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PURE AUDIO EXCELLENCE

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March 2007

Zing go the strings...

We fall for the
Sonus faber
Memento

HD DVD ARRIVES

Toshiba HD-E1 exclusive tech test



Lumley Stratosphere Mk 2
turntable takes music into orbit



Flying Mole 'green' pre/power amp



Shanling CD500 Reference flagship
CD player – does it have the X-factor?

REVIEWED INSIDE...

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- » Esoteric DV-60 Universal DVD
- » Lyngdorf TDA 2200 digital amp
- » ModWright SWL 9.0SE pre-amp
- » Transfiguration Orpheus cartridge

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Italian RED

**SONUS FABER
GUARNERI MEMENTO (£6500)**

Ken Kessler savours Sonus faber's Guarneri Memento – one of his all-time faves after a bit of nip-and-tuck

Tested by Ken Kessler

In December 1993, when the original Guarneri appeared, who knew it would turn out to be the milestone model in the Italian company's history? One could easily postulate even back then that designer Franco Serblin was fired-up by a need to raise the stakes in the speaker market. After all, every time Sonus faber came up with a new look (even that of the Extrema, which was an isolated model), lesser brands ripped off the form.

By 1993, though, the company was sophisticated enough to indulge in more than cabinetry fillips, and the brand was well into the stage where it was specifying proprietary drivers, or providing input into their suppliers' designs. The gloves – probably kid, made by Forzieri – were off.

STRING-DRIVEN THING

What dominated the entire *Homage* series that it launched was Serblin's drive to emulate the Cremonese violin makers. Thus the Guarneri's cross-section reflected that of a lute, the woods were aged and assembled using centuries-old techniques, and even the glues and varnishes were made from recipes that harked back centuries. While sceptics initially posited that the Guarneri exuded style over substance, the sound was simply breathtaking, and the speaker was an instant hit. In addition to siring the later *Homage* models and many dozens of rip-offs, it sold in serious numbers for 13 years, in its original form.

Back then, I said it was one of the best small monitors I'd ever heard, and I have owned a pair ever since. It has been – after the Marantz CD12/DA12 CD player – the longest-serving 'reference' component in my review system. My opinion, over the years, has been continually



ABOVE: New crossover sees bi-wiring posts replaced with single-wiring connectors on latest version

LEFT: Cabinet is constructed from no fewer than 21 pieces of maple wood

reinforced. You can therefore guess that I approached the *Memento* the way a devoted Porsche 911 or Leica M-series owner greets the replacement model: eager, nervous, curious, like preparing for a not-so-blind date.

Despite the singular brilliance of the Guarneri, a catalogue mainstay familiar to many of you, the differences are numerous but obvious only to obsessives. Indeed, only the single terminals (instead of bi-wiring) and the prow on the grille tell non-anoraks that they're auditioning the *Memento* rather than the original. But it is, cabinet shape aside, a virtually new speaker; even the supplied pedestals have been tweaked, the wedge-profiled base producing a 6 degree slant. This ensures, and I quote, that 'the drivers' emissions centres are on the same plane. This allows the speaker to produce more coherent phase alignment and response.'

For the active ingredients, the midwoofer is derived from the Stradivari and Amati midranges. As the company put it, between the original Guarneri's and the *Memento*'s mid-bass drivers are '12 years of technological development. The main difference is the new shaped cone and the use of Kapton instead of aluminium as the coil's support. As a result, we have a 150mm, ultra dynamic linearity driver with a CCAW/ Kapton "eddy current free" voice coil. Its dynamically linear magnetic field motor incorporates Kellogg and

'While sceptics initially posited that the Guarneri exuded style over substance, the sound was simply breathtaking, and the speaker was an instant hit'

Faraday rings, and all moving elements have been optimally ventilated for "resonance free" response.' So, too, does a new tweeter replace the Dynaudio Esotar of the original. A 25mm ring radiator tweeter with dual toroidal wave developed directly from that in the Stradivari, it is identical to one in the Amati Anniversario. Sonus faber feels that it is 'more linear, more focused and a little more directive.' It takes mere seconds to confirm the company's belief that the Memento's sound is 'more detailed and refined if compared with the Guarneri Homage.'

While the dimensions and shape are more or less the same as those of the Guarneri Homage, at 210 x 340 x 380mm (wdh), the wood is now solid maple instead of solid walnut and the small black wood segments have been changed to increase their ability to reduce and control resonances and vibrations. This produced

'The Guarneri is still pretty enough to silence bitchy wives, and it now comes in the red finish that previously existed for only a handful of pairs'

an added benefit during manufacture: 'There's no more need to tune the cabinet with some copper/lead devices, as it was for the older model.'

