

THE HOME Theater



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"This Sonus Faber/REL system easily fits into the latter category—the 20 percent that's really great—with an awesome combination of great looks and fantastic sound."

*—D. Wilkinson
Home Theater*



*This
Sonus
Faber
speaker
system will
really let you
hear the
sound of
music.*

by Darryl Wilkinson



Listen Up

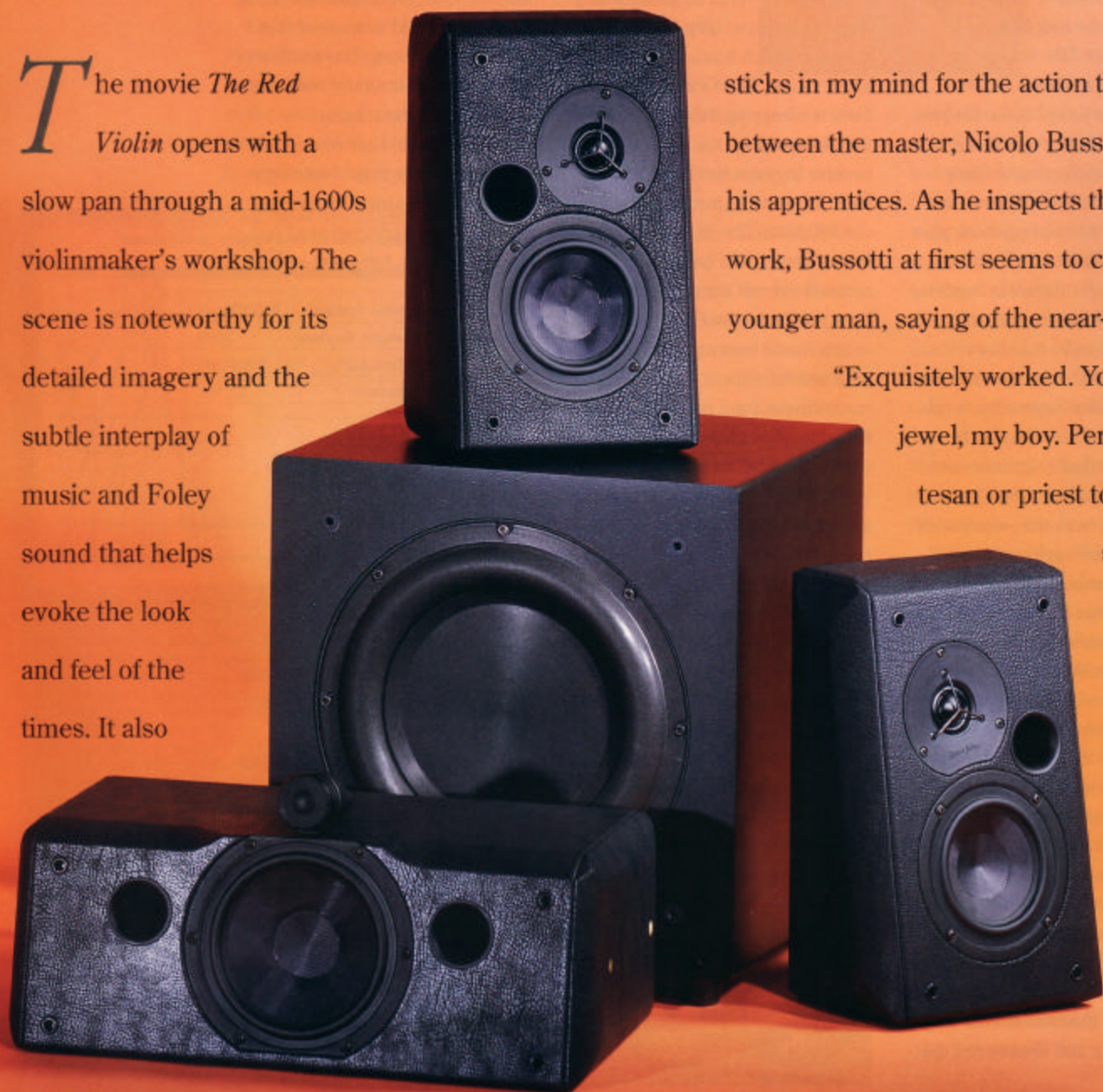
The movie *The Red Violin* opens with a slow pan through a mid-1600s violinmaker's workshop. The scene is noteworthy for its detailed imagery and the subtle interplay of music and Foley sound that helps evoke the look and feel of the times. It also

sticks in my mind for the action that takes place between the master, Nicolo Bussotti, and one of his apprentices. As he inspects the apprentice's work, Bussotti at first seems to compliment the younger man, saying of the near-finished violin,

"Exquisitely worked. You've created a jewel, my boy. Perfect for a courtesan or priest to pluck after

supper or polish Sundays after mass."

