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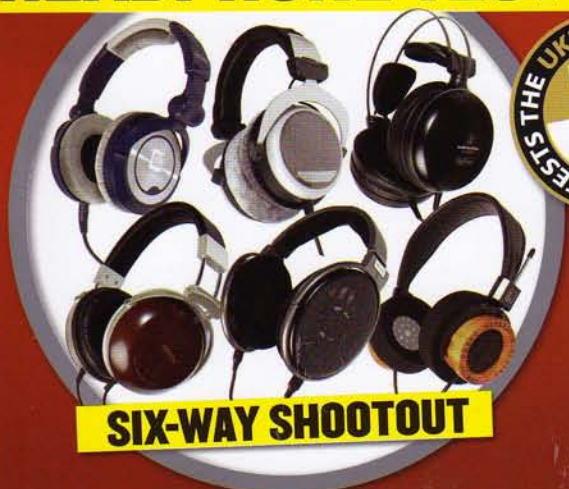
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A rare vintage

Classic speaker from Sonus faber is reprised in its original form

PRODUCT Sonus faber Minima Vintage

TYPE Standmount loudspeaker

PRICE £2,150 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 20x33x27.5cm

• Weight: 6.9kg • Drivers: 28mm soft fabric dome tweeter • 120mm cellulose midrange • Sensitivity: 84dB • Impedance: 8 ohms • Enclosure: solid hardwood, leather coverings on baffle and rear

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The Italians wrote the book on high-class compact loudspeakers, partly through availability of fine sustainable homegrown hardwoods, plus a particular

affinity for high-quality craftsmanship in the design and build of loudspeaker enclosures. Last month (*HFC 311*) we looked at one excellent example, the Opera Callas, with its novel five tweeter arrangement. But Sonus faber is probably the most celebrated example of them all and the Minima is the model that started the trend. Indeed it was Sonus faber's first loudspeaker and it has been reintroduced to the market in its original form. Aficionados will be familiar with this model, but others are in for a treat. Although traditional in terms of technology, the voicing and attention to detail mark it out from others in its class.

Technically it is a straightforward two-way vented design intended for use on tall pedestal stands. The enclosure has a capacity of just six litres and is constructed from solid Italian walnut staves, which are grain-oriented and glued together. The baffle and rear are covered in leather, which is designed to help with dispersion of midrange energy (in the case of the front covering) and the enclosures have smoothly rounded edges to help control diffraction. The enclosure is heavy and solid, with almost no resonant signature when rapped thanks to the solid construction. The use of the word Vintage in the model name is

particularly appropriate for the enclosure, which has what appears to be an oiled finish over a highly figured grain. In fact, Sonus faber use what is claimed to be a medium-gloss ecologically sensitive varnish. The appearance is very classy and luxurious, especially when offset by the leather coverings. The adjustable stands feel as solid as a rock and are designed to be adjusted according to your seating. In addition, the speakers can be tilted on their adjustable spiked feet.

The moving parts consist of a 120mm cellulose acrylate cone driver with a vented basket and a 28mm ferrofluid-cooled, doped soft-fabric-dome tweeter, which are crossed

unspecified reasons and the back is now dressed in leather, which probably has little effect, other than to provide some additional damping for the rear panel.

SOUND QUALITY

Although it bears the name of one of Sonus faber's most well-respected early models, we've actually had little experience of its namesake, allowing us to approach the Minima Vintage as a completely new model, without unrealistic expectations.

Despite which, it comes across as a typical high-class thoroughbred compact of the old-school, with a slightly shy lower bass and a matching roll off in the extreme treble.

“One curiosity of the Minima Vintage is that the design is virtually identical in both its original and current incarnations.”

over by a first order (6dB/octave) network centred on 2kHz. Sensitivity is low at 84dB, which begs comparison with the BBC's LS3/5a. Impedance is 8ohms and power handling (slightly optimistically) is rated at up to 100 watts, but the speaker does exhibit some signs of strain if pushed too hard.

One curiosity of the Minima Vintage is that the design is virtually identical in both its original and current incarnations. The new model has the same drivers and enclosure as the original Minima, which dates back to the early '90s. The only differences are that the basket for the mid/woofer has been changed for

Then the Minima Vintage is clearly at its most comfortable in the mid and upper midband – where a lot of musical fundamentals are placed – and also the main part of the voice region, 300Hz - 2kHz or so. Here it sounds expressive, subtle and unboxy, with a typical Sonus faber warmth and grace. The lowest couple of octaves are on the lightweight side, but not without a hint of muscularity. It does, however, require a subwoofer (see below) to develop further here.

On the whole, the slight loss of top end is no big deal: it merely underlines the quintessentially Italianesque warmth and grace of the design. Of course, there is some marginal loss of very fine detail, though not predominantly on the main (forward) tweeter axis and one consequence is that the new Minima (and presumably this applies equally to the original) is not as analytical as some.

It is more in BBC LS3/5a speaker territory than a modern studio monitor, though it is surely a much better animal overall. Where there is a noticeable loss, is in the reverberant field, which is driven by the tweeter's off-axis dispersion, which is not quite as broad as some. On axis it sounds sharp and precise at low to normal listening levels. But the tweeter doesn't have the headroom of some more recent designs. Push the speaker hard and the treble becomes rather peaky, keep pushing and eventually it generates some grain. But, at moderate levels, which should suffice for all but the most extreme situations, the tweeter is smooth and sweet.

Using the speaker with a subwoofer helps as its performance is limited by the air-moving ability of the diminutive 120mm bass/mid cone. The rear-facing port is tuned to cover the upper bass, centred around an estimated 65Hz. Given this, the bass is quite full and sonorous in balance with everyday material.

We did spend some of the review period, however, with a truly high-class subwoofer, namely the MartinLogan Descent i, which is as superb an advocate for music as it is for home cinema. The effect it has is to immeasurably increase the range of tonal colours, making organ pedal and low notes on the piano noticeable for the first time. It also greatly increases the depth and sonority of orchestral material, whilst more generally expanding the dynamics of the sound.

In one remarkable example, Anton Webern's *Im Sommerwind's Idyl for Large Orchestra* sounded, without LF reinforcement, emasculated and diminished in scale. The subwoofer also needs to be carefully set up, but when this is done, the match is remarkably good, with no obvious discontinuity in the sound across the audio band.

In no sense, other than size, is this your archetypal compact. In some respects its design priorities are somewhat old-fashioned, but loudspeaker technology advances only incrementally on everyday timescales and there is little about the Minima Vintage that could be described as dated. Make no mistake, it is an absolute joy to use for any period of time. It is voiced to perfection, given the natural limitations imposed by its lack of cubic inches and limited cone radiating area. It images superbly too and the slightly romantic warmth of the design is well-judged in this context and works well with the superb aesthetics. **HFC**



VERDICT

SOUND ★★★★★	PRO Classic loudspeaker reintroduced, with impressive musical presentation that seems particularly in tune with classical and acoustic music genres.
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	
BUILD ★★★★★	CON Not designed for high-level use, so rock fans should probably look elsewhere, though it works better than expected with a subwoofer.
VALUE ★★★★★	

CONCLUSION
Fabulous sub-compact designed for standmounting has a warmth and grace that epitomises the finest of the Italian loudspeaker craft, with a solid wood and leather dressed enclosure to match.

HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★

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