Naturally, with two new drivers, a new crossover followed. Proudly, the company will tell you that the new one is less complex, though it maintains first-order networks 'which link this project to our past tradition. It was designed using the philosophy of the least interference with the musical path. So it is a conceptually minimalist implementation using 6dB/octave slopes and components of the highest quality and coherence.' Its crossover point is 2.5kHz, and the impedance is 4 ohm. And like its predecessor, the Memento is – simpler network aside – still a hungry bugger of a speaker. Forget the 30-200W recommended range. Less than 100W is a waste of time.

Another minor change beyond the aforementioned reversion to single wiring, is that both terminals are nickel rather than one gilded and one nickel.

RIGHT: String theory, as propounded by Sonus faber for its front baffle grilles

ON PHILOSOPHY AND HISTORY...

Franco Serblin's stroke of genius back in 1993 – since proven to be a viable direction for Sonus faber rather than a cul de sac like the fascinating Extrema – was to marry high-tech and centuries-old luthier skills to loudspeaker building. While sound came first, and the Guarneri Homage proved that a speaker under 400mm tall could deliver genuine bass and a true sense of scale, the industry-shaking element was really its styling.

Debate still rages as to who produced the first 'boat-tailed', tapered-rear, box-type speaker, but there's no doubt that it was the Guarneri that put it on the map. As a result, it was proven that amazing sound could issue forth from gorgeous enclosures, more in keeping with fine furniture than

geekware. Even the grille design – a row of strands continued down the front of the dedicated stand, recalling violin strings – has been employed by rivals, both with and without Sonus faber's blessings.

But Sonus faber always stayed one step ahead, and each successive model, named after a Cremonese luthier, upped the ante, culminating in the astounding Stradivari. Like the Guarneri, it was copied within mere months of its launch.

But fancy woodwork isn't enough: the Homage models are attuned by and for the most critical ears in the business. Franco Serblin has stayed true to the original Homage concept, and it is with delicious irony that the smaller Guarneri Memento has raised the bar higher still.

Unsurprisingly, given that Franco and his son-in-law Massimiliano (a metallurgist) are the geniuses behind the sublime Yter cables, the entire matter of wiring and connectors has been addressed with new vision. Inside the Memento, replacing the silk-covered Litz of yore, is the uniquely structured Silver-Palladium alloy conductor found throughout the current Homage range. And I will tell you at this point that Yter turned out to be the only wire worth using with the Memento, its symbiotic nature providing a coherence and seamlessness that no other cable could match.

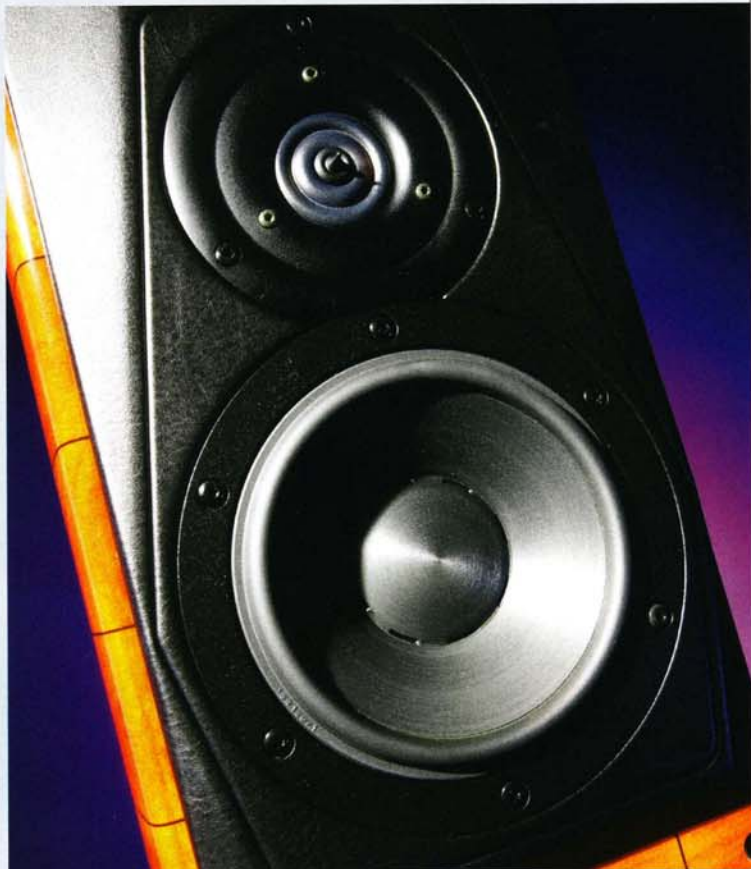
Aesthetically, the Guarneri is still pretty enough to silence bitchy wives, and it now comes in the red finish that previously existed for only a handful of pairs, but which found favour with the Amati and Stradivari. That wonderful graphite finish is an option, and the leather baffle has been restyled.

SOUND QUALITY

Sonically, well, you need to approach this with a caveat, and that caveat is: 'Be ready for surprises.' My all-time favourite audiophile joke goes like this: How many audiophiles does it take to change a light-bulb? Answer: Three. One to change the bulb and two to argue about how much better the old one was.

