

# Franco Serblin Accordo

At long last, we get our hands on the iconic Franco Serblin Accordo. Does it redefine the small loudspeaker?  
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Keith Howard**

**W**e may have waited over five years to review the Franco Serblin Accordo but, as I found within five seconds of switching them on, it was worth the hold-up. The Accordo is one of the late Franco Serblin's last designs, chronologically falling in between the Ktama and the Ligneia, and its appeal to the archetypal British audiophile is blatantly overwhelming. With its predecessor and follow-up both floorstanders, the Accordo differs as a petite two-way standmount, complete with a 740mm angled pedestal. The Accordo is sold in mirror-imaged pairs, in walnut for £7500 with the integral stands, or in high-gloss grey for an additional £300.

*'What nailed me to the chair was a mere two drum beats'*

## DREAMS FULFILLED

Carrying on the Serblin legacy after Franco's untimely passing in 2013 is his son-in-law, Massimiliano Favella. He explained that the Accordo was born of Franco's love for small speakers, "for their discreet presence and for their suitability in less critical environments, for the "magic" which they often are able to recreate". The Accordo was designed with its uniquely shaped cabinet and a stand encasing the crossover network as the ultimate solution to avoid transducer interference.

In keeping with Franco's strict criteria, Accordos are made from solid walnut. Because of this, 'All the processes to obtain one single cabinet require lot of time. The drying of the wood to get the right stability requires six to eight months at least. Everything is undertaken in Vicenza: the aluminium chroming treatment, the stainless steel spikes and bolts hand-brushed under strictly quality control, the sound checking – that's the reason we can only produce a few batches per year.

I know Franco's name is famous and I want to keep the brand going, and to pay homage to his design philosophy'.

Favella's company continues to produce all three of the Franco Serblin speakers, but he also revealed 'During the last two years, I have been working on a fourth model that he left to me. It is taking time and care to achieve good sound and ideal aesthetics,

but Franco taught me that if you have the passion, then dreams can come true'.

With the Accordo, you quickly see the cabinet's extreme asymmetry, and this angularity ensures that set-up is achingly

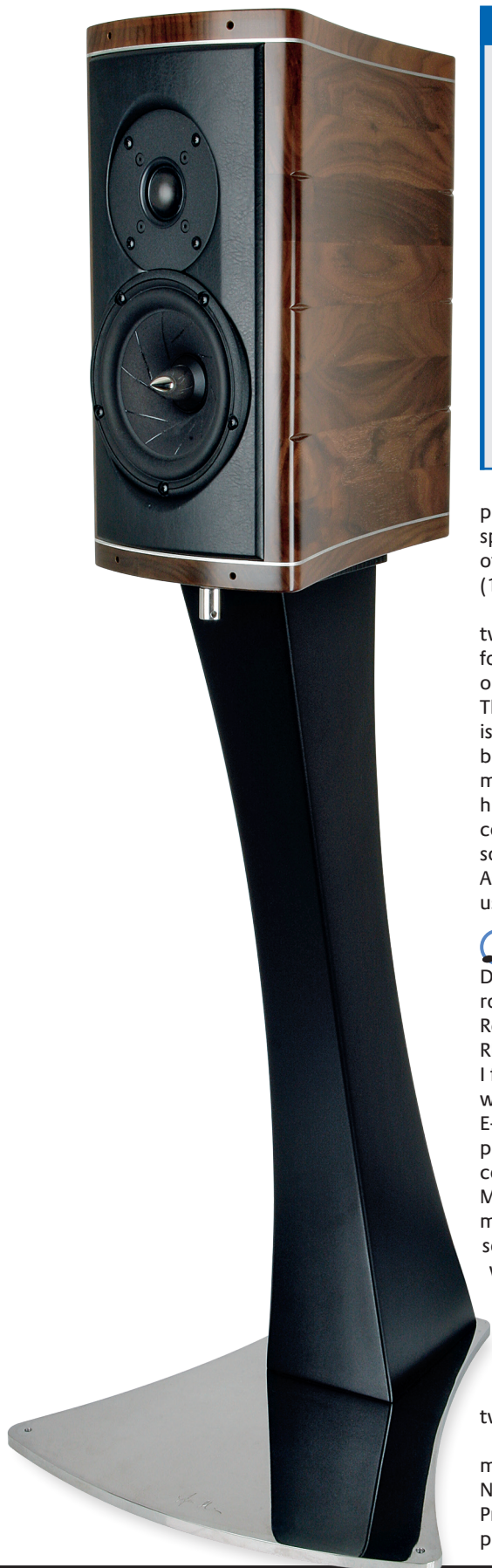
critical. The only speakers I can think of with as strict a positioning regime are Wilson's, sited to the centimetre, and, unsurprisingly, most Sonus fabers – both Serblin era and post-Serblin.

As expected of Franco, the sculpted looks are augmented by build quality of the highest order and the arch-shaped enclosure is reinforced with a 'decoupling aluminium-magnesium component to obtain resonance control'. The appearance is enhanced by grilles made up of elastic strings, a concept directly descending from the original Sonus faber Guarneri, while the black columns sit on massive chrome bases to prevent them from tipping over. As I've just mentioned, these uprights also contain the crossover networks and multi-way binding posts near their base.

