

MICHAEL FREMER

Sonus Faber Aida

LOUDSPEAKER

In 1959, in their musical revue *At the Drop of a Hat*, the British musical-comedy team of Flanders and Swann sang their “Song of Reproduction.”¹ It’s not about sex. The song mocks audiophiles (you thought this was something recent?) for how we spend “all of that money to get the exact effect of an orchestra actually playing in their sitting room.” Before launching into the song, Flanders quips, “Personally, I can’t think of anything I should hate more than having an orchestra playing in my sitting room!”

I’m here to tell you that there’s nothing I *love* more than having the sensation of an orchestra playing in my sitting room—or, more to the point, of being transported to the venue in which the orchestra was recorded.

On the last night of the few months I had Sonus Faber’s recently revised Aida loudspeakers in my own sitting room—my basement listening room—I decided to check out the boxed set of Beethoven symphonies from the Berlin Philharmonic, issued on vinyl (10 LPs, Berliner Philharmonic BPHR160092). Though released in 2017, it had arrived here only recently, and I first wanted to hear Sir Simon Rattle’s interpretation of Symphony 9.

The vinyl releases (and associated high-resolution downloads) were recorded at 24-bit/192kHz with a pair of



mid-side (M/S) microphones. As anyone who’s heard the justly famous *Satchmo Plays King Oliver* (LP, Audio Fidelity AFSD 5930/Analogue Productions AAPJ5930), the M/S technique can produce *intensely* solid, three-dimensional imaging. The late Louis Armstrong sounds as close to being “alive” between my speakers as a recording can manage. The CD and BD editions of the Beethoven box were made from multi-miked recordings.

¹ See https://youtu.be/f_DptPvj7ts.

SPECIFICATIONS

Description “Three and two-thirds-way” reflex-loaded, floorstanding loudspeaker. Drive-units: 1.1” (28mm) damped-apex silk-dome tweeter, 7.1” (180mm) natural fiber, viscous-damped midrange driver, two 8.7” (220mm) sandwich-cone woofers, 12.6” (320mm) Nano Carbon Fiber/foam core Infra (sub) woofer; rear-firing Sound Field Shaper comprises 1.1”

(29mm) damped-apex silk-dome tweeter and two 3.15” (80mm) midrange drivers. Crossover frequencies: 55, 150, 200, 3000Hz. Frequency range: 18Hz–35kHz. Sensitivity: 92dB/2.83V/m. Nominal impedance: 4 ohms. Recommended amplification: N/A. Power handling: 100–1000W (without clipping).

Dimensions 68” (1725mm)

H by 19” (482mm) W by 30.7” (780mm) D. Weight: 363.8 lb (165kg).

Finishes Wenge (wenge veneer, maple inlays), Red (stained walnut veneer, black inlays), both with black leather.

Serial numbers of units reviewed: 014 (both).

Price \$130,000/pair, including dedicated carbon-fiber pedestals. Approximate number of dealers: 20.

Warranty: 5 years.

Manufacturer Sonus Faber, Via A. Meucci, 10 36057 Arcugnano (VI), Italy. Tel: (39) 0444-288788. Fax: (39) 0444-288722.

Web: www.sonusfaber.com/en-us. US distributor: Sumiko, 2431 Fifth Street, Berkeley, CA 94710. Tel: (510) 843-4500. Fax: (510) 843-7120. Web: www.sumikoaudio.net.

At around 2am, as the reverberation of the Ninth's last notes faded away, I found myself exhausted, overwhelmed, and somewhat disoriented, all in the most pleasurable way, by the most convincing illusion I've ever experienced—by a considerable margin—of having been transported from my modestly sized listening room to a concert hall (the Berlin Philharmonie).

I haven't heard the multi-miked version. I have sets of the Beethoven symphonies by Bernstein, Karajan, Klemperer, Leibowitz, Walter, and Paavo Järvi—all of them sound good, some better than others. This new one from Rattle and Berlin might be the most spatially together and believable of all, and it's *digital*. Of course, I think the reason for this is the minimal M/S miking. The digits are just how it's originally stored, and the software keeps getting better.

Generally speaking, the performances sound very "proper," well organized, and understatedly British. When I listen to Karajan or even Bernstein, I see dark evergreen forests. Rattle's Ninth had me seeing English countryside, rolling fields, and meadows. I'm not kidding!

