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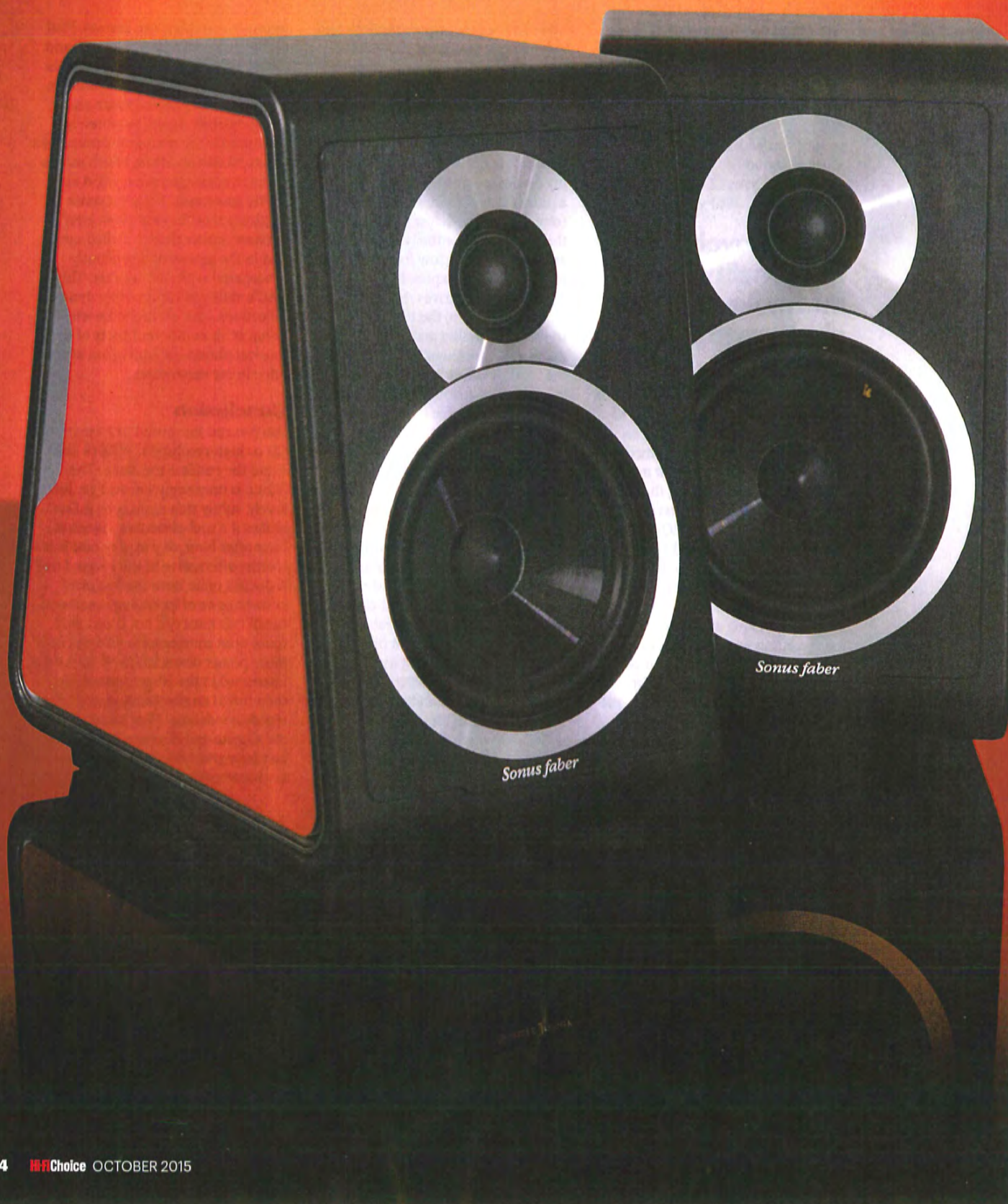
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Show your true colours

David Price is charmed by the pleasing sound of Sonus faber's gorgeous new Chameleon B standmount loudspeaker

There can't be many readers unfamiliar with the work of Sonus faber. This iconic speaker brand from Vicenza, Italy has made distinctive-sounding products for several decades – showing superb attention to detail in the design and an exceptional finish. It's not completely unfair to say that its wares have traditionally better suited classical music, thanks to what used to be called 'a good tone'. More recently, we have begun to see Sonus faber modernising itself. Its redoubtable tradition hasn't been

Its light, breezy character goes up into a wide, spacious midband

thrown out, but – in my opinion at least – there has been a conscious effort to reach new customers.