On the top of the stand is an aperture through which a pro-grade cinch connector emerges, mating with a female connector on the speaker's underside, while the top

**RIGHT:** The elegantly-shaped cabinets are mirror images of each other and combine a 29mm silk-dome tweeter with a 150mm pulp-coned mid/bass unit. The detachable 'grille' is composed of black elastic strands





## THE MAN, THE BRAND

How do I write about one of my mentors, without getting all misty-eyed? Whatever anyone cares to posit, Franco Serblin, through his first brand, Sonus faber, did more to influence the look of dynamic speakers than any designer since the early 1980s. Although Serblin was not trained in electronics, he was a passionate music lover and a true aesthete. He grasped – decades before those who followed – that hi-fi was suffering because of the domestic unacceptability of cumbersome boxes. Serblin chose instead to house the drivers and crossovers in boxes made of real wood, with furniture-grade finishes, and with the edges rounded. They looked sculptural rather than coffin-like.

He pioneered unusual grilles, tapered-back enclosures, stands that didn't look like surplus scaffolding. Almost every major speaker brand has since aped the Sonus faber 'look' in one way or another. His eponymous sequel to Sonus faber continues his belief that speakers must recreate the soundstage with great accuracy if everything else is to be correct. Why the huge success of Sonus faber? Simple: the speakers sounded as beautiful as they looked.

plate is drilled for two bolts that lock the speaker to the stand. Overall, it's a thing of beauty, so svelte that its overall height (1.1m) is countered by the sheer sleekness.

Inside the cabinet is a 29mm silk-dome tweeter designed by Sonus faber co-founder Ragnar Lian, and the result of an on-going project that ran for over 30 years. The 150mm 'sliced paper' cone mid-woofer is custom-made and optimised to control break-up. The crossover uses Serblin's minimalist approach, first experienced in his Sonus faber period – low-order, 'phase coherent', and voiced 'to achieve precise soundstaging, focus and depth of image'. As with everything about the Accordo, it uses premium parts.

### PERCUSSIVE THRILLS

Desperate to hear the Accordos in my room, I wired them up to my Audio Research REF 6 preamp [*HFN* May 16] and REF 75SE power amp with Crystal Cable. I fed it with LP after LP via my SME 30/12, with London Gold cartridge via an EAT E-Glo phono stage. As much as I wish to portray the first salvo in a rush to play concomitant with a virgin male meeting his Mrs Robinson for the first time, it was far more measured than that. I followed the set-up guidance for toe-in, distances from walls, with or without a foam bung in the rear port. These speakers demand as much free space as you can give them. They sounded best with the drivers pointed to an apex of a triangle just in front of the seat, and with one's ears at tweeter height.

A single adjective kept popping into my head, regardless of the music: silky. No, I didn't turn to Boz Scaggs or the Pretty Things so I could torment you with puns. As it turned out, I was listening to

open-reel tapes (via a Sony TC-755) when the Accordos arrived, and kicked off the sessions with the US pre-recorded tape of *Beatles VI* [Capitol L2358] – the Americans' mash-up of *Beatles For Sale* and the UK version of *Help!*. It was a life-changer, hot on the heels of stacked LS3/5As, in part because I was still reeling (!) from the sound of the Fab Four on tape.

Like all Yankee baby boomers, I 'hear' US rather than UK track listings, and this was always one of my favourite LPs because it contained five of my all-time most-loved mop-top masterpieces. What nailed me to the chair was a mere two drum beats at 30 seconds into 'Every Little Thing'. Stage right, a couple of hammerings of the tomtom (or timpani?) delivered the percussive thrills I usually expect only of Kodo drums via some loony-tunes audiophile pressing. Despite an absence of truly deep, quartet-of-15in-woofer-type bass, the minuscule Accordos delivered the proper, complete and convincing sensation of man pounding a taut drumhead, moving lots of air. A small, simple thing, but the authenticity was undeniable, confirmed by the more powerful percussive opening to 'What You're Doing'.

### IN THE ROOM

Ah, what a reveal! 'Tell Me What You See' for harmonies, tambourine and electric piano. The build-up and the clapping on 'Eight Days A Week.' The luscious, lyrical and utterly peerless guitar twanging that opens and underscores 'Words Of Love'. And the vocals! So natural, so sibilance-free, so, so *in-the-room!* I could go on... so how to dispel accusations of foregone conclusions? Despite all my prejudices, a part of me is even tougher than might be deemed necessary on anything toward ➔



## FRANCO SERBLIN ACCORDO

Were the Accordo to achieve its specified 87dB sensitivity it would be a surprise for so diminutive a cabinet, so it was predictable that it shouldn't. Our pink noise figure of 85.1dB (200Hz-20kHz) is much more in line with expectations for a standmount speaker of this size. Franco Serblin could have opted to increase it a little by lowering the impedance further but appears to have chosen to keep the Accordo relatively easy to drive. Our measured minimum of 4.1ohm is slightly above the specified nominal figure of 4ohm, which is unusual, and impedance phase angles are sufficiently well controlled, particularly at low frequencies, that the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) bottoms out at 2.2ohm/127Hz, although a second dip to 2.4ohm/457Hz complicates the issue.

