

# STRADIVARIUS, MEET SCHWARZENEGGER

RENOWNED ITALIAN SPEAKER MAKER SONUS FABER UNVEILS A CURVACEOUS MASTERPIECE.

BY STEVE GUTTENBERG

AUDIO SIGNALS MAKE THEIR WAY THROUGH our components as either a silent continuum of dancing digits or undulating analog waves. It is a speaker's job to turn those electronic variations into sound.

Despite recent advances in design, most speakers still make sound the old-fashioned way with a set of vibrating membranes—a.k.a. woofers, midranges and tweeters. While most modern speaker designs are reasonably good, only the top-tier models, such as Sonus Faber's magnificent new Cremona, can unleash a remarkably lifelike facsimile of Vin Diesel's assorted rumblings from *The Fast and the Furious* DVD, or unfurl the full majesty of Sonny Rollins' tenor sax.

With this design, Sonus Faber pays tribute to Cremona, Italy—the City of Music and Art—where Stradivarius and Guarneri once practiced the fine art of instrument-making. The company did not add the Cremona name just to give the speaker a more musical aura. No, Sonus Faber's holistic approach to the art of speaker design is fundamentally different from its competitors' philosophies. Like any instrument-maker of merit, Sonus Faber emphasizes the integrity of the "sound box" because the resonant signature of each design is inexorably tied to the construction quality of the speaker cabinet.

And what a cabinet it is. Just take a gander at the Cremona's graceful 42-inch tall column. View it from above for the sensual form of its lute-shaped enclosure. What you see instead of the ubiquitous medium-density fiberboard construction favored by most speaker makers is 32 pieces of hand-fitted solid and laminated maple, which make up Cremona's cabinet. The front baffle is covered with sumptuous faux leather. No one will ever mistake a pair of Cremonas for your father's old JBLs.

Yes, I will eventually discuss the sound, but the look and feel of these Italian beauties cannot be denied. My experience in high-end audio stretches

back 25 years, so I have personally set up hundreds of speakers, but I find it nearly impossible to be in the presence of a Cremona without caressing it. And Sonus Faber's attention to detail is not limited to the woodwork. Behold the burnished glow of the satin lacquer finish; the acoustically transparent, but visually stunning string grille; the integral stands that cant the speakers back a few degrees; and the machined speaker connectors that facilitate a tight fit for the speaker cables without the use of wrenches or other tools. Every facet of this well thought-out design was conceived to enhance the interface between owner and speaker. While so many stalwarts of the consumer electronics industry rush through model changes on an annual basis, Sonus Faber's creations tend to be produced for at least a decade.

The company's designs are meticulously researched to communicate the intimacy of music. To that end, Cremona's tweeter, midrange and dual woofers are sourced from one of Denmark's most highly regarded driver manufacturers, and built to Sonus Faber's exacting specifications. Each Cremona is handcrafted, but the final sonic quality control functions are performed by machine to ensure each unit sounds as it should. Our review samples are finished in natural maple, but light graphite (grayish black) is also available. The Cremona is offered only in matched pairs.

Like many high-end speakers, the Cremona can be a little demanding about its placement particulars. The speaker's potential for greatness is immediately apparent to me, but the sound does not quite jell during my first sit-down audition. Ah, but I notice that the sound seems more focused when I rise from my listening chair, so I reduce the amount of tilt-back by adjusting the spikes. During the next few weeks, I find these speakers to be precision instruments; moving them even a fraction of an inch produces an audible change. In this case, speaker setup will likely require a



skilled professional installer. For my evaluation of the Cremonas, I rely on the assistance of tweeker par excellence Patrick Butler of Sumiko, Sonus Faber's U.S. importer, to eke out the best sound from the speakers.

Once the speaker's potential is fully realized, I am again reminded that one of the amazing things about great audio is how it brings out the best in less-than-stellar recordings. Certainly, superb CDs and DVDs sound even better; you would expect that. But with fine high-end audio products—the Cremonas included—even the less exalted discs are improved. Somehow, their flaws recede into the background. As I make my way through my classical CD collection, I hear much more of each music label's sonic signature—the Colombias are leaner, the Philips sound more sweetly melli-



In Italian, Sonus Faber means "hand-crafted sound," and, indeed, the company's speakers clearly reflect this philosophy. Each Cremona is built by hand with 32 pieces of maple. The unusual speaker grille is made from black elastic slings; it looks elegant and provides protection for the fragile tweeter.

fluous and the RCAs are more palpably holographic.

These speakers revel in my '50s-era jazz CDs—the music's swinging sound is breathtakingly immediate, the bass tactile. The Cremona is also a champ at communicating the rhythmic flow of music, and I find myself tapping my feet and grooving along more than usual. The speaker does not shy away when asked to pound out aggressive rock CDs, like the Queens of the Stone Age's hard-core but accessible *Songs for the Deaf*. However, I have heard greater transparency and a more visceral presentation from Cremona's near-twin sibling—Sonus Faber's top-of-the-line speaker, the Amati Homage.

At this point, I admit to a certain bias against the ability of audiophile-oriented speakers to produce rip-roarin', feel-it-in-your-gut home theater sound. Can the Cremona deliver the goods? No problem at all. Hooked up to my Ayre Acoustics K-3 preamplifier and Krell FPB 350 Mcx power amps, the speaker pins me back into my seat with its freewheeling dynamics. It

## DYNAMICS & DELICACY: The Cremona easily reproduces anything from action movies to subtle nuances of music CDs.

also sounds spectacular during a few late-night soirées.

These auditions whet my appetite for several new members of the Cremona line that Sonus Faber recently released. The new speakers make the Cremona a viable foundation for a home theater audio system. The models include the Cremona Center speaker and the Cremona subwoofer. Four Cremonas and a Cremona Center could make a substantial home theater system, with or without the Cremona subwoofer. If you prefer a smaller speaker to reproduce the surround channels (the sound that comes from behind you), Sonus Faber offers the Auditor, a daintier version of Cremona appropriate for smaller rooms or for use as surround speakers.

I suppose you can tell by now that I find the Cremona's looks beguiling and am swept away by their astonishing re-creation of the life-force of music and home theater. But do not accept my opinion at face value—experience them for yourself. **|||88|||**

■ PRICE: \$7,495/pair

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