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# Sonus faber Sonetto VIII

The largest model in the Italian company's new 'cost conscious' range is imposing both in stature and sound  
 Review: **James Parker** Lab: **Keith Howard**

Perhaps the best-known Italian speaker company, Sonus faber is celebrating its 35th anniversary this year. Much has changed since it was founded in Monteviale, Italy, and launched its first speaker, the Parva – including the expansion from being a one-brand company to a group encompassing such well-known names as McIntosh and Audio Research – but the principles are still the same. Italian manufacture continues, and the speakers tend to have a style – and a price – marking them out as something a little different from the herd.

In that context, the new Sonetto range, of which the Sonetto VIII speaker we have here is the £5698 flagship, available in wood finishes, matt white and piano black, is almost conventional in its looks. You see, one of the ways Sonus faber is marking its anniversary is not a hugely expensive 'statement design' – after all, this is the company that once hired a Venetian palazzo to launch its huge 'Fenice' speaker [*HFN* Feb '11] before discovering later that there was a bit of a problem with that name and reverting to calling it 'The Sonus faber'. Instead what we have is a range aimed at 'the highest quality in music reproduction within a cost-conscious package'.

## OCTET OF SONETTOS

There are eight models in the Sonetto lineup, which starts with the £1450 Sonetto I and takes in centre-channel and wall-mount speakers. All the elements of the company's design and engineering thinking are present and correct, from the 'lute' shape of the enclosure in plan-view all the way through to hand-stitched leather trims. Indeed, much of what the Sonetto models are about has been trickled down from far higher up in the Sonus faber

catalogue, which tops out with a number of models that have the ominous letters 'POA' beside them.

Built in the company's Vicenza factory, the new series seems to be an acknowledgment that not everyone is after a 'cost no object' speaker. Admittedly almost £6k a pair is hardly 'back of the sofa' change for most of us, but in the context of the company's range, the Sonetto VIII is obviously more real world, and clearly designed for wider appeal.

## ROOM FRIENDLY

That extends to its acoustic design. Yes, it's a big speaker, standing just under 120cm tall with its gunmetal-finished aluminium plinth and spikes attached, and promises a big sound with its triple 18cm bass drivers, but it's designed to be (relatively) room-friendly thanks to a downward venting bass port, which gives some freedom about positioning [see KH's boxout, p57]. A little care was needed in placing the speakers to finally 'fix' the soundstage image, but in general the speakers were pretty much immune to any obvious room effects.

Check over the Sonetto VIII, and it's not hard to see the technology transfer from elsewhere in the company's range. An obvious trait is the leather top trim, with the logo 'branded' in, as previously seen in the Olympica speakers, while the combination of tweeter and midrange driver, referred to by the marketing people as the 'Voice of Sonus faber', was also used in that range, as well as the Homage and

'Give the Sonetto VIII some welly, and the sound transforms'

**RIGHT:** An outrigger lifts the downward-firing port clear of the floor [see boxout, p57]. All drivers are Sonus faber's own: 3x180mm alloy-coned bass units, 150mm pulp/fibre mid and 29mm dome tweeter



## GIVING VENT

In a speaker like the Sonetto VIII the issue of where to put a large reflex port is not a trivial one. Room might have been found on the baffle but, as well as being visually unappealing, a front-firing port can provide easy escape for reflections and resonances better contained within the cabinet. A rear-firing port solves the aesthetic problem and lessens the acoustic one by directing spurious output away from, not towards, the listener. But if you have a cabinet, like the Sonetto VIII's, with a narrow back panel, a rear reflex port has to be slot-shaped. Sonus faber uses such ports in its costlier models but here a simple circular, flared port was dictated and so the optimum place for it was the cabinet base – with a raised plinth to prevent the port output being throttled. KH



Reference models. It combines the 29mm 'Damped Apex Dome' tweeter, with its metal 'bridge' in front of it, and a custom-made 15cm mid using a pulp/natural fibre cone. Sitting below that is the trio of bass units, with their 18cm aluminium cones and the same open basket design used in the midrange, for speed, linearity and dynamics. Linking the drivers together is the company's 'Paracross topology' crossover, fed by twin sets of terminals that facilitate bi-wiring or bi-amping.

