

Sonus Faber Grand Piano Home speaker system

A balancing act: speakers that are as at home in the hi-fi domain as the movie one?

PRICE: £3646 system as tested

SUPPLIER: Absolute Sounds

CONTACT: 020 8971 3909

Although mainly associated with small and medium size high-end speaker systems, Sonus Faber's remit has recently widened to include home cinema. The Grand Piano Home system is the company's main product in this area, consisting of main, centre and rear effects speakers, and something new for Sonus Faber, an active subwoofer.

However, very few compromises have been made to suit the home cinema role, and the main speakers in particular are as at home in a high fidelity stereo music context as a movie one. The subwoofer could be set up just to provide the extra bottom end oomph, and when switched off leave the main speakers to act as full bandwidth speakers in their own right, adding flexibility. Each of the models can be bought individually, with no special discount for buying a complete system. The models are the Grand Piano (GP) Home, the main speaker; the Solo Home central dialogue speaker; the Wall Home, a compact surround effects speaker; and the Gravis active subwoofer.

The pattern is set by the Grand Piano Home, which provides in its music-making something of the elegance and even beauty that is suggested by its appearance. Perhaps this has something to do with the company ethos, which sees good loudspeaker design as a kind of analogue of the musical instrument making process. The example that Sonus Faber gives in its own promotional literature is 'the ancient art' of lute making, and Sonus Faber talks of speaker design in terms that suggest an art rather than science.

Be this as it may, the sound of the GP Home is distinctive in some ways yet almost not an issue in others. Above all else it has a quality of rightness, of balance that means the speaker effectively disappears aurally, becoming something like an aural open window. Not a perfect window of course. The bass has a light,

deft touch and excellent timing, but it also has the ability to cope with complex, dancing rhythms that trip other similar speakers. It is not the most physical bass around, and its extension is no greater than you would expect from the size of the enclosure, which means it produces useful output down, I would estimate, to somewhere a little below 50Hz.

The opposite end of the spectrum also has something of the same quality. It doesn't have the ultra high resolving power and clear extension of the Focal tweeter used in my normal reference, the JMLab Mezzo Utopia (a much more expensive loudspeaker), but it still has fine resolving ability, enough to help the speaker distinguish between individuals in a soup of sound, the classic example of which is individual voices in a choir, or fiddle players in an orchestra. I could cite any number of specific examples to support these observations, but what's important here is not what happens with particular discs, but those qualities that it brings to some extent to every recording.

The crowning glory of this speaker however is neither the top nor the bottom, but the filling in the middle, the midband. It is here that the GP Home shakes off most of the opposition. Again it has that sense of pristine rightness and balance that sets it apart. But there is nothing antiseptic about it. This is a speaker with a distinctive voice in some ways, and it is in the midband that this is most obvious. Without descending to the ranks of an easy-on-the-ear, valve like sound, which some Italian speakers (and electronics) are trapped in, the GP Home has a smooth, subtle and sophisticated sound, aided and abetted I should add by a treble that peaks early and is clearly (to my ears) on the decline before it reaches the nominal upper limit of hearing.

The mid-bass plays ball with this too, and the outcome is a perceptibly warm, slightly laid back quality, with a trace of lift in the lower treble. Yet the midband is layered and understated, with exquisite tonal differentiation and dynamic poise. This is a speaker that lets you hear what's going on with tremendous clarity, not because it is bright, and the treble information is being

squirted out, but because the midband has a higher inherent resolution than most, mated with an enclosure that doesn't contribute too much of its own to the sound. One consequence is that although the musical information is palpably there, and subtle detail is easy to distinguish, the information is presented in a very easy, refined way. To describe it as self-effacing would be taking it too far, but I hope you get the drift.

But the system doesn't consist of just the GP Home. How do the other speakers fit in? The answer in the case of the Solo centre speaker is extremely well. There is always a compromise when a centre speaker is not physically identical to the main speakers, and this doesn't go away just because the electronics are equipped with bass management. But a lot of the potential problems have been tackled at source with the unusual drive unit configuration. This speaker doesn't have the low frequency bandwidth to be acceptable as a 'wide' bandwidth speaker in the system setup, but it works well as a small centre, with relatively little extra identifiable colouration from the enclosure. It doesn't sound the same as the GP Home of course, but in practice, with multi-channel music or film soundtracks, the centre speaker simply disappears aurally. Sounds that are panned across the soundstage are consistent in tonality and in other ways as they are handed from speaker to speaker, and you really don't hear the centre speaker at all.

The same cannot be said of the remaining speakers, or at least not to the same degree — and with speakers it is always about degree rather than absolutes. The Wall is a little more coloured and obvious and raises the question of whether it has been seriously adapted for boundary operation, despite the name, which clearly implies that it has. It's still a smooth, refined speaker, and on an appropriate listening axis, which is normally well below the plane of the bass, never mind the tweeter, the mid/top holds up quite well, even though off-axis listening is bound to throw up phase irregularities in the crossover band. But the



🔊 The Italian job: the Concerto Series system's stylish, leatherette looks stand as a passable metaphor for its polished musical ability

proximity of a wall has the effect of adding a rather boxy bloom to the upper bass, which tends to draw the ear. In short it is not as transparent as the three front speakers.