The next day, when Bart LoPiccolo, regional director of sales for Sonus Faber's parent company, the McIntosh Group, and a coworker came to pack up the Aidas, they first asked to hear them. I obliged with the Ninth's final movement. I also played for them "Whole Lotta Love," from Bob Ludwig's now-famous 1969 cut of Led Zeppelin's *II*. Later, when John Atkinson arrived to do some measurements, I played him the Beethoven. Then the Aidas were gone.

Big, Bold, Beautiful Flagship

The revised Aida costs \$130,000/pair, and pictures in a magazine or online don't well communicate its size or dramatic styling. It's *big*—5' 8" tall by 18.9" wide by 30.7" deep—and graceful looking, and in a modest-sized listening room a pair of them seem even larger, almost comically so for the space. I shot a video of their installation here and posted it to YouTube²—where you can read the comments of skeptics who can't imagine that these speakers and my room could possibly work together.

Externally, the 364-lb, "3 and 2/3 way," multi-driver Aida is indistinguishable from the original, which was launched in 2011. It's available in Sonus Faber's new Wenge finish, in addition to the familiar Red. Both feature inlays of maple and glossy, hand-polished surfaces, and Sonus Faber's snazzy combination of black leather, gleaming metalwork, and their unique, top-to-bottom, stretchy stringy, licorice harp thing.

Inside, the Aida is entirely new, including the drivers, which have neodymium magnets and were designed by Sonus Faber, then built to their specifications.

Some speaker makers—eg, Wilson Audio Specialties, YG Acoustics, Magico—seek to heroically eliminate cabinet colorations and resonances altogether. Sonus Faber has long advocated "tuning" their speaker cabinets by combining materials of different resonances. However, it's not accurate to say that SF views its loudspeakers as "musical instruments,"

² See <https://youtu.be/FfzCsP7WZOc>.

MEASUREMENTS

As the Aida weighs a back-breaking 364 lb, I drove my test gear to Mikey Fremer's place to measure the speakers in situ. After I'd done the in-room measurements, my plan was to perform the quasi-anechoic measurements in Mikey's driveway. Sonus Faber's reps had placed one of the speakers on a wheeled dolly and rolled it from the listening room to the garage. However, for the first day in weeks, it was raining, and with no end to the downpour in sight, I ended up measuring the Aida in the garage with the door open. I could position the speaker well away from the sidewalls, but reflections of its output from the ceiling and floor limited the anechoic time window used for the analysis to 3ms, which reduces the measurements' resolution in the midrange. I didn't measure the Aida's output to its rear, but the High, Low, and Depth controls were left set to the positions MF had used.

As usual, I used DRA Labs' MLSSA system and a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone to measure the Sonus Faber Aida's frequency response in the farfield, and an Earthworks

QTC-40 for the nearfield and spatially averaged room responses. The Aida's voltage sensitivity is specified as 92dB/2.83V/m; my B-weighted estimate was a little lower, at 90.5dB/2.83V/m, but this is still high. Specified as a nominal 4 ohm load, the Sonus Faber's impedance remains below 6 ohms over the entire audio-band (fig.1), with minimum magnitudes of 2.23 ohms at 35Hz and 2.33 ohms between 11.3 and 14kHz. Although the electrical phase angle remains low, the Aida will need to be partnered with an amplifier capable of supplying a lot of current.

The traces in fig.1 are free from the small wrinkles that would imply the presence of cabinet-wall resonances, but when I reached for my accelerometer to investigate the enclosure's vibrational behavior, I found that its preamplifier wasn't working—and my tool kit was 45 miles away. I listened to the enclosure with a stethoscope while it played pink noise and found it relatively inert.

The impedance traces are difficult to interpret with respect to the tuning of the woofers and subwoofer. In addition, there is always the possibility of

cross-talk between the low-frequency radiators when I perform nearfield measurements. Nevertheless, there was a null at 33Hz in the front-facing woofers' nearfield responses, which suggests that this is the tuning frequency of the two vertical slot ports on the enclosure's rear. The woofers themselves have slightly different responses, the lower woofer rolling off a little earlier in the midrange than the upper. The complex sum of the outputs of the two woofers and their ports, measured in the nearfield and taking into account acoustic phase and the different distances from a nominal farfield microphone position,

Stereophile Sonus Faber Aida Impedance (ohms) & Phase (deg) vs Frequency (Hz)

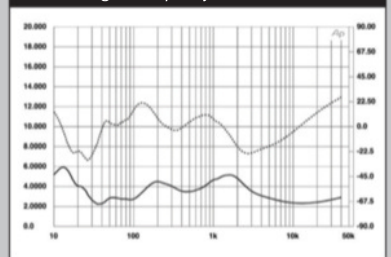


Fig.1 Sonus Faber Aida, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed) (2 ohms/vertical div.).

though of course they're "tuned."

