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*Drop-Dead Gorgeous*

## Sonus Faber Stradivari "Homage" Loudspeaker

Jonathan Valin

The Sonus Faber Stradivari is not the kind of loudspeaker that will make you say, "Wow, I never heard that before!" every ten seconds. Nor will it throw the widest, deepest soundstage. Nor will it "disappear" the way, say, my Kharma 3.2 monitors do.

All the Stradivari *will* do, in fact, is sound astonishingly beautiful on record after record, disc after disc. If you can imagine a Spendor BC-1 with greater authority, more lifelike image size, far superior dynamics, detail, and extension, more seamless driver-to-driver continuity, and considerably less boominess and boxiness, then you have an idea of what these Sonus Fabers are like. Though the Strads won't turn sow's-ear recordings into silk-purse ones, they'll certainly make every disc more listenable—and great ones breathtakingly lovely. Along with the diminutive \$20,000 Kharma Reference Monitor 3.2s and the humongous \$91,000 Rockport Hyperions, they are the most musical dynamic loudspeakers I've auditioned in my home.

At \$40,000 the pair, these things ought to sound as fabulous as they do. What you might not expect—especially, if you are unfamiliar with other Sonus Faber speakers—is how fabulous they look. Feasting eyes upon them for the first time, my wife, who has seen thirty years' worth of stereo equipment come and go, quipped: "Who cares how they *sound*!" With their graceful curves and gorgeous red lacquer finish, they put you in mind of exactly what Sonus Faber was aiming for: the burnished look of a Stradivarius violin.

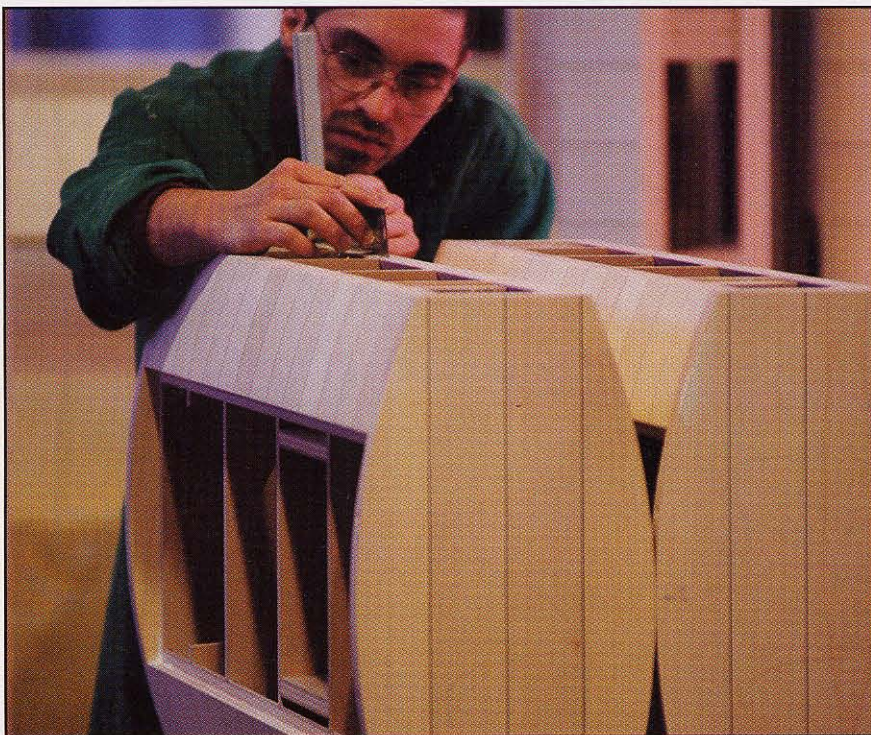
The company Sonus Faber (the name literally means "sound

craftsman" in Latin) is located in Cremona, Italy—famously the home of the great seventeenth-century violin- and lute-making families of Amati, Guarneri, and Stradivari—and Sonus Faber's Franco Serblin takes his Cremonese heritage very seriously. Over the past decade or so, he has created a series of "homage" speakers (including the one under review) that were inspired by the work of these great Cremonese masters. Indeed, Serblin makes speakers rather in the same way that Andrea Amati, Giuseppe Guarneri, and Antonio Stradivari made lutes, cellos, and violins, mixing artisanal techniques with contemporary science and focusing on the beauty of the sound first and foremost.