The baffle is built in one piece with the main cabinet, 'to maintain strength and rigidity', and this contributes to the smooth lines of the enclosure as the front flows into the two radii of the curved sides. The quality of both the gloss black and wood-finished samples we had in for review were flawless.

Setting up the speakers is pretty simple. With the cabinets still upside down in their boxes, one bolts on the metal platform to the base, followed by the spikes. All this is probably a two-person job, each speaker weighing a bit over 26.3kg and a little unwieldy when attempting to get them right side up to lift off the boxes. In editor PM's listening room they ended up about 50cm from the rear wall and around twice as far from the sides, with a bit of toe-in.



## WHACK UP THE WICK

The big Sonetto's 90dB+ sensitivity and moderate impedance makes them a relatively undemanding drive [see KH's Lab Report, p59]. We played it very safe indeed with the 'house system', combining a Melco N1ZS20 music library [HFN Jun '17] feeding a dCS Vivaldi One streamer/DAC/preamp [HFN Feb '18] and thence a Constellation Taurus power amplifier [HFN Dec '17]. With oodles of power on tap the system

enjoys headroom aplenty. And so it proved, with one proviso: the speakers sounded somewhat 'ho hum' at lower levels, with rather flat imaging and less than precise soundstaging, but really came to life when the volume control on the Vivaldi One's remote handset was wound up a bit.

Now admittedly that's the case with many speakers, but rarely have I encountered a floorstander undergo so radical a change as the volume level was increased. Give the Sonetto VIII a bit of welly, and the sound transforms, not just weighting up but also sharpening its focus, so that's a point you may want to consider if your amplification is less than prodigious, or conversely you don't have the luxury of being able to play your system reasonably loud.

## HOT SPRINGS

I'm not just talking about the ability of the speakers when handling powerful rock, though a spin of Gov't Mule's *Dark Side Of The Mule* set [Provogue PRD 7446 5] showed that when the level was inched up the soundstage snapped in, along with the greater slam with which the music was delivered. Suddenly it stopped sounding like a bad Floyd pastiche and took on its own life.

Similarly, exploring some familiar territory with Emerson, Lake & Palmer's 'Karn Evil No.9', from *Brain Salad Surgery* [Sanctuary 5308195;DSD64] showed that the Sonetto Vllls perform best when you can feel the bass through the springs of your sofa. In the slow piano, percussion and bass section of the second 'movement' the measured playing has depth and tension. Then, as the music ↻



The background of the entire poster is a dark grey or black color, densely populated with various musical symbols and notes in shades of light grey and white. These symbols include treble clefs, bass clefs, musical notes of various shapes and sizes, and sharp signs (#). The symbols are scattered across the background, creating a rich, textured musical theme.

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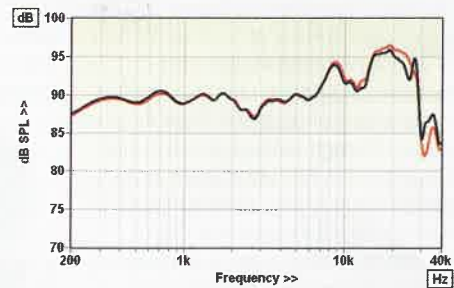
# LAB REPORT

## SONUS FABER SONETTO VIII

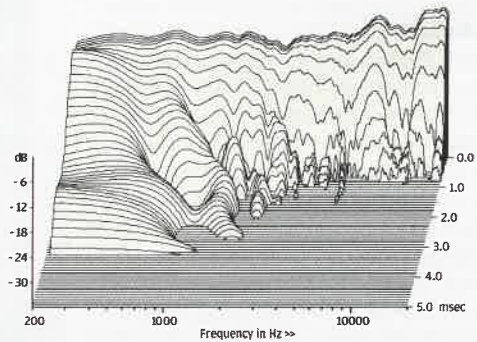
Of the three sensitivity figures that we list in the test table below, the second (IEC using pink noise) is the industry standard but arguably the third (using 'music shaped' pink noise) best represents a loudspeaker's *perceived* sensitivity. On the basis of the IEC measurement (91.0dB), Sonus faber is conservative in claiming 90dB sensitivity for the Sonetto VIII but the music figure of 90.1dB suggests that it is spot on. The Sonetto VIII is quite a large loudspeaker, nevertheless to achieve such a high sensitivity you might suspect it also has a low impedance and/or a curtailed bass extension. In fact it steers a middle path.