A photo on Sonus Faber's website shows an Aida II under construction.³ The inner cabinet is a curved structure of leather-clad wood in which at least five chambers are created by cross-braces, a few of them wedge-shaped to direct rear-radiated energy to the Aida's various ports. To those who use metal and composites to eliminate resonances, the Aida's innards probably look old-school—but the proof is in the listening and, to a lesser degree, the measuring.

Mounted on the Aida's gently sloped baffle is the Voice of Sonus Faber: a tweeter-and-midrange module comprising a 1.1" (28mm) XTR-4 silk-dome Damped Apex Dome (DAD) Arrow-Point tweeter and a 7.1" (180mm) XTR-04 midrange unit with a cellulose-pulp cone. A vertical bracket holds a small damping pad against the tweeter dome's apex, to optimize top-octave dispersion. Both drivers are decoupled from the main baffle, the tweeter's rear wave loading into a natural wood "acoustic labyrinth."

Below this module are two 8.7"



(220mm) W22XTR-12 woofers with neodymium magnets. Not visible is a downfiring 12.6" (320mm) SW32X-TR-08 long-throw subwoofer featuring a Nano Carbon sandwich cone and a 4" voice-coil. Also not visible from the front is the Sound Field Shaper, a rear-firing, ported, midrange-tweeter-midrange array, comprising a 1.1" (29mm) silk-dome XTR2 DAD tweeter and two M8XTR 3.15" (80mm) midrange units. The Aidas are handed: the axes of the Sound Field Shaper drivers are offset from those of the front-firing drivers, so by swapping the left and right speakers, the user can opt to have the rear-firing arrays angled in toward the center of the stage or out toward the side walls. Sonus Faber suggests angling the Sound Field Shapers in when the Aidas are placed close to sidewalls, and out when the speakers are at least 2m from the sidewalls.

The Aida's massive cabinet is affixed to an arched pedestal, made of aluminum. This is designed to provide clearance for the output of the downfiring subwoofer,

3 See www.sonusfaber.com/en/products/aida.

is shown in fig.2 (red trace). It peaks broadly between 30 and 120Hz, and the upper-frequency rolloff is free from any resonant spikes. I haven't shown in this graph the nearfield output of the downward-firing subwoofer—it was undoubtedly affected by crosstalk from the front-firing woofers—but it appears to reinforce the Aida's low-frequency response to a true 20Hz.

The blue trace below 300Hz in fig.2 shows the nearfield output of the midrange unit; above that frequency, it

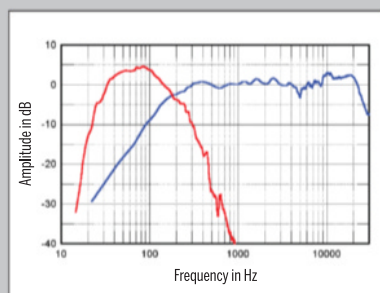


Fig.2 Sonus Faber Aida, anechoic response of midrange unit and tweeter averaged across 30° horizontal window centered on tweeter axis at 50" and corrected for microphone response (blue), with nearfield response of midrange unit (blue) and complex sum of nearfield responses of front-firing woofers and their ports (red), respectively plotted below 300Hz and 900Hz.

shows the farfield response of the midrange unit and tweeter averaged across a 30° horizontal window centered on the listening axis. The Sonus Faber's response is impressively flat, other than a small plateau in energy in the top octave. As shown by the plot of the Aida's lateral dispersion, normalized to the tweeter-axis response (fig.3), this plateau will compensate for the fact that the tweeter starts to become directional above 7kHz, which would otherwise make the speaker sound a bit lacking in top-octave air in large or overdamped rooms. In the vertical plane (fig.4), the Aida maintains its even tweeter-axis response for up to

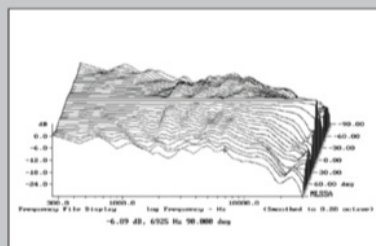


Fig.3 Sonus Faber Aida, lateral response family at 50", normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 90–5° off axis, reference response, differences in response 5–90° off axis.

