own crossover network – an anti-resonant design, with optimised amplitude/phase response for optimal space/time performance. This also features what the company calls 'Paracross topology', a means of impedance compensation at low frequencies making the loudspeaker especially amplifier-friendly.

We live in a simplified, sound-bite culture today, and although this adds in so many sweeping generalisations as to make the statement only just not fully invalid, effectively the Sonetto is the cabinet and port system of the Venere with the driver units and crossover of the more upmarket Olympica range (albeit with a wholly new bass unit), built from the ground up in Italy. This is a little like saying a Rolls-Royce is the drive train of a BMW 7-Series with a new body and some refinements, but there's a nugget of truth in both, and in the case of the Sonus faber loudspeakers, this pithy little sound-bite works to the Sonetto's advantage. The point of listening now is three-fold; does combining the two make the best – or worst – of both worlds, is the resultant Sonetto closer to Olympica or Venere in performance, or has Sonus faber gone after a different sound altogether?

In fact, all three conditions are met in the listening session. The Sonetto V is the best of all worlds, as it does seem to combine what was good about the Venere – a sense of 'directness' and purpose of sound... and the lower price, of course – with the increased refinement and top-end openness of the Olympica models. In addition, I would put the sound in a new place for Sonus faber in absolute terms, but closer to the Olympica than the Venere in the Sonus faber canon. Disregarding the price point and the place of manufacturer for the moment, its sonic positioning makes it more than just another Sonus faber range. It makes it the sign of a designer moving beyond the company's comfort zone, to reach a new audience. That's a bold move.

► of place of manufacture – but what really comes over is the elegance of the design. Sonus faber is practically allergic to poor design, but this is an extremely pretty loudspeaker; retaining the elegant curves and finish properties you might find in any expensive Italian design (loudspeaker, car, or even a good pair of shoes), with a modernity that will make it hugely attractive to more than just music lovers. This is the sort of loudspeaker you can use at home, hire an interior designer, and not end up with someone having a blue fit. Even the contrasting top-plate (a recent design Sonus faber design cue) is both retained and gives the speaker an elegance beyond just a big box of drive units.

The design is always uppermost in discussing Sonus faber loudspeakers, but we should never forget that first and foremost, Sonetto is a loudspeaker, and a very good loudspeaker at that. A three-way floorstanding, vented box loudspeaker, Sonetto V features Sonus faber custom drivers throughout. The tweeter is a 29mm high definition DAD design with a DKM dome diaphragm and visco-elastic baffle

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► OK, so the Sonetto V is still very much a Sonus faber design; it's the first at the price that features the configuration of Damped Apex Dome and natural fibre midranges that the company dubs the 'Voice of Sonus faber' more commonly found on the Olympica, Homage, and Reference collections. That gives the Sonetto V a sense of openness, top-end extension, and overall refinement that are characteristics of the 'Made in Italy' lines, and shines through here, too. This is especially noticeable on female vocals, such as 'Seven Joys of Mary' on Maddy Prior and June Tabor's *Silly Sisters* [Chrysalis], where those tight folk harmonies are beatifully rendered without ever sounding hard, harsh, or brash. The influence of the cabinet is minor by comparison to its bigger brothers, and seems centred on slight reductions to image width and depth rather than tonal or timbral changes.

However, where the Sonetto V departs from the Sonus faber norm is in the bass, where this loudspeaker goes for speed over depth. In fairness, it has pretty good bass depth, too, but the Sonetto V is a tauter, faster, more expressive performer. Jaco Pastorius's fretless bass work on 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat' [Joni Mitchell, *Mingus*, A&M] is effortlessly expressive here. All 36 of his fingers (how the hell else could he do that?) can be heard plucking away at that poor Jazz Bass as he tortures it into making uncanny sounds no-one else has ever produced. Here, those notes are all about the attack and release, emphasising the percussiveness of his playing rather than simply going for bass depth. This is dynamic, detailed, and above all fast bass, which is something of a departure for Sonus faber, especially for those who still equate the brand with that lush, louche bass sound of the company's past. To those, who want every loudspeaker to be a homage to the Elector Amator, the Sonetto V will be yet another loudspeaker not to buy. However, for those more rooted in the now and who actually listen to music, this fast, rhythmically adept, and intrinsically enjoyable presentation will likely prove more attractive than the rose-tinted sound of yore.

Perhaps the biggest departure from old is the 'fun' element. Sonus fabers have been increasingly moving toward a sound that is cleaner and less dark sounding, and the Sonetto continues that tradition, but perhaps more importantly adds in a touch of fun with rock and roll that has sometimes eluded Sonus faber in its quest for musical beauty.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker system.

Vented box design

Drive units: 29mm high definition DAD tweeter, 150mm cone cellulose pulp midrange driver, 2x 180mm aluminium cone bass drivers

Crossover frequencies: 235Hz, 3kHz

Frequency response: 38 Hz -25,000 Hz

Sensitivity (2.83V/1m): 90dB SPL

Nominal impedance: 4 ohms

Suggested amplifier power output: 50W – 300W without clipping

Long-term max input voltage (IEC-268-5): 22V rms

Finishes: Matte white, piano black, wood

Total dimensions (HxWxD): 107.2 x 25.8 x 40.9 cm

Weight: 22.6 Kg per loudspeaker

Price: £4,250 per pair

Manufactured by: Sonus faber

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One word that is never uppermost in the Sonus faber lexicon is 'boogie'. They make a beautiful, full, and dynamic sound, but one of grace and space rather than something a little more down and dirty. The Sonetto V does boogie, however. It has an infectious sense of a beat, and makes 'Out of the Black' from Royal Blood's eponymous first album [Warner] leap at you powerfully. Yes, you know this is just a two piece (like the White Stripes or the Black Keys), but it's still a full-on metal thrash, and the Sonetto V loves it!

The Sonetto V is at the perfect junction in audio. It draws more than you might think from the Olympica loudspeakers in terms of outright sound quality but does so at a fraction of the cost of a similar Olympica speaker design, and it does all this while carving out its own elegant aesthetic and sonic performance that is extremely entertaining, especially to those who might never fully embrace the 'live, unamplified music' ethos of traditional high-end. Perhaps more importantly though, it shows what Sonus faber can do in creating an attainably-priced high-end loudspeaker without having to resort to building the products half a world away. +