

EQUIPMENT REPORT



Sonus faber Amati Futura

Refinement and Performance

Jim Hannon

The latest generation of reference-quality, multi-driver loudspeakers approaching the state of the art have several things in common: cabinets that go to fanatical lengths to reduce and control resonances; sophisticated crossovers utilizing very expensive high-quality parts; advanced isolation schemes to decouple the speaker from the floor; and more. When skillfully applied, these design elements can lead to loudspeakers that are far less colored and lower in noise than their predecessors. Significantly reducing and controlling the cabinet's resonances lets the drivers reproduce music with more clarity and inner detail, as well as more truthful timbre and accurate soundstaging. Perhaps because of their seductively warm tonal balance, Sonus faber loudspeakers have always struck me as being designed more for music lovers than audiophiles (not a bad thing). However, when I first heard the Amati Futura at the 2011 RMAF producing one of the best overall sounds of the show, I knew that this was a breakthrough for Sonus faber. Having lived with these beautiful 3.5-way floorstanders since then, I must say that these are speakers that both music lovers and audiophiles can love.

BACKGROUND AND TECHNOLOGY

The Sonus faber Amati Futura pays homage to Andreas Amati, credited with creating the first four-stringed violin, as well as defining its form and proportions and the construction techniques used for over three centuries to produce the most glorious-sounding instruments the world has known. Both Antonio Stradivari and Andrea Guarneri apprenticed with Amati's grandson and believed that every element of the violin had an impact on the sound, from the type of wood used, to its internal structure, lacquer, glue, etc., and so do the designers of the Amati Futura. Every aspect of the Futura's exquisite form appears to serve some meaningful sonic purpose to reduce or control resonances and let the drivers do their jobs.

The Amati Futura is the third-generation Amati loudspeaker following the original Amati Homage and Amati Homage Anniversario. Like those earlier models, the Futura uses a patented lute-shaped cabinet, inspired by Stradivari, with beautifully curved walls sloping to the back that help limit resonance. In the tradition of world-class Italian furniture-makers, this has to

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be one of the most drop-dead-gorgeous loudspeakers out there. Strips of beautiful selected woods are optimally arranged in layers to create a constrained-mode enclosure; sub-structural ribs are strategically placed to help reduce spurious vibrations; and even the glue and the seven layers of lacquer finish have been carefully selected for their sonic attributes.

Aside from its lute-like shape, the Futura is a complete stem-to-stern reworking of the Amati, with a larger, higher-volume cabinet, all new drivers, and new technologies. It is the first in a series of Sonus faber loudspeakers to benefit from lessons learned in the development of the company's flagship loudspeaker, "The Sonus faber" (reviewed by Robert Harley in TAS 216), as well as technology migrated down from it. The Futura is mechanically decoupled from the floor via its ingenious, elastomer-based suspension system. Its Avional exo-skeleton clamping-structure connects the beautiful CNC-machined top and bottom plates via the dual fins at the back, mass-loading and stiffening the enclosure while sending vibrations to the base of the loudspeaker and away from the front baffle. Sonus faber's patented Stealth Reflex system helps keeps the footprint of the Futura relatively compact, produces more extended low frequencies, and enables the ports to be dead-quiet.

The Amati Futura's design and build-quality are exemplary, and its drivers are custom units that have been selected for their sonic naturalness. The lovely natural high frequencies are handled by an Evolution 1.1" Ragnar Lian silk dome which is isolated from the enclosure. The midrange unit, mounted in its own internal enclosure, has been created from a new formula of natural fibers. Its powerful magnet system is combined with a 1.7" voice coil and triple Kellog/Goeller copper rings to reduce distortion and make it "eddy-current free." The elastomer-damped, dual 8.75" aluminum-magnesium alloy woofers combine a long-throw magnet system and an eddy-current-free 1.5" voice coil for enhanced low-frequency dynamics and linearity. To optimize their performance, one woofer rolls-off before the other. The crossover network uses a progressive-slope architecture and the highest-quality parts, including Mundorf Supreme capacitors and Jantzen inductors.