Forward frequency responses for the review pair, measured at a distance of 1m on the tweeter axis, show a slightly downward trend [see Graph 1, below] through the presence band after which there is narrow 4dB suckout near 5kHz and shelved up upper-treble output thereafter. Response errors are a little high at  $\pm 4.4$ dB and  $\pm 3.9$ dB, respectively, as is the pair matching error of  $\pm 1.3$ dB over the same 200Hz-20kHz frequency range. Diffraction correction for such an unusual cabinet shape is difficult but our nearfield measurement of bass response shows its extension to reach 62Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz) rising a little to 70Hz with the foam port bungs inserted. High distortion at 100Hz was to be expected given the diameter of the bass-mid driver but 1.5% at 1kHz (90dB/1m) was still disappointing. The measurement was repeated with the same result. The CSD waterfall [Graph 2] reveals a series of treble resonances. KH

**LEFT:** The solid wood cabinet 'hand crafted by master artisans' is further reinforced with aluminium/magnesium alloy. The speaker terminals, and crossover, are isolated within the stand

masterpiece – it was wall-to-wall stereo, with every instrument enjoying its own turf, and with possibly the best front-to-back depth I've encountered this side of a Quad '57. I could hear Franco's measured tones, telling me about why his speakers had a 'hot seat' for optimum listening. Sure, they're fine off-axis, but the prime listening seat, with everything in focus, yields about as convincing a 3D space as one could desire. Yet this is not a speaker for everyone, because – convincing scale and abundant detail aside – its lower registers are typical of a speaker limited by a 150mm woofer. They are lightweight, and bass addicts might find them wanting.

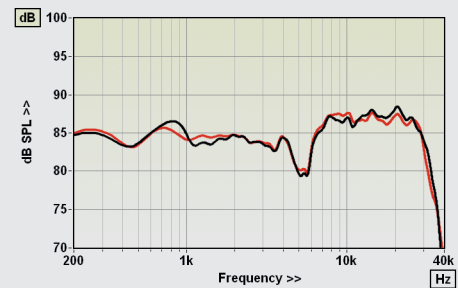
### A BIG HIT

Fortuitously, a batch of RCA 'Living Stereo's came my way thanks to an old friend, so I was feeding the Accordos with what are generally regarded as some of the best-sounding LPs ever issued. Perez Prado's *Big Hits By Prado* [RCA LSP-2104] is a perfectly recorded orchestra, and all it took was a burst of 'Cherry Pink And Apple Blossom White', with the volume turned up to much louder than one expects of a small box, to hear that orchestra in my room. And, yes, it was, indeed, as 'silky' as could be. Brass that punches like Tyson... shimmer... sheen. I'm in love. ☺

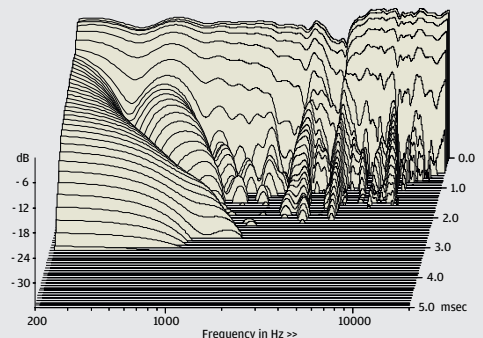
### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Take this with a caveat, as I'm biased toward 1) small, beautiful speakers and 2) anything Italian. That said, my reaction heightened by years of anticipation, the Accordo is one of the most alluring, nay, seductive speakers I have ever heard. It commandeers the term 'musical' and makes it its own, the way Joe Cocker stole 'With A Little Help From My Friends.' Forgive the melodrama, but this is a speaker 'to die for.'

Sound Quality: 87%



ABOVE: The Accordo's response shows a slightly recessed presence band but a bright treble thereafter



ABOVE: The solid little cabinet is well damped but driver resonances are visible through the treble >4kHz

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	86.1dB/85.1dB/84.5dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	4.1ohm @ 192Hz 33.6ohm @ 2.4kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-48° @ 104Hz 52° @ 1.3kHz
Pair matching/Response Error (200Hz–20kHz)	$\pm 1.3$ dB/ $\pm 4.4$ dB/ $\pm 3.9$ dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	62Hz / 33.2kHz/31.3kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.8% / 1.5% / 0.3%
Dimensions (HWD)	360x190x360mm



which I might seem pre-disposed. So I turned to a milestone album that was of dubious sonic worth.

Yes, Derek & the Dominos' *Layla* has been 'audiophiled' to death despite its occasionally muddy, murky sound – which actually suits the swamp-rock nature of the album. While its stereo properties are beyond question, it takes something like the latest Mobile Fidelity two-LP version [MFSL 2-470] to peel away a layer of grunge. What *Layla* did for me was provide a taste of – if not quite the final word on – the Accordo's ability to convey a sense of grandeur in direct opposition to its diminutive size.

A Spectorian wall of sound filled the room, but – unlike a Spector