The Stradivari is Serblin's chef d'oeuvre, and a departure in several ways from his previous "homage" designs. First of all, the Stradivari is larger than either the Amati or the Guarneri "homage" speakers—a massive, ported, four-driver, three-way floorstander that weighs roughly 165 pounds. Second, unlike the Amati and the Guarneri, which are narrow-baffle loudspeakers (considerably taller and deeper than they are wide), the Strad is *much* wider than it is deep. Third, again unlike the Amati and the Guarneri, whose guitar-shaped enclosures are modeled on Cremonese lutes, the Stradivari's cabinet is elliptical, shaped like the arched body of the king of instruments, the violin. The Stradivari's external walls are exquisitely fashioned from multiple layers of maple and other high quality woods, artfully arranged







in a constrained-layer sandwich designed to reduce resonances. In addition, the enclosure is braced internally with violin-like structural ribs, has tuned ports for the midrange and woofers (analogous to the violin's F-holes), and is finished, in a gorgeous red lacquer derived from Antonio Stradivari's own formula (and said, like the lacquer of a Stradivarius violin, to enhance the beauty of the speaker's sound).

The Stradivari is an "infinite plane" loudspeaker, in which the considerable breadth and elliptical shape of the speaker's baffle is claimed to work "synergistically" to improve the dispersion of its ring-radiator tweeter, to augment dynamic scale and range in the bass (by effectively increasing the radiating area of its two ten-inch woofers), and to greatly reduce diffraction effects. At the same time the superb enclosure and vented subenclosures for the six-inch midrange and twin bass drivers are said to ideally terminate backwaves. I will have more to say about these claims anon.

On to the listening.

As a reproducer of stringed instruments, from doublebass to acoustic guitar to violin, the Stradivari is peerless in my experience—rivaled among dynamic loudspeakers only by the Rockport Hyperion and the long-discontinued Spendor BC-1. The Strad is simply voluptuous sounding, combining fine dynamic nuance and superb large-scale "snap" with drop-dead-gorgeous timbres. For example, on a "difficult" recording like Speaker's Corner's marvelous reissue of *Vienna 1908-1914* [Mercury], which can (like so many other Mercurys) sound a bit edgy on tuttis, the Strad makes the London Symphony Orchestra strings in Schoenberg's *5 Stücke* sound positively

diaphanous. On a much smaller scale the Strad turns Ildikó Hajdu's sumptuous fiddle and György Déry's equally sumptuous, plum-colored cello from the Kodály Duo on Hungaroton's *digital* LP into things of exquisite beauty. Given the variable nature of recordings, this may not be the way basses, cellos, violas, or violins *should* sound on these LPs, but it is certainly the way we want them to sound—the way, at their finest, we remember these instruments sounding. In saying this, I suppose I'm conceding that the Stradivari—like the Hyperion—errs toward the warm side. Indeed, I would say that it is warmer than the more neutral Kharma Reference 3.2—about as warm as the Hyperion but a little darker in balance. (Because of its buttery smoothness in the upper mids and treble and the beguiling fullness of its mid-to-low bass, the Strad tends to sound as if it is weighted just a bit toward the bot-

tom octaves.) And yet, despite the added warmth, the Strad does not obscure the flaws of lesser recordings so much as make them more livable and listenable.

As you might expect, the Stradivari is also a superb reproducer of the human voice, from basso to soprano. On large-scale multimiked studio recordings, like *Elektra* [Decca] or *Showboat* [Angel], it makes soloists and chorus sound just as beautiful as it does solo and massed violins and cellos, though, as with these string instruments, the Strad tends to sweeten vocal timbres attractively and, because, of its slight darkness, to make performers sound less freed up from the speakers, less "there-in-the-room-with-you" and more "there-in-the-recording-studio-or-concert-hall." On smaller-scale, minimally miked recordings, it may be even more impressive, particularly on discs where voices are accompanied by strings, such as the guitar, auto-harp, and upright bass on Cisco's remarkable LP reissue of Ian and Sylvia's *Four Strong Winds* [Vanguard].