LISTENING

In the quest for better transparency, transient speed, tonal neutrality, and inner detail, some next-generation loudspeaker designs may depart from a company's "house sound," crossing the line and drifting into hyper-detail and leanness—essentially losing the sonic recipe that made its earlier models so musically appealing in the first place. Let me assure you that although the Amati Futura (along with The Sonus faber and the Aida) is more detailed, transparent, quick, and tonally neutral than previous generations of Sonus faber loudspeakers I have heard, it is even more musically engaging and mesmerizing, moving one closer to the sonic truth of a live performance. Massed strings, female voices, and woodwinds still have body and richness, but they also have more realistic timbre and transparency.

Indeed, the sound of instruments and voices is absolutely palpable on all types of music on *One. Open Reel Selections of Opus 3 Analogue Recordings*—from Duke Ellington to Eric Bibb to George Bizet. And if you want to be aurally seduced, listen to LPs of Shelby Lynne's "reach-out-and-touch-you" voice on

Just A Little Lovin' [Lost Highway] or the lovely tenor sax on *The Genius of Coleman Hawkins* [Verve]. With the Amati Futura, it's easy to listen far longer than planned.

The Futura has several other formidable strengths besides being among the very best at reproducing the sound of massed strings and voices. You'll not only hear instruments with air and body arrayed with focus across a broad stage, but more ambient cues from the hall itself (These effects can be enhanced still further with the addition of a REL G-1—see sidebar). The depth of image goes right to the back wall, and the speaker disappears like a great mini-monitor.

While not at all bloated, there's a lot of sonic meat on the Futura's bones, aided by its extended bass, which goes down to the mid-20Hz range with considerable authority, dynamic punch, and control—more than one might expect given the modest size of the cabinet. It offers a full, rich sound with a very solid foundation on all kinds of music, particularly power orchestral and jazz, as well as solo piano. I was amazed at its deep-bass extension, weight, and dynamic explosiveness on a fun new HDCD from Reference Recordings entitled *Horns for the Holidays* with the Dallas Wind Symphony. The percussion sections on Stravinsky's *Song of the Nightingale* [Chesky Records RC10] and Debussy's *Iberia* [RCA] were quite thrilling, with real snap and force and no blurring of the leading edges of transients—similar to what you'll find in the concert hall. These attributes also extended to jazz and rock recordings, where you'll notice the Futura's transient speed and subtle detail with brushes on snare drums, sticks on high-hats, and strikes on kick drums.

While the Amati Futura has a relatively high sensitivity (90dB)

SPECS & PRICING

Type: 3.5 way vented floorstanding loudspeaker

Frequency range: 25Hz to 30kHz

Sensitivity: 90dB

Impedance: 4 ohm nominal

Drivers: 1.1" soft-dome tweeter,

7" cellulose-fiber midrange,

two 8.75" aluminum-magnesium-alloy cone woofers

Crossover frequencies: 80Hz,

220Hz, 3.2kHz

Dimensions: 16" x 45.7" x 25"

Weight: 122 lbs.

Price: \$36,000

Lower frequency response in-room: 15Hz at -6 dB

Inputs: High-level Neutrik Speakon, low-level stereo RCA, LFE RCA

Gain control range: 80 dB

Power output: 600W RMS

Phase switch: 0 or 180 degrees

Dimensions: 22.5" x 18.25" x 26"

Weight: 108 lbs.

Price: \$4499

SUMIKO

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REL G1 Sub-Bass System

Type: Closed box, front-firing subwoofer

Driver: 12" long-throw, carbon-fiber cone

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The REL Gibraltar G-1 Sub-Bass System

The Sonus faber Amati Futura loudspeakers were delivered with one REL Gibraltar G1 sub-bass system. While external subwoofers heretofore have not been my cup of tea because they can muddy up the main speaker's midbass and midrange, the G-1 is different. The REL is designed to mate seamlessly with high-performance main loudspeakers, and does so admirably. However, one must have a light touch with its settings (lower is better) to achieve its beneficial sonic gains.