The minimum modulus of 3.4ohm means its nominal impedance is correctly specified at 4ohm while – as a result of limited impedance phase angles – the minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) is 1.7ohm at a low 29Hz, which is no worse than we've recorded from many a modern speaker design. Diffraction-corrected near-field bass response measurement indicates a 50Hz LF extension (-6dB re. 200Hz), which may seem a little high for a speaker of this size but is easily offset in-room by exploiting boundary gain.

The forward frequency responses, measured at 1m on the tweeter axis have an essentially flat trend to 6.5kHz, barring a dip at 1.7kHz (ignore the roll-off below 300Hz), whereafter the treble output rises, albeit unevenly, to just below 20kHz [see Graph 1, below]. Response errors are thus higher than they need be at ±4.5dB and ±4.7dB, respectively, but the high treble response will flatten if the VIII is auditioned a little off-axis. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2, below] is commendably free of significant treble resonances. KH



ABOVE: Forward response is broadly flat in trend until 6-7kHz beyond which there is a rising (high) treble



ABOVE: The waterfall plot shows that the cabinet and drivers are impressively free of spurious resonances

**LEFT:** A quartet of multi-way binding posts allows for bi-wiring/bi-amping (although the crossover is a three-way at 3kHz and 270Hz). The terminals are Sonus faber's own flanged type and very easy to tighten

recessed, but there's a good sense of the rear wall of the room fading from view, the space extending back beyond the speakers. Similarly, the ominous atmosphere of the 'Catacombs' section is conjured up to good effect, the powerful chords crashing in to heighten the drama.

So while these aren't speakers to instantly stun you with their three-dimensionality, they do major on neutrality and musical flow, as evidenced throughout *The Unthanks' Mount The Air* [Rabble Rouser Music RRM013], which is presented with a delicate view of the harmonies and instrumentation, and just enough air and space to let the music breathe and fill the room.

The light-footed speed of the speakers was also much in evidence with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra's set of *Mozart Overtures And Arias*, conducted in sprightly fashion by Christian Baldini [Linn CKD 460; 192kHz/24-bit], the smaller forces being well suited to the taut delivery, and the recording making the most of the clear ability with detail and instrumental textures. The overtures simply fly by, while the arias, sung by soprano Elizabeth Watts, show fine focus and a sympathetic handling of the voice and the way it's balanced with the orchestra. The Sonetto's are well-named – pure poetry! ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Never flashy, overly 'hi-fi' or oppressive, even when played at higher levels – as they need to be if they're to give their best – these are understated, refined speakers. They could well suit any listener looking for a sophisticated sound combined with an immaculate, classy finish. The combination of trickle-down technology and the usual Sonus faber quality of design and construction serves them well.

Sound Quality: 85%



### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – Mean/IEC/Music)	93.0dB / 91.0dB / 90.1dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	3.4ohm @ 31Hz 14.7ohm @ 2.4kHz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	-38° @ 27Hz 38° @ 1.2kHz
Pair matching/Resp. error (300Hz–20kHz)	±0.7dB/ ±4.5dB/±4.7dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	50Hz / 40kHz/30kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.3% / 0.4% / 0.2%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	1188x283x427mm / 26kg



swings into something more akin to tightly-played trio jazz, the punchy underpinning bass and Carl Palmer's crisp drumming is the perfect counterpoint to the flamboyant piano going on above them.

### FLEET OF FOOT

In fact, pianos fare rather well through the Italian floorstanders, as is clear with Paul Lewis's recording of *Mussorgsky's Pictures At An Exhibition* [Harmonia Mundi HMC90 2096; 96kHz/24-bit download], where the nimbleness of the speakers ensures every note is clear, while still maintaining the sense of the body and size of the instrument. True, the image isn't quite pushed out into the room, being a little