I suppose I could go through all the instruments, from piccolo to grand piano, and say just about the same things I've said about the way the Stradivari reproduces strings and voices. When it comes to timbres and dynamics, it is superb—as good or better than anything I've yet heard. And because of its high sensitivity, low distortion, harmonic richness, treble smoothness, and extraordinary dynamic ease, it will play very softly or very loudly without falling apart. Indeed, for those who like their large-scale music played large (and have the large), the Strad is an obvious must-audition. And for a guy like me, who is very sensitive to the upper midrange roughness, driver discon-





tinuities, and speaker/room interactions that are exaggerated at high volumes (in much the same way that video artifacts on DVD are exaggerated when an image is projected on a big screen), the Strad is, along with the Rockport Hyperion and the Kharma Exquisite 1-B, the only *three-way* dynamic loudspeaker I could listen to contentedly at concert-hall levels and beyond.

Perhaps because of its inherent richness and ripeness, the Strad is as good as anything I've heard at realistically reproducing instruments that play in the bass. Though it is a large speaker, it isn't gigantic like the Hyperion or some of the bigger planars, and yet it generates truly deep bass at least as well as these others do. In my medium-sized listening room (17.5 x 16 x 12 feet), the Strad plays down into the low 20s (no small feat), and though it does not have the crisp definition and leaned-out midbass that some audiophiles seem to demand from their bass reproducers (neither does the Hyperion), it manages, like the Hyperion, to combine a high measure of performance-and-instrument-related detail with an even higher measure of the dynamic authority and richness of timbre that grand pianos, doublebasses, bassoons, tubas, and cellos have in life. The Strad also has unusually good transient response in the bass—which is, frankly, something the Hyperion did not—so that basses played pizzicato or staccato, like those doubled by bass drum near the close of Britten's *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell* [Cisco], have the sensational impact they have in a concert hall. (The Strad is, by the way, just as fast

on transients in the mids and treble—e.g., on the amusing whip and woodblock in this same Britten piece or the marvelous triple-note wind figure, with string pizzicato, in the third movement ["Farben"] of the aforementioned Schoenberg piece, which here really does sound, as Schoenberg intended it to, like a trout suddenly breaking the placid sunlit surface of a lake on a summer morning.) Its clarity on complex harmonies—for instance in the lyric passage late in the Allegro of the Brahms First Cello Sonata [Mercury] in which Starker double-stops his instrument, producing gorgeous counterpoint between the deep bass line and that of the mid-register—is amazingly high.

So where's the rub? Actually, there are just two, unless you count the speaker's inherently sweet, warm, rich balance against it. (And those of you who do should consult a shrink.)

First, the Strads seldom "disappear" into the soundfield the way my (admittedly much smaller) two-way Kharma Reference 3.2 monitors do. I am generally aware of them as sound sources, no matter where they are placed (and John Hunter of Sumiko did a helluva job positioning them for fullest extension, highest detail, and widest soundstage in my room). In all likelihood, this would not have been the case in a larger space than my listening room (these are large speakers, after all), though it may also be that, Sonus Faber's claims to the contrary notwithstanding, those beautiful lacquered enclosures have a beautiful resonant signature of their own. I will find out for sure when I pay






Sumiko a visit later in the year to hear the Strads set up in a big room. In the nonce, I would not let this reservation bother you overly much. The \$91,000 Rockport Hyperions—the best speakers I’ve ever heard in my home (though the Strads give ’em a helluva run in some respects)—didn’t “disappear,” either.

Second, in addition to what I would call the “transparency” question, the Strads do not soundstage quite as well as the Kharma Reference 3.2s do. Of course, no other speaker I’ve heard, save for the Nearfield Acoustics Pipedreams, does. Though stage depth is superior by anything but Kharma standards, stage width always seems a bit curtailed to me, even in comparison to other comparable speakers. While spreading the Strads more widely apart spreads the stage, they do not really image much “outside the box” (beyond the outer edges of their enclosures), the way the Kharms do. (I should note, once again, that the Hyperion wasn’t a world-beating soundstager, either.) On the other hand, image size is extraordinary with the Strad, and inner detail is, as noted, excellent.

