

SF 80

The Collection **LOUDSPEAKER**

Sonus Faber Amati Anniversario

Pay Homage to the floorstanding loudspeaker that just got the mother of all makeovers

PRICE: £13,500 per pair (violin red), £14,200 per pair (graphite) CONTACT: Absolute Sounds, 58 Durham Road, London SW20 0DE ☎ 020 8971 3909 🌐 www.sonusfaber.com

New Sonus Faber Homage speakers don't come along very often. There are only three models, the latest being 2003's Stradivari (there haven't been many new violin makers worth pay homage to in the last half millennium). They don't need upgrading often, either; the Amati Anniversario is the first revised design in a dozen years of Homages.

What's changed? The Amati is still midway through the Homage series – bigger than the Guarneri, smaller than the Stradivari. The original Amati had a time-aligned front baffle; the Anniversario tilts the whole speaker back. Unless you are dumb enough to use this as the world's most expensive plant-pot stand, the back tilt is an all-round improvement. The stunning lute-shaped cabinet back has remained, but the rear ports are now two large lozenge-shaped slots instead of three little ports. Physically, the 27cm wide, 56cm deep and 117cm tall speaker weighs in at a healthy 57kg, but this is not too dissimilar from the size and weight of its predecessor.

Beneath the beautiful exterior is a very clever, extraordinarily solid design. The enclosure is a multilayer affair, featuring constrained-mode damping and formed using hand-selected layers of the finest chunks of real tree. These are graded and oriented for carefully optimised resonance control. Then, sub-structural ribs are strategically placed for a near-absolute vibration-free cabinet.

But perhaps the biggest change is to the drive units. The 25mm ring radiator tweeter, with dual toroidal wave-guide, the 150mm midrange unit with its 'eddy current free' CCAW/Kapton voice coil and the pair of 220mm aluminium/magnesium alloy cone bass drivers are remarkably similar to the driver complement in the range-topping Stradivari Homage.

This driver line-up demands a fine crossover network, and Sonus Faber doesn't disappoint. This one is designed with phase and amplitude response uppermost, which is extremely useful with so many drive units in the signal path. The multi-slope design crosses over at 350Hz and 4kHz and is designed to keep the speaker amp-chummy. With claimed sensitivity of 92dB and a nominal impedance of four-ohms, the Amati Anniversario is said to perform well with any decent amplifier from 30-300 watts. We listened to the Amatis hooked up to the lovely Jadis DA88 Signature amplifier (reviewed on p46), with an Audio Research CD3 MkII as the source. This is a fitting level of equipment for a speaker of the Amati's calibre.

Sonus Faber is keen to draw your attention to the attractive and innovative string grille, as proudly displayed in our picture. This is an effective way of hiding speaker drive units without relying on a sonically deleterious lump of wood with a bit of cloth wrapped around it. Instead, battens are affixed to the top and bottom of the front baffle and the thin ropes of material stretched between them don't get in the way of the music.

These are remarkably house-friendly speakers, save for the dents that big spikes and almost nine stone of speaker will put in the average shag pile. The rear ports necessitate some breathing space between speaker and rear wall, but these don't need to be in a barn of a room – under a metre from side and rear walls, with a slight toe-in is sufficient.

SOUND QUALITY

There are people who won't like the sound of the Sonus Faber Amati Anniversario, just as apparently there are straight men who don't fancy Angelina Jolie. These individuals should be pitied, or maybe hunted for sport.

Why so strong a reaction? Because these speakers put the joy back into music so profoundly and so effortlessly, anyone not liking these speakers must simply have had their fun button pulled off years ago. Joy... that's a word that rarely appears on the pages of a hi-fi magazine, yet that's the most prevalent feeling that strikes you when you listen to the Amati Anniversario.

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Whatever you play through the Amati Anniversario, it leaves you hungry for more. The first disc comes and goes, filling you with wonder and the sheer thrill of listening to entertaining music once again. Then, you find yourself criss-crossing through your collection, and the collections of others, to find the perfect contrast to the first disc, and so the process goes on. You might have to forcibly eject yourself from the listening room, because you don't just turn off or walk away from this kind of sound.

The scale of the music is immense. Not in that Wilson-esque big sound, or the sort of hyper-analytical monitor speaker presentation. No, we are talking about the scale of the music itself, not just the sound. You get to feel the passion that the musicians and

the composer put into the music, whether that's one guy strumming a guitar and wondering where his life went or a full orchestra attempting to parse Rachmaninov's philosophical heaviness.

Of course, such musical insight is only possible with a speaker that delivers the audiophile goods, and the Amati Anniversario does that in spade-loads. It's possessed of one of the most open sounds around, with a soundstage to match. It presents more of a wall of sound, instead of a walk-in soundstage, but this seems to be perfectly in line with the musical integrity of the Amati. It also has an extraordinarily deep and fast bass – play something adrenalin-filled like Count Basie and the speed of the speaker is exhilarating, leaving you exhausted and nursing a groin strain from too much toe-tapping.

But there are many speakers that can deliver a good soundstage and tight, deep bass. The Amati Anniversario has something more, an almost intangible element. Maybe it's a secret harmonic to all sound, like that which differentiates an okay violin from one made by – you guessed it – Andrea Amati.

It is said of the Homage series that the speakers only suit classical music. If this is the case, are Led Zeppelin, the White Stripes and Eminem 'classical'? It's not that the Amati Anniversario is only good for classical music, it's just that it's so good at doing the classical thing that people tend to assume it can't possibly be as adept at playing jazz or rock.

Yet, if you're that way inclined, this speaker rocks out like it was born wearing denim (as opposed to gorgeous real wood).

We played our pair of Amatis with all sorts of music at all sorts of volume levels, from whisper-quiet to upset-parts-of-your-anatomy loud. It wasn't just that nothing phased the speaker; it kept coming back for more and put a Cheshire Cat smile on any listener's face while doing so. You name it, the Amati Anniversario made it sound wonderful.

This is what most people get into hi-fi for. Few speakers are named after top-quality musical instruments and that's how it should be, because those few have become musical instruments in their own right. It's simply a joy to sit in front of these speakers. HFC

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