10° below that axis, which is just as well given that the tweeter is 48" above the ground.

MF's reference is the Wilson Audio Alexx, which he reviewed in May 2017.¹ Fig.5 compares the spatially averaged response in his room of the Sonus Faber's (red trace) and the Wilsons (blue). (The traces were generated by averaging 20 1/6-octave-smoothed spectra, taken for the left and right speakers individually using SMUG-Software's FuzzMeasure 3.0 program and a 96kHz sample rate, in a vertical rectangular grid 36" wide by 18" high

1 See www.stereophile.com/content/wilson-audio-specialties-alex-loudspeaker.

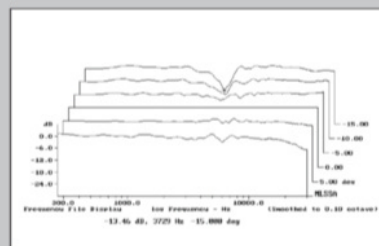


Fig.4 Sonus Faber Aida, vertical response family at 50", normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 15–5° above axis, reference response, differences in response 5–10° below axis.

and the Zero Vibration Transmission system decouples the cabinet from the floor with springs and elastomers, their compliances carefully calculated based on the speaker's weight.

Also used here, as in some previous big floorstanders from Sonus Faber, are their Tuned Mass Dampers (TMD)—a series of weights suspended inside the cabinet, and designed to vibrate in antiphase to “erase” cabinet vibrations. SF says that this system helps produce clearer bass and increased “cabinet silence.”

Sonus Faber's patented Stealth Ultraflex para-aperiodic venting system is claimed to reduce total harmonic distortion (THD) while improving bass extension and eliminating vibrations created by the flow of air through the reflex port. The design is also said to have made possible a smaller enclosure. Also used here is SF's Anima Legata system, which features a cabinet-stiffening, “vibration collecting metal rod, here running between the speaker's upper and lower-middle inner chambers.

In addition to the Sound Field Shaper MTM array, the Aida II's rear panel includes three potentiometers for adjust-



ing the output levels of various drivers: High for the front tweeter, Low Damp for the subwoofer, and Depth for the Sound Field Shaper.

Each Aida II has three pairs of binding posts and is thus tri-ampable, but I used the included jumpers and single pairs of TARA Labs Omega Evolution SP speaker cables.

There's more to this complex design, and especially to the design and construction of the drivers, but that's enough for the purposes of this review, other than Sonus Faber's basic specifications: a frequency range of 18Hz–35kHz, a sensitivity of 92dB/2.83V/m, a nominal impedance of 4 ohms, and crossover frequencies of 55, 150, 200, and 3000Hz.

A Bit of Background

Paolo Tezzon, Sonus Faber's head of R&D, has been the company's chief designer since 2006, when founder Franco Serblin left the company (he died in 2013). Tezzon is responsible for the sound, while Livio Cucuzza handles industrial design, at Sonus Faber as well as at Audio Research and sometimes McIntosh. Like most gifted speaker designers, Tezzon has created some hits

measurements, continued

and centered on the positions of MF's ears.) The two speakers appear to have broadly similar responses below 300Hz, where the spatial averaging has not eliminated major room-acoustic issues. Both speakers offer effective output to 20Hz, but the Wilsons have a little more output below 20Hz, if that matters. The Sonus Fabers have a little more midrange energy than the Wilsons and a little less presence-region energy, but of more subjective significance is how smooth and even the Aida's in-room response is throughout the midrange and treble. The output smoothly slopes down by about 5dB

from 400Hz to 18kHz, which is almost exactly the in-room behavior you need from a pair of speakers for them to sound flat.² Certainly in my own auditioning of the Aidas when I visited Mikey, the sound quality was as superb as this graph implies. Incidentally, the individual measured responses of the left and right speakers at the listening position indicated superb pair matching, the two outputs matching within 0.5dB from 600Hz to 8kHz.

In the time domain, the Aida's step response on the tweeter axis is shown in fig.6; it reveals that the tweeter and midrange unit are connected in positive acoustic polarity, with the tweeter's

output arriving at the microphone before that of the woofer. The woofers are all connected in inverted acoustic polarity, but the beginning of their step is smoothly integrated with the decay of the midrange step, implying optimal crossover implementation. The same is true for the time-domain integration of the tweeter and midrange outputs. The Sonus Faber's cumulative spectral-decay plot is very clean (fig.7).

The excellent measured performance of Sonus Faber's Aida indicates that some serious engineering talent was involved in its design.—John Atkinson

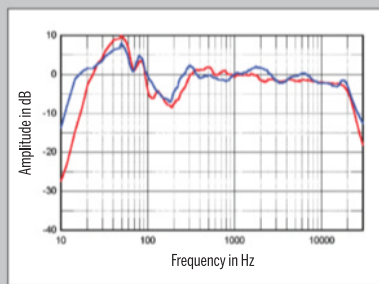


Fig.5 Sonus Faber Aida, spatially averaged, 1/6-octave response in MF's listening room (red); and of Wilson Audio Alexx (blue).

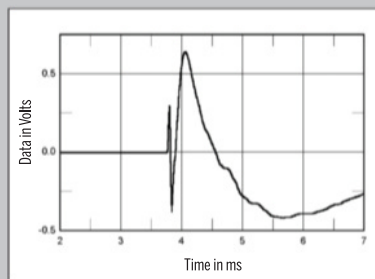


Fig.6 Sonus Faber Aida, step response on tweeter axis at 50° (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

² See www.stereophile.com/content/measuring-loudspeakers-part-three-page-8.

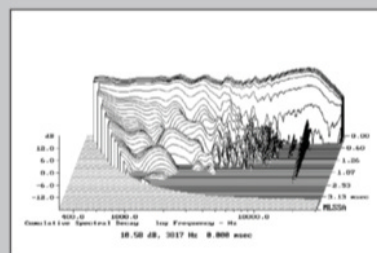


Fig.7 Sonus Faber Aida, cumulative spectral-decay plot on tweeter axis at 50° (0.15ms risetime).

and a few misses.

I'm steeped in Sonus Faber. In 1999 I bought a pair of original, pre-Tezzon Sonus Faber Amati Homage speakers, and since then have reviewed numerous SF models. I've visited the factory at least four times. In fact, I turned down an invitation for another visit in preparation for this review. Turning down any trip to Italy is crazy, but I didn't feel the need to see the factory again.⁴

As Advertised: "Limitless Immersion"

The Wilson Alexxes were rolled out and the Sonus Fabers were wheeled in—the installers positioned the Aidas and adjusted each speaker's three level knobs. I listened.

Immediately, I noticed that the Alexxes' intense three-dimensional imaging and image specificity had been replaced by slightly more diffuse, less-well-focused images, mitigated in great part by the immensity of the soundstage in every direction: width, height, and especially depth.

The soundstage was not only huge, it was properly proportioned, in part because the setup guys knew how to correctly adjust the Sound Field Shaper's Depth control—which obviously affected more than just the depth dimension. And the imaging was better than fine: sufficiently well-focused, and correctly sized for the generous picture. The Aidas worked perfectly well in my relatively modestly sized room.

Once I'd grown accustomed to the Aidas' spectacular reproduction of space—the first thing that hit me and every visitor—I realized that their overall frequency response must be among the flattest and most full-range of any speaker I've reviewed in this room. So much inner detail and delicacy was easily revealed by the Voice of Sonus Faber module, with all its renowned delicacy, warmth, timbral, and textural richness intact, but minus some of the much older speakers' top-end politeness and overly velvet transients—at least according to some listeners.

The Aida's reproduction of the upper octaves was ideal: neither bright and tizzy nor recessed and in need of sparkle. That's why it was possible to switch from Beethoven's Ninth directly to Bob Ludwig's noncompressed version of "Whole Lotta Love"—which has among the most spectacular cymbal strokes on a rock record—and not have to make excuses. The cymbal attacks were as clean, precise, metallic, and properly aggressive as any rocker might want, with generous sustain and ideal decay.

If you really want to drop dead with pleasure, as in *Records to Die For*, listen through the Aidas to Herbert Downes and Jacqueline Du Pré's *Music for Viola and Cello* (LP, Parlophone CSD 1499/Electric Recording Company ERC 028), preferably while gazing at a photo

of Du Pré. This 1963 recording includes a performance of Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia* on "Greensleeves," with harp accompaniment, that might stop your heart, and a Bach-Gounod "Ave Maria" with deep organ notes that also might do the trick. And if they don't, maybe the price will—only 300 copies have been pressed, at £500 each. But an original will cost you considerably more.