The Strads sound best toed in greatly, so that you are listening virtually on axis with their drivers. They should also be set as far as possible from rear and side walls and at least five or six feet from one another (although setting them too far apart will rob you of midbass). Their tilt (which greatly affects the

blend of the tweeter) must be carefully adjusted. (I could see where they could sound a bit bright or overly dark, if tilt weren’t dialed-in just so.) And, as cool-looking as they are, their “strung” grilles *must* be removed for best sound. In my room, the Strads sounded their finest with moderate-power tube amplification, particularly with the 70Wpc Ming Da monoblocks (review forthcoming) and the 75Wpc Tenor 75Wp’s. The 300Wpc hybrid Tenor 300Hp’s also did a superb job—allowing the speakers to “open up” more because of their enormous advantage in power.

I should also note that switching cable and interconnect from my reference balanced Nordost Valhalla to single-ended runs of Synergistic Research’s new active X-2 Absolute Reference makes a good deal of the loudspeaker’s darkness go away, though it makes a bit of the midbass go away, too.

In spite of any shortcomings, the Sonus Faber Stradivari, like the Kharma Reference Monitor 3.2 and the Rockport Hyperion, is a truly great high-end loudspeaker, as gorgeous to look at as it is to listen to. I cannot imagine any of you not loving it as much as I do—and as much as my listening panel does. (I’ve never had this many return visits from guys who are old, jaded hands when it comes to audio gear.) Its sound is so beautiful, so dynamic, so utterly, thrillingly, and addictively musical that it actually takes an effort to tear yourself away from the listening room. Frankly, I don’t know when I’ve last been able to say that—and mean it. For the music lover, this is a reference-quality product. 

#### SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Four-driver, three-way, floorstanding dynamic loudspeaker  
 Speaker complement: One-inch Neodymium ring tweeter, six-inch dynamic midrange, (2) ten-inch aluminum/magnesium alloy woofers  
 Crossover: Multi-slope at 330Hz and 4kHz  
 Sensitivity: 92dB  
 Impedance: 4 ohms nominal  
 Frequency response: 22Hz–40kHz  
 Dimensions: 25.5" x 53.5" x 10"  
 Weight: 165 lbs. apiece  
 Price: \$40,000

#### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Aesthetix Io and Calisto, Lamm L2 and LP2, Messenger and Xanden pre-amps; Tenor 75Wp, Tenor 300Hp, Lamm ML-2, Krell FPB650, Ming Da 70 amplifiers; Walker Proscenium Gold turntable and arm; Clearaudio HarmonyMg cartridge; emmLabs DAC6e/emmLabs modified Philips SACD1000 transport, Krell SACD Standard SACD players; Krell 25sc CD player/preamp; Nordost Valhalla, Synergistic Research X2 Absolute Reference, Purist Audio Dominus, Silent Source cable and interconnect; Walker Velocitor, Richard Gray Power Company 600S and Pole Pig power conditioners; Walker Audio Valid Points

