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Issue 161

APRIL/MAY 2006

Sonus Faber Concerto Domus Loudspeaker

Making You Feel Right At Home.

Neil Gader

Since the word “domus” is Latin for house or home, it is safe to conclude that Sonus Faber’s new Domus Series of loudspeakers has been designed for any media habitat, the aim being to please both music (stereo or multichannel) and home-theater aficionados.¹ Although technically positioned as Sonus Faber’s entry-level line, the Domus speakers are imbued with so many of the physical and sonic virtues of the Italian speaker-maker’s more expensive Classic and Homage Series offerings that even the faithful will likely be fooled. I was.

Like any of the fine Sonus Faber speakers from founder/designer Franco Serblin, the new Domus Series builds upon its predecessors’ strengths. Along with increases in interior volume it borrows the Concert line’s decoupling of the side panels for cabinet-resonance control, while the elegant arching of its solid walnut panels are clearly inspired by the Cremona line. Fitted out with Sonus’ trademark leather-effect material on the front and top panels, the Domus comes to market richly appointed technically, and ripe with the charisma that Sonus Faber and Serblin have cultivated—an Old World aesthetic replete with classical forms and shapely allusions to the art of the master violin and lute builders of Cremona. Its cabinet is “tuned” by the same means that the great stringed-instrument builders used to create the characteristic sound of their prized instruments—with bracing, varying wood thicknesses, and varnishes. Mystique or marketing, to gaze upon a Sonus Faber loudspeaker is to almost smell the pungent aroma of golden varnish or feel the fine grit of ebony dust on your fingertips.

The Concerto Domus is the smaller of two floorstanders in the Domus Series. It’s a two-way bass-reflex design with a forward-firing port. Like all Sonus Faber speakers, the Scandinavian-sourced drivers are manufactured to Serblin’s specs



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and further tricked out at the factory. In a clever bit of engineering, Sonus Faber has ensured smooth driver integration by physically scalloping the tweeter’s mounting plate where it abuts the mid/bass driver’s frame. The semi-gloss cabinet-work is exemplary, the gently arched side panels terminating in smoothly radiused edges at the rear. Domus also features the vented-phase-plug design premiered in Sonus’ Stradavari Homage flagship—a design that boasts exceptionally low compression characteristics. The single pair of binding posts is top notch. For added stability, a heavy, black-crackle, steel pedestal bolts to the bottom of the speaker. Adjustable spikes let you angle the Concerto back a few degrees to mechanically time-align the silk ring-radiator tweeter with the mid/bass transducer.

This was the first Sonus I’ve had for evaluation since my visit to the factory a couple of years ago for the debut of its flagship, the Stradavarius. At a tenth the cost of the Strad you’d expect some epic sonic differences in the area of dynamics and extension, and you wouldn’t be entirely wrong. But in terms of the Concerto Domus’ *voice*, the bloodline was unmistakable. That voice was an expressive one, a hint darker in character with a seductive overall warmth that was utterly non-fatiguing across the octaves. The Concerto is virtually incapable of reproducing a sterile-sounding note. The bass, which extends confidently into the upper 30Hz range, was well defined and generally well controlled with a warmth in the midbass that, at its best, enriched acoustic bass lines, bassoons, and bass drums. The treble frequencies, while not ruler-flat, were unprickly and had an inherent sweetness that plainly speaks to the quality of the ring-radiator tweeter. Overall, its spectral balance was comparatively even, marked by benign undulations in a couple of frequency bands—a shallow dip in the presence region, and a bump or resonance in the midbass—that the ear easily integrates into the listening experience.

¹ The Domus line also includes the Grand Piano floorstander, the stand-mounted Concertino, its wall-mount cousin the Wall Domus, the Center Domus, and a subwoofer, Gravis Domus. The entire line is magnetically shielded.

Like its forbears, the Concerto Domus doesn't study sound through the lens of a clinician. Rather, it treats music in a holistic way, not segmented into a dry checklist of audiophile criteria. In short, the Concerto Domus has the soul of the Romantic. The result is a sensation that frequencies across the bandwidth are in harmony with one another and dynamically open.