Du Pré's cello sat between the speakers, appropriately warm, sheen-y, and three-dimensional, while the harp, at stage left, had true, precise transient attacks and was not at all soft or over-romantic.

My go-to record for transient clarity and attack precision is John Renbourn's *Sir John Alot of Merrie Englandes Musyke Thyng & ye Grene Knyghte* (UK LP, Transatlantic TRA 167). Don't bother with the US edition on Reprise, which has added reverb that ruins *everything*. Renbourn's acoustic guitar is accompanied by Terry Cox's finger cymbals, African drums and glockenspiel, and Ray Warleigh's flute, all recorded by John Wood at Sound Techniques. (I tried to get an interview with Wood when the recordings he made with Nick Drake for Island were reissued, but he insisted that he'd have nothing interesting to say. No enticement worked.)

The Aida revealed everything you'd want to hear from this intimately recorded sonic gem: the precise attacks of Renbourn's guitar, the ringing transparency of the finger-cymbal attacks and sustains, the delicate texture of the drum skin that, to sound correct, must be neither too hard and cardboardy nor too soft and lacking in skin tone.

I can't imagine that any listener would find the Aida too laid-back or too aggressive, though of course associated equipment always plays a big role in a system's sound. What I heard was smooth in the best sense of the word, and not at all smoothed over.

No doubt my room's bass bump at around 50Hz, with a suckout between 60 and 110Hz, will show up in John Atkinson's measurements, and those who can't distinguish what they see from what they hear will "see" the bump as "boomy bass"—but what I hear in this room from well-designed speakers is deep, authoritative bass from recordings that contain such information, with no perceivable overhang. Or, as Siegfried Linkwitz (of Linkwitz-Reilly crossover fame) recently said to me, "You get cues from the eye, but some things that look gross in the frequency response, the ear says, 'I don't care.'" The Aida's bottom end was fast, powerful, deep, and unobtrusive—it appeared only when summoned by the recording, and never during the entire listening period did it appear as "bass." It



⁴ During one such visit, to hear the limited-edition Ex3ma speaker, designed to celebrate Sonus Faber's 30th anniversary, I was asked by then-CEO Mauro Grange to pick up a sledgehammer and help him destroy a carbon-fiber mold—see <https://youtu.be/953qRXnaff4>.

was always attached to the music, never stuck in the box.

For \$130,000/pair you should get full bottom-end response delivered powerfully, without compression or mechanical aftertaste, and with a sensation of ease. The Aida did that. For electric bass, try *Jaco Pastorius* (LP, Epic EK 33949/ORG 114); for acoustic double bass, Ray Brown's *Souler Energy* (two 45rpm, 200gm LPs, Concord Jazz 4468/Analogue Productions AAPJ 268-45).

But the real bass success for this speaker happened at the bottom of the Ninth. (Haw.) Not all that conversant with classical-music terminology, I did an online search to find the best way to describe what I'm talking about. What came up was *fart*. That's the word British conductor Roger Norrington (now 84) used to describe a passage near the end of this symphony, just after the choir envisions God: an intervention by two bassoons, contrabassoon, and bass drum, at a new tempo and on the wrong beat of the bar, in the wrong key.

The Aidas' reproduction of this passage was as vividly believable as it was incredible. *What did I just hear?* I thought. *How can a speaker manage that?* The bass drum's tight definition, extension, and power, plus its positioning in three-dimensional space—the way it just *appeared* was a sensational experience, the first time and every time I played it—which was often. I played it for the Sonus Faber guys and for John Atkinson, but neither said nor telegraphed anything about what they were about to hear. John's first comment was about that bass drum and Beethoven's musical fart, that he had never heard the positioning of the instruments in the surrounding space so clearly resolved.

After the Aidas' departure, I reinstalled the Wilson Audio Alexxes and played Rattle's recording of the Ninth. I knew the soundstage wouldn't be quite as immense—I'd already given that up by swapping in the Alexxes for Wilson's Alexandria XLFs, which had indeed produced soundscapes of similarly grand size, to get the Alexxes' better bass and more transparent midrange—but I didn't expect to be so thoroughly disappointed by the far less visceral attack and loss of definition of the bass drum. It was a serious and surprising letdown—and I love the Alexxes.

Conclusions: All Romance Is Gone

The new Aida is Paolo Tezzon's most brilliant and meticulously crafted design.

Rightly or wrongly, many audio enthusiasts associate Sonus Faber speakers with a "romantic" sound, and thus feel that they're better suited to acoustic music, especially classical. That's probably more true of the company's stand-mounted than its floorstanding models. But after reviewing the original Amati Homage in June 1999,⁵ I bought a pair—and I listen to a *lot* of rock. I experienced no problems with rock through the Amati Homages.

In that review I described the Amati Homage's sound as being "more emotionally and physically alive" than I'd been used to hearing, and I was enticed by its ability to express "tiny volume modulations, subtle nuances of amplitude phrasing I had never been aware of."

In his Measurements section, JA wrote: "While some of the Amati Homage's measurements are excellent, there is nothing to indicate why Michael Fremer was so enamored of the speaker's sound. Indeed, some of the measurements, such as of the speaker's bass performance, raise more questions than they answer."

I didn't take that last line seriously until, shortly after

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog Sources Turntables: Continuum Audio Labs Caliburn (with Castellon stand), Technics SL-1000R, VPI Avenger. Tonearms: Swedish Analog Technologies SAT & SAT LM-09, Kuzma 4Point. Cartridges: DS Audio Master 1 (plus equalizer); Grado Epoch (mono); Lyra Atlas, Atlas SL, Atlas SL Mono, Etna, Etna SL; Miyajima Laboratory Zero (mono); Ortofon MC Century Anna A95.

Digital Sources dCS Rossini CD Player, AVM 8.2 preamplifier-DAC, Lynx Hilo A/D-D/A converter, Meridian Digital Media System, Pure Vinyl & Vinyl Studio software.

Preamplification darTZeel NHB-18S, Ypsilon MC-10L & MC-16L step-up transformers; CH Precision P1 (with X1 power supply), Ypsilon VPS-100 phono preamplifiers.

Power Amplifiers darTZeel NHB 458 monoblocks.

Loudspeakers Wilson Audio Specialties Alexx.

Cables Interconnect: Chord Company Sarum T (S/PDIF), Luminous Audio Technology Silver Reference, Stealth Sakra & Indra, TARA Labs Zero Evolution & Zero & Air Evolution, Teresonic Clarison Gold. Speaker: TARA Labs Omega EvolutionSP. AC: AudioQuest Dragon, Dynamic Design Heritage AE15 Digital.

Accessories AudioQuest Niagara 7000 power conditioners; Oyaide AC wall box & receptacles; ASC Tube Traps; RPG BAD, Skyline, Abffusor panels; Stillpoints Aperture Room panels; Synergistic Research UEF products (various); Symposium Acoustics Ultra platform; HRS Signature SXR, Stillpoints ESS stands; Finite Elemente Pagode amplifier stands; Audiodharma Cable Cooker; Furutech record demagnetizer & deStat; Audiodesktopsysteme Gläss Pro, Loricraft PRC4 Deluxe record-cleaning machines.

—Michael Fremer

buying the Amati Homages, I moved to where I now live. I simply could not get them to work in my new room. I don't know why, but the bass was weak—as if I'd spent all that money on a small two-way speaker.

Here, in the same room, Sonus Faber's new Aida produced some of the best low-frequency response I've heard—much like that of Marten's Coltrane III, which made me realize how much better my room's bass could be than what I'd been getting from the Wilson Alexandria XLF. The Wilson Alexx fixed that. And now the Aida II—which costs 6.5 times the price of the Amati Homage in 1999—fixes it even better.

The rest of what the Aida does—especially its ability to perfectly hang together without ever revealing a sonic seam (an amazing design feat, considering its considerable complexity), and how well it performed with every type of music I played, or against any checklist of sonic parameters you might come up with—produced the kind of sonic thrills and solid, believable musical performance to which \$130,000 entitles you. And my experience tells me that you needn't fear putting a pair of them in a room of relatively modest size.

Paolo Tezzon has produced a masterpiece of a loudspeaker that both honors Sonus Faber's glorious past and moves it confidently into the future. This lady isn't fat, but she sure can sing! ■

⁵ See www.stereophile.com/floorloudspeakers/139/index.html.