But there's more. "In other





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Sonus Faber Grand Piano Speaker System

words," he tells him, "this violin will never bear my name." To emphasize the point, Bussotti smashes the delicate instrument against a workbench. "Put your anger into your work, my boy. Stay with me and learn."

I'd like to see a little more anger in the work of the people in the consumer electronics industry. I'm not suggesting that they start smashing things (well, maybe a few things), but a little more emotion of any kind would be welcome. There are too many salespeople hawking too many lifeless pieces of gear in stores better suited for cattle-herding than human interaction. These guys wouldn't know an authentic emotion if it smacked them upside the amygdala. I know it's a mass-produced, fast-paced world in which cheap thrills abound. Every now and then, though, it's nice to find a well-wrought product in the hands of a thinking salesperson who understands that music (and even movies, if Hollywood could get out of the way) can have a deep, profound, and uplifting effect on the human psyche. Just good enough shouldn't be good enough.

Sonus Faber is a company that gets this concept. They

get the fact that music is more than just something that can be packaged and found on the shelf of your local Stop 'N Go. They also understand the old axiom that, if something is worth doing, it's worth doing right. From the first look at each speaker in the Sonus Faber system I've lived with for the last few months, care and craftsmanship are evident. The main speakers, the Grand Pianos, are finished with four coats of beautiful black lacquer that's so nicely polished I was almost afraid to touch it. (I did anyway.) Two small, brass fittings near the top and two more near the bottom of each side panel cover the spots where the side panels were hand-tightened to the cabinet in a process that involves both the ears and the hands. The speaker's angled front baffle, top, and back are covered in soft, dull (both in the sense of color and nonresonance), black leather that's been hand-stretched and glued to the cabinet. OK, so the leather is a synthetic, better-than-leather leather, but it's so much like the real thing that the Italian export board that regulates such things qualifies it as leather. Although I'm no leather expert, it certainly

fooled me. In addition to saving a cow's hide, this high-grade synthetic stuff is stronger, more flexible, and—in case your speaker is exposed to the sun streaming in through a nearby window—more fade-resistant. A long, black grille cloth covers the front of the speaker; however, thanks to the leather on the front baffle, the

- A. The Wall is an average-sized, wall-mountable speaker that's available in black or white.**
- B. Among its many features, the Grand Piano comes with spike adjusters that allow you to tailor the speaker's rake to suit your room.**
- C. The Solo's 1-inch silk-dome tweeter is mounted on top of the speaker cabinet.**
- D. REL's powerful Q401E subwoofer is a nice complement to the Sonus Fabers.**

HIGHLIGHTS

- Luxurious mix of lacquer and leather
- Quick response that's perfect for music and movies
- Movies with music are elevated to a whole new level

Grand Piano looks great with or without the grille—a good thing, since it sounds a smidgen better with the grille off.

The Grand Piano is a frontported design that utilizes two 7-inch fiberglass cone woofers and a 1-inch silk-dome tweeter. It stands

42.5 inches tall and measures about 12.5 by 11 inches at the base, which includes four large thumbscrews that adjust the spikes below. While you might think that the spike adjusters are only there to level the speaker on an uneven floor, they





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E. The Sonus Faber speakers use gold-plated binding posts.

are more-critically useful for adjusting the speaker's tilt back, or rake. With these speakers, an amazingly tiny amount of front-to-back height adjustment can make a significant difference in the imaging of voices and individual instruments. (Consider how small movements in the focus ring of a pair of binoculars affect the clarity of what you see.)

Except for the grille and the exposed tweeter pod, the Solo center channel is entirely covered in the same leather that covers the Grand Piano. The leather's soft, nonreflective finish gives the Solo

a neutral look that should allow you to place it above a big screen or in a cabinet without it screaming, "Hey you, look here! I'm a center channel!" A 7-inch woofer sits snugly between two ports on the angled front baffle. A 1-inch silk-dome tweeter, mounted directly above the woofer in its own cone-shaped chamber, tops the cabinet.

Like the Solo, the Wall surround speaker is fully covered in black leather (white is also available). The

same 1-inch silk-dome tweeter that the Grand Piano uses joins a single 5.25-inch woofer in a ported cabinet. As its name suggests, the Wall is designed to be wall-mounted, and the included mounting hardware lets you pivot the speaker approximately 15 degrees left or right. Average in size for a surround speaker, the Wall measures 8.75 inches wide, 6 inches deep, and 13.5 inches tall. The front baffle is angled, and, even on my listening room's white walls, the black leather works well aesthetically.

Sumiko, Sonus Faber's U.S. and Canadian distributor, sent along an REL Q401E subwoofer to complete the system. It's a very solid, nondescript, black box that is 15.5 inches wide, 16.25 inches tall, and 16 inches deep (about 20 inches deep with cables). The Q401E uses a 12-inch, front-firing driver and an internal 400-watt amp with a low-pass crossover that's continually variable from 25 to 100 hertz. It's not covered in the fabulous Sonus Faber leather but has a slightly rough black finish.

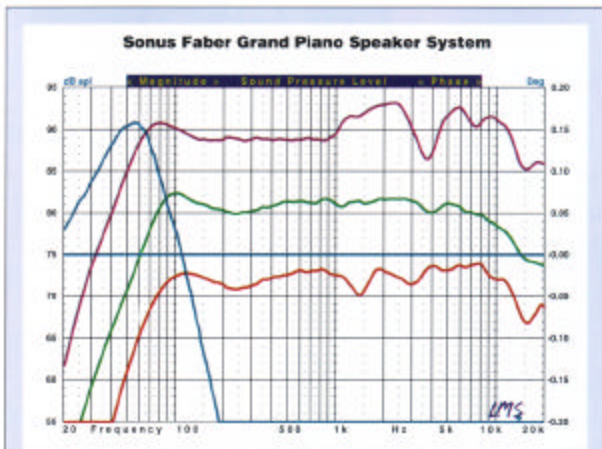
As I implied earlier, one of the many reasons that I like *The Red Violin* is because music is such

an integral part of the movie. It's no surprise, then, that one of the biggest reasons why I find the Sonus Fabers to be so impressive is because they do so darn well with music. The red violin of the title is the movie's main character, and the music heard throughout serves as its voice. Lesser speak-

ers could easily impair the violin's delicate "words"—and the multiple stories that it weaves together—

but this system absolutely soars with the violin as it sings, cries, and dances through the movie. Some speakers have a tough time with violins, giving them a harsh, jagged quality that's like taking a serrated plastic knife to your eardrums. The Grand Pianos and the Solo, on the other hand, are smooth and fluid. None of the cabinets' harmonics are lost, and individual sounds—such as the baron running a finger (with its grotesquely long fingernail) down the strings—are dead-on.

When there's no video to occupy your attention, these speakers are even more powerful. A beautiful multichannel DVD-Audio recording, Bucky Pizzarelli's *Swing Live* sets out to capture the experience of sitting through a live performance in a Manhattan jazz club. With a disc like this—where the rear channels reproduce the club's ambient sounds rather than the artificial placement of instruments or vocals—it's crucial to use speakers that speak the same sonic language. The Walls, fine small speakers in their own right, are the perfect complement to the Grand



HT Labs Measures: Sonus Faber Grand Piano Speaker System

This graph shows the quasi-anechoic (employing close-miking of all woofers) frequency response of the Grand Piano L/R (purple trace), REL Q401E subwoofer (blue trace), Solo center channel (green trace), and Wall surround (red trace). All passive loudspeakers were measured at a distance of 1 meter with a 2.83-volt input and scaled for display purposes.

On-axis response of the Grand Piano measures +3.20/-3.49 decibels from 200 hertz to 10 kilohertz. The -3dB point is at 55 Hz, and the -6dB point is at 47 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 3.14 ohms at 7.8 kHz and a phase angle of -35.99 degrees at 64 Hz. Sensitivity averages 90 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz.

On-axis response of the Solo measures +0.20/-2.98 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. An average of axial and (+/-15 degree) horizontal responses measures +0.41/-3.09 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. The -3dB point is at 71 Hz, and the -6dB point is at 62 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 3.17 ohms at 4.3 kHz and a phase angle of -39.24 degrees at 2.9 kHz. Sensitivity averages 87.5 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz.