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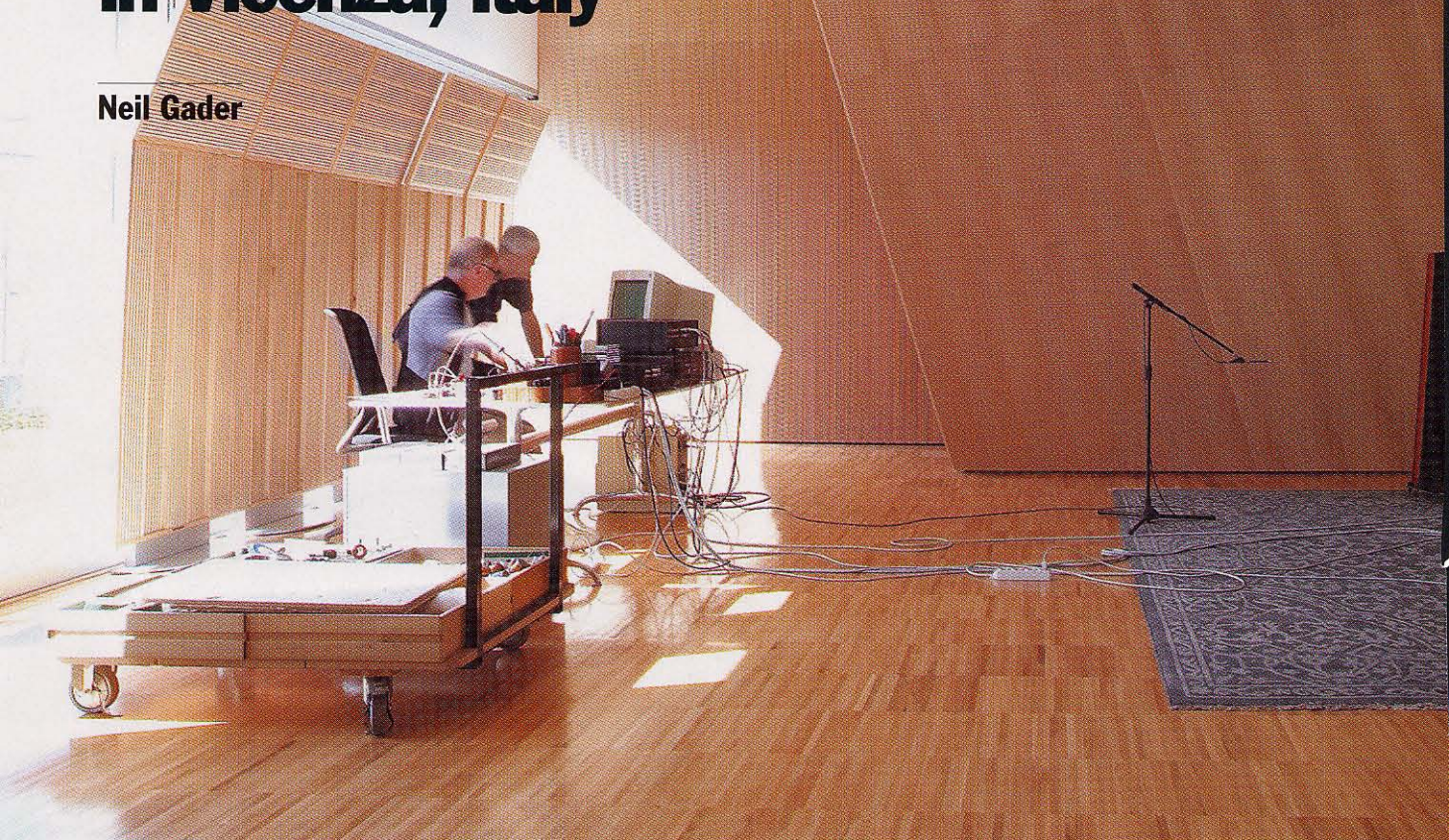
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# A Tale of Two Strads

## Visiting the Sonus Faber Factory in Vicenza, Italy

Neil Gader



It's impossible to treat a visit to the Sonus Faber factory as a mere assignment. Not only does it mean immersion in the Sonus philosophy of design and manufacture, but also total engagement in Italian culture, its music, and its history. Indeed for Sonus Faber it's the intersection of the past and the present that informs every loudspeaker the company produces. Just as the technology of today supplies the Sonus design team with the finest available transducers, it's the study of the great masters of lute and violin craftsmanship that guides and breathes life into Sonus Faber's inimitable enclosure designs.

Sonus Faber is located in Vicenza, the affluent manufacturing district in the northernmost region of Italy known as the Veneto. The city is dotted throughout by the stately architecture of native son Andrea Palladio and offers its own distinctive tradition of high-tech innovation, fashion, food, and, of course, wine. The purpose of my visit was two-fold—a tour of the new facility (under construction when I last visited two years ago)

but also to listen to its latest "Homage" Series loudspeaker, the Stradavari. And, as it turned out, an even rarer Stradavari. My hosts for the visit were Cesare Bevilacqua, President of Sonus Faber, Founder/Designer Franco Serblin<sup>1</sup>, and John Hunter of Sumiko, the U.S. distributor for Sonus Faber.

In contrast to the previous factory, the newly built facility is roughly the difference between the Dark Ages and the Renaissance. Whereas the former building had 2000 square meters of work space, it was spread among five distinct structures, grossly reducing efficiency. The current factory is a single, two-story structure. It's Bauhaus-inspired and airy, with large glass areas and skylights filtering natural light along the entire assembly line and office workspaces. Much of the perimeter is enclosed in an atrium-style environment where bamboo trees bring a bit of the natural world inside. Space has increased

<sup>1</sup> Sonus Faber was founded in 1980.



markedly to 3600 square meters providing Sonus Faber—a ten million dollar company—with the room to meet growth projections of 10% each year over the next five years. With assembly and final testing upstairs and packaging and shipping on the first floor, logistics have vastly improved as well.