I've never been of that school, preferring to give the benefit of the doubt to any manufacturer with the guts to revise a classic. One needn't have worried with the Guarneri Memento. It audibly and clearly advances





on the old Guarneri. Subjectively, there seems to be more weight down below, maybe a shade more extension, certainly a lot more control. Accusations of too much euphony haunted the original; the Memento is indubitably more detailed and transparent. But the character? Despite sounding bigger, the scale of the stage it creates will baffle those who equate the function with cabinet size. And although it exhibits a far more convincing disappearing act than the original, the Memento (set up with the necessary severe toe-in which crosses the speakers in front of the listener) resembles the original in key ways. With vocals in particular – and I used a spread ranging from the broadband power of Jackie Wilson to the frailty of Sinead O'Connor – there remains a naturalness that places the vocalist texturally and spatially in the room, just in front of the speaker line. Strings still shimmer. Transients remains sharp but non-aggressive. To put it another way, it sounds

more real and detailed without sacrificing any warmth. The evolutionary step between the Guarneri Homage and the Guarneri Memento is as distinct and impressive as that between any other world-class technical product after a 13 year lifespan: cars, cameras, you name it. The trick was not losing the virtues that made the original so desirable. This may sound contradictory, but, if you have a pair of the originals, don't feel compelled to change them. They're still magnificent, and I intend to use mine until the driver cones decompose. But if you want to own the best-looking small speaker ever made, which just happens to sound as amazing as it looks, turn your eyes toward Italy. Sonus faber has done it again. And despite the 600lb gorilla in the catalogue called 'Stradivari', the Memento just may be the best all-around speaker it has made to date. ☺

For: Still the prettiest non-panel speaker on the planet

AGAINST: Needs bags of power

Verdict Hifi news **SONUS FABER GUARNERI** (£6500/£6900 in graphite)

If this review had appeared in December, I would have stolen a seasonal Chanukah refrain that states 'A miracle happened here.' Not only has Sonus faber improved its 14-year-old masterpiece in every way, it's managed to lower – in real terms – the retail price! You don't need an accountant's math skills to understand that £5500 in 1993 versus £6500 in 2007 is a serious price reduction. I've always loved the Guarneri. Now I positively adore it.

FEATURES
SOUND QUALITY
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VALUE FOR MONEY

Hi-fi news **20/20**
OVERALL RATING

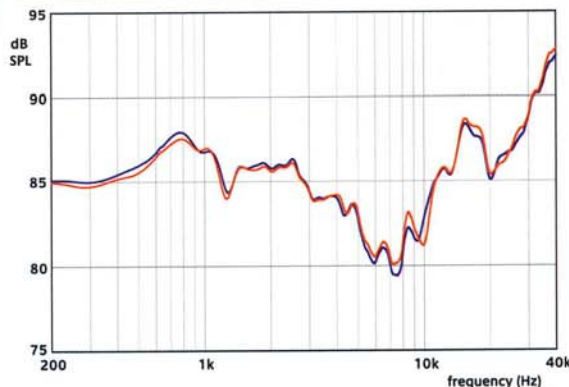
Review system breakdown

SOURCES: Marantz CD-12/DA-12 CD player, Kenwood L-07D turntable, AirTight PC-1 cartridge, Audio Research PH5 phono stage
AMPLIFIERS: Krell Evolution 222, McIntosh MC2102, Quad 909
SPEAKERS: Sonus Faber Guarneri Homage
CABLES: Yter

Contact numbers

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Hi-Fi News lab report



Most notable of the Guarneri Memento's results on test was its frequency response. Although the response error figure is modest, both speakers displayed a broad dip in output between 2.5kHz and 11kHz, to the tune of about 7.5dB down at 7.5kHz ref 750Hz and 15kHz. This indicates poor integration of the bass-mid driver and tweeter through crossover, particularly for a speaker of this price, although the dip may serve to disguise some break-up resonances in the bass-mid driver's aluminium cone in this frequency range, visible in the cumulative spectral decay.

Our measured sensitivity of 85dB is 3dB shy of Sonus Faber's claim but response extension is good at either frequency extreme, at the top end because of a marked ultrasonic peak. KH

Hi-Fi News lab specifications

Sensitivity	85.0dB
Impedance modulus min/max	4.38ohm @ 200Hz/ 42.2ohm @ 74Hz
Impedance phase min/max	-59.7° @ 86Hz/55.8° @ 22Hz
Frequency response error, 200Hz-20kHz	±4.5dB (L), ±4.3dB (R)
Pair matching, 200Hz-20kHz	±1.3dB
LF extension -6dB ref 200Hz	34Hz
HF extension -6dB ref 10kHz third-octave	>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (90dB SPL 1m)	3.17%/0.09%/0.33%