Actually, you might almost say the marque is deliberately 'going out' to meet new customers, rather than letting them come to it. These speakers are customisable, with a choice of different coloured side panels to suit taste and/or decor, which are easily removed or interchanged. There are six different finishes available, including white, black, metal blue, metal grey, orange and red; one pair (in the colour of your choice is supplied as standard and additional sets cost £145). The main cabinet itself is covered entirely in leather, while the driver flanges get aluminium embellishers. The idea is that the speaker can change as the lives of its owner changes; if you move house or redecorate then you can alter your speaker to suit.

Closer inspection reveals the Chameleon is more than just a pretty face. That distinctive shape is designed to stop the propagation of

standing waves, and the cabinet itself is very well damped for its price. The B version tested here is a two-way reflex ported standmount (the T is a three-way floorstander with reflex port, the C is an infinite baffle centre channel with passive radiator). All share a custom-designed, 29mm doped fabric dome tweeter; the B has a 150mm mid/bass unit with a polypropylene cone and free compression basket, again designed inhouse. The company says that this material is used because it is still the best compromise between cost and quality. The two drivers cross over at 2.5kHz, fairly typical for a two-way.

Electrically, the Chameleon B is of average sensitivity; 87dB is claimed and this means you need around 50W RMS of power for it to really make an impression in a normal-sized room. Nominal impedance is quoted at 4ohm, and Sonus faber says its power handling is 150W. Being reflex ported it shouldn't be rammed right against a boundary wall, but I find it works well fairly close at 25cm or so away. There's also an attractive optional stand, which sits the speaker at an ideal 70cm high – although I discover it sounds good on my less exotic looking Atacamas. I use an Exposure 3010 S2-D amplifier and Chord 2Qute DAC (page 52) with a variety of digital sources, and the speakers really begin to sing when run for a few hours, and are very slightly toed-in towards the listener in my largish listening room.

Sound quality

On a superficial level, the Chameleon B is a good deal livelier and more animated sounding than traditional Sonus fabers, yet it does retain the clarity and smoothness for which the brand has become famous. As such, I think it has been cleverly voiced, and will appeal to a wider age range. You get a punchy, engaging and enjoyable sound, yet it doesn't sound as opaque

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sonus faber
Chameleon B

ORIGIN
Italy

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
6.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
185 x 315 x 283mm

FEATURES
• 29mm fabric
dome tweeter
• 150mm
polypropylene
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity
87dB/1W/1m

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and unobtrusive as one might expect for a pair of what are – by this company's standards – budget boxes.

Kicking off with a track that might be regularly heard in the houses of the fashionable young professionals whom I could see owning a pair of Chameleon Bs, and Coldplay's *A Sky Full Of Stars* sounds spacious and powerful. The recorded acoustic is expansive, the soundstage pushes back surprisingly far in the room and the speaker captures the epic, stadium rock feel of the production. Vocals are smooth, showing no sense of brittleness, and the keyboard has a fulsome, rich, quality. Hi-hat cymbals, are crisp and clear and the steel string guitars strummed in an enjoyably percussive way. All in all, it sounds just right.

Give this speaker something a little more challenging, and things stay fun. *Dance On A Volcano* by Genesis is a typically dry, mid-seventies rock track that's very well recorded but slightly impenetrable. The Sonus faber picks its way through, with a gutsy, propulsive rendition. Bass is, of course, ultimately limited on a speaker that's as compact as this one is, and so it proves; as you'd expect it's missing the bottom octave, although above this it sounds confident and tuneful if it's not asked to do too much physical exertion at high listening levels. Its light, breezy character goes up into a wide, spacious midband that's decently

By switching those side panels you can have a speaker that matches your home decor



Q&A

Fiore Cappelletto
Director of Brands at Fine
Sounds Group



DP: What type of customer is this speaker made for?