On-axis response of the Wall measures +1.40/-2.37 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. The -3dB point is at 74 Hz, and the -6dB point is at 63 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 4.04 ohms at 4.9 kHz and a phase angle of -61.22 degrees at 111 Hz. Sensitivity averages 87.5 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz.

Close-miked response of the Q401E, normalized to the average level from 40 to 80 Hz, indicates that the lower -3dB point is at 34 Hz and the -6dB point is at 28 Hz. The upper -3dB point is at 77 Hz using the LFE input. After trudging through the muddled documentation (which bears little logical connection to the labels on the back panel), it was possible to achieve greater low-bass extension at the expense of upper-bass extension. As the manual suggests, you'll need to experiment to find what settings work best for your system.—AJ

Pianos. The spectacular re-creation of that performance—with the band clearly defined on stage, the music seamlessly sweeping from front to back, and the gentle mixing in reverse of the clinking glasses and whispering audience—was awe-inspiring to say the least.

Jazz and classical aren't the only musical genres that this system does well. A friend of mine recently dragged me to a tiny hole-in-the-wall bar to hear "the hottest band you've never heard of." He was right. I'd never heard of the Hadden Sayers Band, and they are one of the hottest bands around. They primarily play classic Texas rock (electric lead and bass guitars, plus drums), and one of their discs, *Swingin' from the Fabulous Satellite*, was recorded live in a slightly larger (but equally run-down, I'm sure) venue than the one I heard them in. Hadden Sayers has a distinctive low, back-of-the-throat singing voice that's reminiscent of Stevie Ray Vaughan. The Grand Pianos nailed his voice, along with most of the hall's grit and grime—just as I remembered hearing it live.

So the Sonus Fabers do a bang-up job musically, but can they measure up with more-lowbrow Hollywood fare? As much as I dislike *Pearl Harbor* (cheap sentimentality isn't my thing—I prefer the expensive variety), it's got some great bombing and other surround effects. When I felt a gust of air against my face as I watched one particular explosion, I thought that the central heater had coincidentally kicked on. When I replayed the scene a little later, however, I felt the same gust of air. I did a little checking and discovered that

the air was coming from the ports on the front of the Grand Pianos sitting about 9 feet in front of me. Now, I know that speakers blowing your hair back is a cheap image that doesn't fit with the way I've described these speakers so far, but damn it was cool.

Aside from just moving air, the Grand Piano has very musical bass response. (Back to that music thing again?) This musicality is owed to the specially designed tweeter, which has an extended lower range. The Grand Piano features a whopping 4mm surround that holds the 1-inch silk-dome tweeter in place and optimizes the bass drivers for quickness and clarity. (Actually, in the Grand Piano, the middle bass driver is crossed over as a traditional mid-bass, while the lower driver kicks in at a much lower point for low-bass reinforcement.) This design's smoothness (and the associated 6-decibel-per-octave crossover) was obvious with Hadden Sayers' voice, which straddled the tweeter and midbass driver but sounded perfectly natural. That's one of the reasons for the cone-shaped chamber around the Solo's tweeter: to help extend its range downward.

As good as they are, even the Grand Pianos benefit from a good subwoofer. You can set the REL Q401E's crossover as low as 25 Hz, so it fleshes out the bass below the Grand Piano's range. When I dialed-in the Q401E with the Grand Pianos and the rest of the

system, it became a thoroughly integral, totally natural part of the system. Instead of mentioning how well the sub augmented the system with music, I'll tell you how it performed with *The Fast and the Furious*. The only reason to watch this movie is to enjoy the rumble of super-charged engines, and the Q401E corralled all of that horsepower and unleashed it in my listening room. The windows and the pictures on my walls may never be the same again.

It's been said that 80 percent of everything is crap. I won't go that far with home theater gear. There's a lot of decent stuff out there. There is, however, a pretty

Grand Piano Tower Speaker	\$3,250/pair
Solo Center-Channel Speaker	\$950
Wall Surround Speaker	\$995/pair
REL Q401E Subwoofer	\$2,195

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www.sonusfaber.com
www.sumikoaudio.com
 Dealer Locator Code SNF

small percentage—much less than 20 percent—that's really great. This Sonus Faber/REL system easily fits into the latter category with an awesome combination of great looks and fantastic sound. The combo ain't cheap, but it's well worth buying a used car and spending the savings on this system. It'll take your psyche more places than a new gas-guzzling SUV will. 🚗