What this means for efficiency is that the same twenty line employees have increased output close to 30% in the past year. And the new factory could increase output another 50% with only a small increase in employment. Mr. Bevilacqua pointed out to me that he doesn't employ *workers*, but instead "artisans" who work together as a family. The team is always looking for new methods to increase quality and efficiency, meeting once a week with production managers to troubleshoot. The office also holds staff dinners every two or three months.

In addition to the assembly facility, there are also two off-site cabinet shops for the construction and finishing of enclosures. The Cremona Auditor and the Concert Line cabinets are built in the city of Bassano. Cabinets for the Classic line, which includes the larger Cremona and Cremona Center, Amati Homage, Guarneri Homage, and the new Stradavari Homage, are built in the Cittadella shop an hour to the northeast. This is filled to the rafters with raw maple and other woods; I was surprised to learn that all of the walnut is sourced from Virginia.

What most captured my attention was the contrast between modern assembly technology and the laborious hand-fitting of components. For example, the unassembled cabinets from the Cremona through the Homage series are matched, sanded, and fitted as a unit, then dis-

sembled, with each cabinet part receiving a serial number corresponding to that specific enclosure. After final finishing is complete, the enclosure is reassembled exactly as originally prepared, insuring a quality of fit beyond typical mass-production tolerances.

Similarly the arched top and back of the Stradavari (pictured below) use maple-composite triple-layer sheets. Each of eight of these sheets is steamed into the correct curvature, but at different grain angles to one another to



reduce sympathetic resonances. Glue is then applied, creating an ultra-thick non-resonant laminate 25 layers thick. Bracing is typically high-density fiberboard rather than the cheaper medium-density type. The braces are not merely glued but slotted and glued into channels. The thread-like black Homage purfling is a wood-strip inlay reminiscent of classic lute construction.

In order to attain the rich and seemingly bottomless patina of the Homage

series the finish is applied with seven coats of lacquer. Sonus Faber doesn't manufacture its own drivers (they are variously sourced from Denmark) but each driver is meticulously matched and modified for its application. For example, Sonus creates a special circular rear chamber out of solid maple for its Cremona and Homage tweeters. Virtually every driver receives special attention as regards venting and damping and resonance control. Crossovers for the limited-production Homage series are still assembled by one man—one of Sonus Faber's longest-term employees.

The distinctive grain of "synth" leather was created for Sonus Faber and is still cut and applied by hand to each speaker. Even now most people assume it's the real thing. In terms of longevity and damping it's actually better than the natural stuff. Finally, all speakers are fitted in a mini "anechoic" chamber for a quality-control check.

### The Other Strad

Following the tour my eyes and ears received the ultimate "dolci" during a visit to the birthplace of legendary master violin and luthier craftsmanship, Cremona. Although the Museum of Civilization, which houses the famed Hall of Violins collection, was undergoing renovation, Mr. Bevilacqua had arranged a short tour courtesy of Andrea Mosconi, the curator of the Museum. To everyone's delight, Mr. Mosconi received us causally holding a violin and bow accompanied with an impish grin. He explained it was the Stradavari "Cremonese," built in 1715 (currently valued at five million dollars), and that he was going to treat us

2 Keeping the violins of the collection "fit" includes playing them a short while every day.



to an impromptu performance of Bach.<sup>2</sup> We were seated in a large exhibition room with twenty-foot-high arched ceilings, rectangular in shape and approximately thirty by sixty feet in size. Up close the Strad, gleaming and golden in the soft light, looked remarkably fresh for its nearly 300 years. Its sound was delightfully balanced in this highly reverberant hall. Transitions from string to string were seamless, something I didn't quite expect. But it was the way the sound from this ultimate "point source" seemed to burst forth and blossom in all directions that made the experience so breathtaking. The music seemed to swirl in an expanding vortex, contrails brushing the edges of the hall with the delicacy of angel's wings.