What the Wall does have is a lot of midband authority and definition, and to this extent it is a great match for the rest of the system. But it is clearly a compromise in high-end multi-channel systems, especially where music is the principal type of software — generalising like mad here, I'd say that the use of rear channels in the cinema tends to be relatively subtle and low key, apart from the occasional special effects of course, but there is no curtailing of bandwidth requirements in a digital surround system, or ones that use DVD-A or SACD multi-channel as a source. The electronics can help reduce the LF

demands on the rear speakers, but except in small rooms bass management is always a compromise, and usually an undesirable one.

Finally, the Gravis subwoofer is a design which behaves itself and adds an extra octave to the main system, and of course allows for some tinkering with bass/midband balances to suit the requirements of home cinema, which many people prefer to be a tad fruitier than for music (or maybe it is that film soundtracks are engineered with this kind of balance in mind). By good subwoofer standards, the Gravis is very slightly soft in character: it lacks the attack and palpable definition of an M&K or the sheer authority (at levels that don't excite bloom or excess) of the better RELs. But it can be adjusted to provide something almost as

valuable, namely a sense of extra air and space as well as extra weight, and most important of all, it can do this while achieving a seamless match with the rest of the system.

Summing up, if the name Sonus Faber didn't excite interest from visitors during this system's sojourn, and it usually did, the way it looks always got them. There is something organic and even rather seductive about those elegant, flowing lines and fine wood flanks of the Grand Piano Home in particular, and the leatherette coverings give the whole system a tactile, homely quality.

That's just looks of course, but by one of those curious acts of serendipity the visuals are a more than passable metaphor for the sound. Here is a package with all the polish and

sophistication associated with the Sonus Faber brand and which manages the delicate balance of acting as an excellent home cinema system while delivering the goods musically. It is not without

character, but this is not wilful, obstructive colourations, but rather highlights that tend to emphasise, enhance and flatter the music.

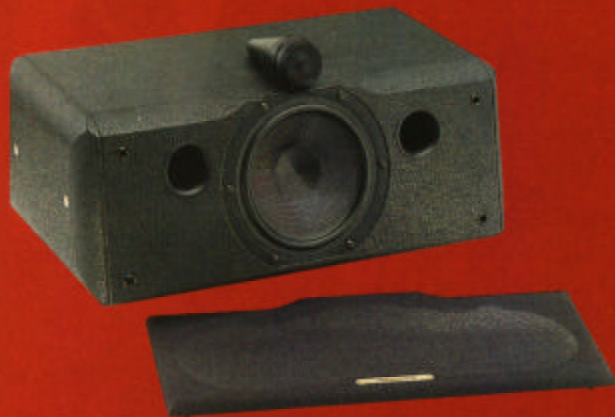
WORDS ALVIN GOLD

And now for the guided tour bit. The basic designs contain few surprises; on the whole they are really best described as evolutionary rather than revolutionary, though there are some specific points of technical interest.

The GP Home (£1699) is developed from an older design called the Grand Piano, a slightly smaller two-way plus ABR design. The GP Home, a two-way system with two 180mm fibreglass cone units, has a taller front-vented enclosure (1080x235x290mm, hwd) with a new and improved metal frame plinth, which means that the primary tweeter listening

axis is much closer to ear level. The stone plinth once available as an accessory to bring the GP up to height is no longer necessary and has been dropped. The larger speaker also means a more fully developed bass, and at the far end of the frequency spectrum treble is handled by a 26mm silk dome Vifa tweeter, displacing a 1-9mm ScanSpeak, and the single wired

crossover operating point has been changed to 3kHz to suit. The relevant numbers are 8 ohm nominal impedance for a 90dB sensitivity, so this is a reasonably abstemious design, and a nominal 250 watts power handling figure (very nominal, I'd suggest something closer to 100 watts or so before audible strain sets in).



The Solo centre speaker (£399) does break the mould, by using just a single centrally placed bass/midrange unit in a box measuring 470x250x220mm (hwd), with the tweeter mounted in a separate small bullet-type pod immediately above the main enclosure, which eliminates all lobing effects due to the varying phase interactions of two horizontally staggered drive units when listening from different angles in the horizontal plane. The

only problematic phase relationships left are those due to the vertical disposition of the two drivers, but they are of a similar magnitude and type to those that are involved with the GP Home, which encourages homogenous voicing. The only other tradeoff is limited power handling due to the use of a single mid/bass unit, but this has been addressed with a high power, long throw bass/midrange unit, and the Solo handles power with some grace.

The Wall (£549), which measures 340x220x150mm (hwd), is a small two-way direct radiating speaker with a quoted bandwidth of 60Hz – 20kHz (equivalent figures for the GP Home by the way are 35Hz – 20kHz, and the Solo 40Hz – 20kHz, but no limiting levels are stated), and a slanted baffle that mirrors the GP Home, which by suitable orientation allows rather greater

freedom of positioning than a standard box. As the name implies, the Wall is a boundary design, for which recessed or angled 4mm being posts would have been useful. Like the Solo and Gravis, and much of the GP Home, the finish is black leatherette, giving the whole system an unusual look, and plays a significant role in damping the enclosures.



Finally, the Gravis Home subwoofer (£999) is an almost cubic design, measuring 370x420x420mm (hwd), with the family slanted baffle and leatherette covering, which has three drivers, the main 250mm unit which is driven by a 200 watt amplifier, and two 200mm passive drivers on opposing faces, which by operating against each other cancel the net forces acting on the

enclosure which are not due to the main active unit. There are high and low level inputs, and a standard set of controls, namely a level, adjustable low pass filter and a two position phase switch. The Gravis doesn't suffer much from obvious box type resonances or air leaks, and the low pass filter offers reasonable ultimate rates of attenuation.