FC: We're aiming to involve a wider and younger audience with this new collection of high-quality loudspeakers at an affordable price. At the same time, our classic audiophile customers can be really satisfied by the performance as well. The Chameleon has the typical warm, full-bodied and powerful Sonus faber sound, in line with our DNA.

Why did you decide to offer interchangeable side panels and leather-covered cabinets?

We think it's a very good option – an opportunity for our customers to be free to play with their Chameleon speakers and change the colours when they change their furniture, without spending much money. Because we wanted to maintain the Sonus faber heritage, we used leather just as with our historical speakers.

Why is the speaker cabinet shaped in the distinctive way that it is?

This has been proven to be the simplest and the most effective way to ensure the rigidity and reduction of standing waves, by virtue of the fact that the front panel and the rear are mutually nonparallel. Each Sonus faber loudspeaker uses bass reflex porting to maximise the perception of low frequencies by the listener.

How important is it to Sonus faber customers that products are made in Italy?

The Venere demonstrates that the market is ready for well-made products coming from China, but of course we strongly believe in Italian manufacturing values, especially in the top quality of Sonus faber production department and we want to use it as much as we can.

IN SIGHT



- 1 29mm fabric dome tweeter
- 2 Bi-wireable speaker terminals
- 3 150mm polypropylene mid/bass driver

detailed and very good at conveying timing and dynamic nuances.

In absolute terms, this loudspeaker is a little congested in the midband. Kate Bush's *Snowflake* signposts this, but it's certainly no worse than any of its similarly priced rivals. When the volume goes north, you also begin to be aware of its physical limitations. When playing something like this track, with its powerful, close-miked piano cadences the Sonus faber starts to compress things and begins to falter. Again, it's no surprise for a box of its size and price, but suggests that it's best in smaller-to-medium-sized rooms and wouldn't be a first choice for blaring parties all night.

Locate this speaker in a sensibly proportioned room with a good solid-state amplifier and a decent source and it works a treat. It has the ability to make any music that you play through it fun, yet it doesn't descend into crudeness or hardness at any point and so won't have you hiding behind your designer leather sofa. Even classic reggae, like Gregory Isaacs' *Night Nurse*, has everyone in the house bouncing around, the Chameleon throwing out a very fluid and surprisingly strong bassline allied to a silky cymbal sound. Isaacs' voice sounds rich with some lovely timbral detail, and the recording isn't deconstructed too much – as some price rivals seem to be prone to doing.

Feed it some cleanly recorded jazz and the speaker's talents and foibles are evident in equal measure. It's not a design that you would exactly say came from the 'BBC school' of loudspeaker voicing. That's not necessarily a bad thing of course – my point is that it doesn't have an ultra transparent midband, yet still makes the music highly engaging and pulls

the listener right in. Miles Davis' classic *So What* is most beguiling, as this speaker seems to tune into the emotion of those great players as effortlessly as anything I've heard at or near the price. There's an ever so slightly soft and hazy quality to the upper midband in absolute terms, but this lends a rather romantic feel and the speaker's innately rhythmic nature carries you through. That soaring trumpet is a rare treat through the Chameleon, as is John Coltrane's tenor sax work.

Conclusion

Even when designing relatively cheap and small loudspeakers, the Italians seem able to do it with a flair that eludes so many manufacturers from other countries. The Sonus faber Chameleon B faces stiff competition from several highly capable price rivals, but in the end it just oozes charm and character that makes living with it so much fun. This doesn't just go for the sound either, because the style, construction and even the packaging is superb. Well worth an audition ●

HOW IT COMPARES

Monitor Audio's Silver 2 (HFC 384) is a highly capable rival that's £50 cheaper yet still keeps it honest. Instead of the Italian speakers' warmer, softer polypropylene mid/bass unit, we find a hi-tech RST-coned affair that gives a tighter and ultimately more controlled sound. The ceramic-coated aluminium and magnesium tweeter is crisper and more detailed too. Sonically, the Monitor Audio is more detailed and incisive with less coloration. Still, it seems a little bland and soulless compared with the emotive Italian, even if it is ultimately the better all rounder. It's a classic case of having to listen and choose for yourself.

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OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Big hearted music maker with brio and warmth

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: A little congested across the midband

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Beautifully packaged, stylish speaker with a super sound

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL