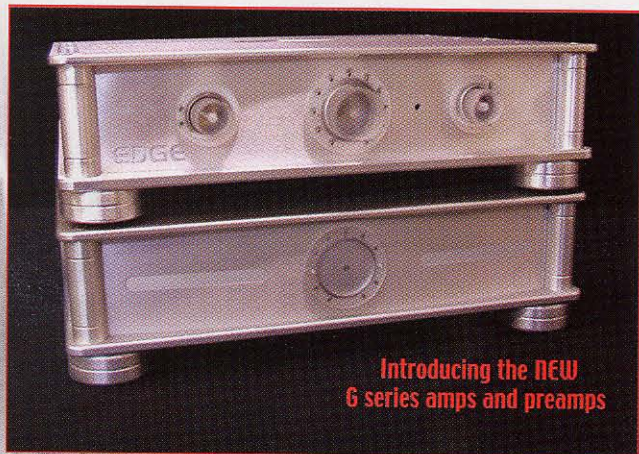
For a moment I put my reviewer's hat back on. The sound was powerfully

midrange, without edge or bite. The upper register was sweet and buttery. There was no treble tilt or transient speed in the sense that we expect from our systems because much of the individual attributes we listen for no longer call attention to themselves in the presence of such immaculate balance. This performance provoked a reconsideration of the rudiments of stereo sound and the nature and extent of audio distortions. All became ripe for reappraisal as I drank in the sheer majesty of the soaring Strad.

### The Main Event: The Stradavari "Homage"

The Stradavari Homage is a radical departure from previous Sonus Faber designs which drew inspiration from the

narrow frontal area and deep profile of the lute. Inspired by the radiation patterns of the violin's arched sound-board, the Stradavari Homage is shallow and broad across the baffle with a slight pinch in the waist. Dimensions accordingly are 25.5" x 53" x 19.75". Designer Franco Serblin describes the profile as "elliptical," which he believes allows for very high rigidity. He maintains that the large front panel is less room dependant as well. The Stradavari is a three-way dual-ported reflex design incorporating a pair of 10" woofers from SEAS wired in parallel, a 6" midrange from Audio Technology, and a 33mm Neodymium ring-radiator tweeter sourced from ScanSpeak. The midrange and tweeter drivers are mounted on a separate, arched baffle decoupled from the main cabinet. The crossover is a quasi-first-order design with transitions at 300Hz and



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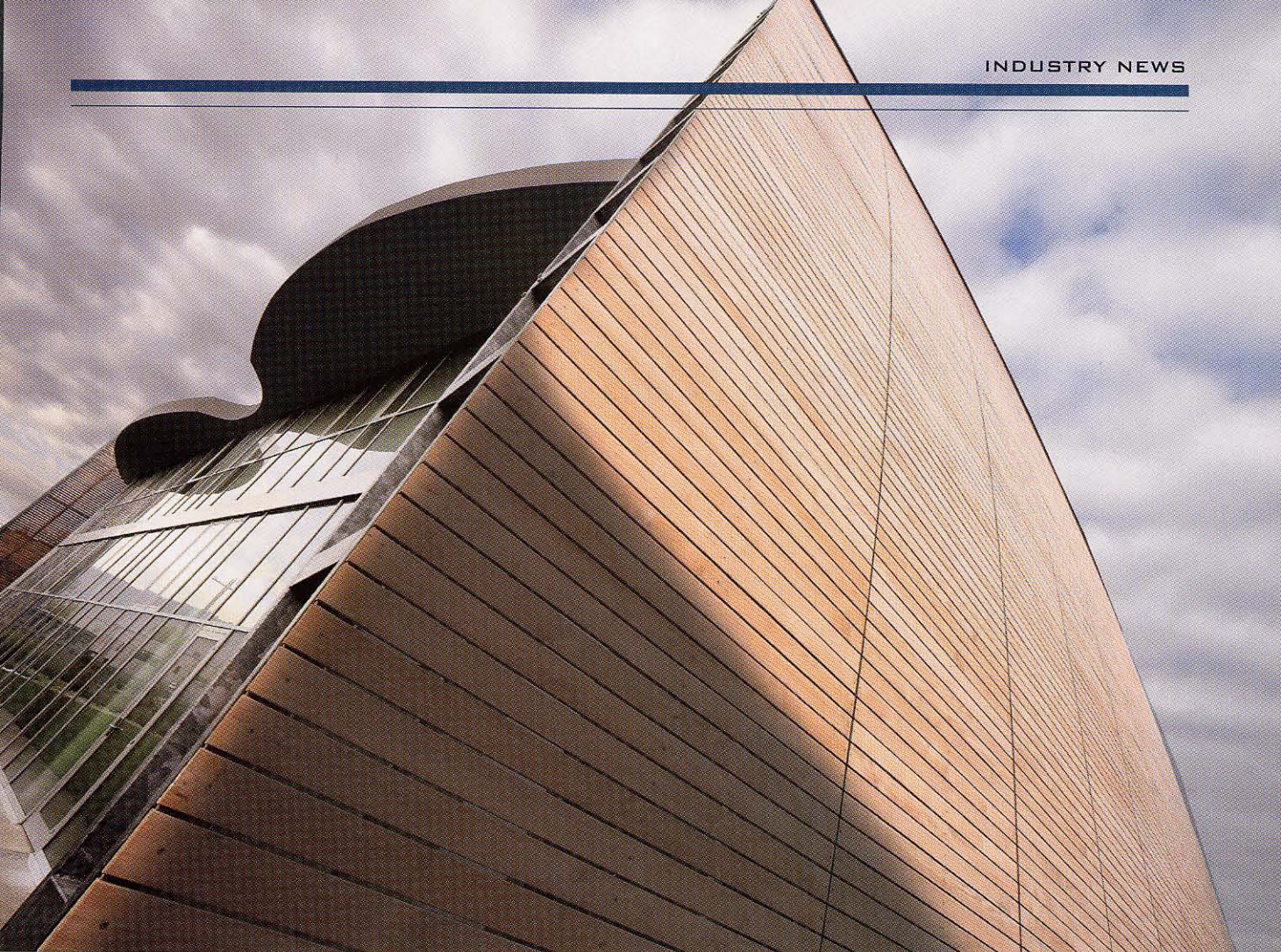
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## **“I’m confident there will always be a loyal part of the market for a good stereo loudspeaker.”**