The most obvious beneficiaries of this were vocals of all stripes. For example, the deep sonorities of a bass-baritone like Bryn Terfel singing "Shenandoah" [*Sings Favourites*, DG] were lush and expressive. Similarly Claire Martin's "Black Coffee" [*Too Darn Hot*, Linn SACD] revealed a full-bodied vocal presence with all the sizzle of a live performance.


The Concerto Domus' soundstage was wide with better than average dimensionality—a listening perspective that was relaxed but not distant. Although it's not a physically large speaker by any means, its sonic images do not undergo death-ray miniaturization. During Lisa Gerard's "Who Are We To Say" [*A Thousand Roads*, Wide

Blue Sky], the Concerto produced a wide, vibrant soundstage where the output from surging string crescendos kept increasing in volume but remained firmly rooted in position on stage. Images were cleanly delineated without the deadly etch of artificiality. Similarly, the Domus recovered low-level details without drama. During Jackson Browne's "Color of the Sun" [*Greatest Hits*, Asylum] there's an alternating high-hat figure that varies in intensity and character with each strike—distinctions that go along way to conjuring up the live listening experience. Hearing details like these were one of the great pleasures of spending time with the Concerto. As I expected from a Serblin-designed two-way, driver integration was superior, the sweetspot comfortably large. You'd think this issue would be a slam-dunk with contemporary two-ways but driver discontinuities continue to plague many so-called high-end designs.

However, topping my lengthy list of positive impressions was the Concerto's cool combination of mid-band dynamic liveliness and lower-range oomph—muscular attributes that I don't normally associate with Sonus speakers in the way that I might with, say, a Revel or a Krell. I know it sounds odd, but this is a Sonus that does Slayer as well as Schubert—Korn as well as Korngold. Take as examples the propulsive kick-drum intro of The Police's "Murder By Numbers" [*Synchronicity*, A&M] or the bottomless, flat-pick electric bass of Mary Chapin-Carpenter's live version of "Stones in the Road" [*Party Doll*, Columbia], and you'll hear how the elegant little Concerto hides a bit of the beast beneath all the beauty. And more to the point, its gutsiness in the low end rarely interferes with the finer points of bass pitch and definition. At least some of the credit must go to the inert enclosure—throughout my

evaluations it was for all intents and purposes invisible.

Ultimately, however, even the most grandiloquent two-way hits the dynamic wall. At its limits there was a sense of the port shouldering more of the burden and of the otherwise-well-disciplined bottom end growing a bit underdamped. But only moderately. There was never any conspicuous chuffing or overhang to give away the location of the speaker. Of greater significance was the slight softness of leading-edge dynamics in the uppermids/lower treble—an occasional lack of zip and attack on transients. No doubt an effect intertwined with the pinch of brilliance in the mid-treble, it was most often characterized by a subtle rounding of the edges of percussion instruments—i.e., the initial tick of the stick on the high-hat or the tickle of the upper-octave ivories on piano.

This trait can be an enhancement, however. On the Bryn Terfel recording, for example, the Concerto sweetens edgy moments by rounding off Terfel's more aggressive vocal peaks. By the same token, it can also cast some shade over the ultimate transparency of great recordings. In a market where viability literally depends on catching the ear of the consumer, the Concerto Domus neither points, punctuates, underlines, nor exclaims its merits. Rather, it achieves an exquisite equilibrium of virtues. The Sonus Faber Domus Concerto is about refinement and balance and musicality. It's a speaker that I would be proud to welcome into my home, any time. 

DISTRIBUTION INFORMATION

SUMIKO AUDIO

2431 Fifth Street
Berkeley, California 94710
(510) 841-4500
sumikoaudio.net
Price: \$3595

SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way floorstanding loudspeaker
Driver complement: 1" ring-radiator tweeter, 7" coated-paper mid/bass
Frequency response: 35Hz–20kHz
Sensitivity: 88dB
Impedance: 4 ohms
Dimensions: 8.25" x 39" x 12.25"
Weight: 50 lbs.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Sota Cosmos Series III turntable; SME V pick-up arm; Shure V15VxMR cartridge; Sony DVP-9000ES, Simaudio Moon Supernova; Plinius 9200 integrated amplifier; REL Britannia B3 subwoofer; Nordost Blue Heaven and Kimber Kable BiFocal XL, and Wireworld Equinox III cables; Wireworld Silver Electra & Kimber Paddian power cords; Richard Gray line conditioners

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