4.2kHz. All internal wiring uses a special silver alloy developed by Mr. Serblin (a former dentist). This conductor is even carried through into the proprietary binding posts—a critical detail that Serblin feels is often overlooked. Sensitivity is 92dB, impedance a nominal 4 ohms. The speakers rest on short metal stands with spikes adjustable for rake. Shipping weight is over 400 pounds per pair.

My listening observations occurred over a narrow window of time and in the large, dry listening room at the factory. Nonetheless my first impressions indicate the Stradavari possesses the familiar warm naturalistic rendering of music that is such

a part of the Sonus Faber family of speakers—but to an even higher level. Serblin’s fervent design aim is to capture midrange authenticity and the Strad’s sonics reflect this. Its character was not especially forward but the speaker had presence to burn and presented a complexly layered soundstage rich with dimensionality. Rather than sounding ostentatious the Stradavari became a servant to the material—seemingly playing as “big” or as “small” as the music required. Driver integration and coherence was excellent. The Stradavari fully fleshed out every square inch of the soundboard of Evgeny Kissen’s Steinway during *Pictures At An Exhibition* [RCA]. And Norah Jones’ cover of “The Nearness of You” [Blue Note] was sensual and filled with air and transient delicacy. Bass was extended, articulate yet not overdamped. It had the distinctive Sonus low-frequency bloom that was quite addictive with acoustic instruments like stand-up bass or piano.

In my closing moments I asked Mr. Serblin whether multichannel music had

captured his interest and he replied that it had not, although he understood its increasing popularity. “My passion remains for simple stereo. I’m confident there will always be a loyal part of the market for a good stereo loudspeaker.” Serblin concluded “Stradavari is the future. With me it’s important that I attempt to reinvent the loudspeaker when I start again. It’s important that I have a new inspiration—that I feel the emotion. I don’t want to repeat myself with the same design.”

The speakers will be available only in “Red Violin” finish (naturally) and later in Nera (a dark graphite high-gloss lacquer). Sonus Faber will produce about ten pairs a month and up to 150 pairs a year at peak output. Production will be ramping up in February. Setup will be important with the Stradavari and it appears likely that lucky owners will get the white glove treatment from distributor Sumiko, complete with an in-house optimization shortly after delivery. Expected price is \$40,000/pr. 