The G-1 sports a massive 12" long-throw carbon-fiber driver capable of an excursion of 1-3/4" in an attractive, extensively braced, sculpted cabinet, as well as a high-quality internal 600W Class A/B MOSFET power amplifier. Its terrific disc-shaped IR remote control lets you adjust volume, crossover frequency, and phase from the listening position. This critical functionality allows one to easily dial the G-1 in (or out). Although I didn't use them, it also has features for home-theater applications (HI/LO level, .1/LFE level).

For comparison purposes, I easily switched the G1 out of my system by simply disconnecting the G-1's Neutrik Speakon connector on the back of the REL, thereby breaking the connection between the subwoofer and the speaker terminals of the amplifiers driving the Amati Futuras. (Mute your preamplifier before doing this!) I vastly prefer REL's connection approach since the main loudspeakers are essentially untouched by the G-1.

While one would expect the G-1 to add more extension and power to the Amati Futura's deep bass, and it does, the effect is not as dramatic as you might think because of the Futura's very fine low-end performance. On the Pierre Verany recording of Bach's famous "Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor" the lowest pedal tones of the organ had somewhat more extension and weight, but what was most surprising were the gains in soundstage expansion and hall ambience retrieval, two of the most formidable of the Futura's strengths. On well-recorded albums, the soundstage expanded to the side walls, more of the hall was evident in front of the speakers, and the sound was more palpable with greater air and presence. On *Schubertiade* [Harmonia Mundi] neither the marvelous natural timbre of Judith Nelson's voice nor Alfred Prinz's clarinet was affected by the G-1. That's a tough test that only the best subwoofers can pass.

For those who want even more air and low-end impact, the G-1 can be daisy-chained with additional G-1 units in stereo pairs or vertically stacked towers. I plan to audition the Amati Futura with multiple G-1s in Sumiko's listening room. But even a single G-1 yields substantial, albeit subtle, sonic benefits without causing any harm or drawing unwanted attention to itself. That's the best praise I can give any subwoofer/sub-bass system! **JH**

and performed admirably with the PrimaLuna DiaLogue Sevens, I preferred using those amplifiers in ultra-linear mode instead of triode mode, as the Futura benefited from the additional power and perked up even more when mated to the Audio Research DS450M power amplifiers which produces 650 watts into the Futura's 4-ohm load. The biggest difference was in macrodynamics and bass authority and control, which were terrific with the Audio Research amplifiers. Since the Futura's recommended power-handling tops out at 300W, I was careful not to overdrive them, but this beauty can play very loud without losing control or hitting a dynamic ceiling.

As good as the Amati Futura is, and its combination of stunning looks and gorgeous sound is hard to beat, it falls short of the state of the art in a few areas, but I admit that I like its design tradeoffs. Although far better in this respect than previous Sonus fabers, the Futura's tonal balance remains slightly on the dark side of neutral, giving the sound a touch of added richness and warmth, which can be very appealing. The Futura's top end is slightly rolled-off and some may want a little more sparkle and extension, but this benefits many digital recordings and complements the rise in most moving-coil cartridges very nicely, preventing aural fatigue. Its microdynamic performance is very good, but some electrostatic speakers like the Quad ESL-2905 and ESL-2805, are slightly better than the Futura (and many other, more costly dynamic-driver loudspeakers), and come alive more readily at low volumes. However, the Amati significantly outdistances the Quads when it comes to macrodynamics, bass weight, and power, as it should at about three-times the price. As with many high-performance loudspeakers, careful setup is required to get the most from this loudspeaker.

The Futura is up against some fierce competition in its price segment, with some others also offering inert cabinets, high-performance drivers, advanced crossovers, and effective approaches to decoupling the speaker from the floor. However, the Amati Futura more than holds its own against them in soundstage width and depth, ambience retrieval, bass power and articulation, and natural timbre. For many, its ravishing sound on massed strings, woodwinds, and vocals combined with its delivery of subtle details may tip the scales in its favor.

The Amati Futura is a breakthrough product for Sonus faber—a stunning loudspeaker in both form and function. It not only skillfully applies principles developed by the most influential of the Cremona violin craftsmen, but also fuses them with proprietary technological innovations and know-how migrated from the company's flagship loudspeaker to a more compact package at a much more accessible price. While not inexpensive, the Futura offers a level of refinement and performance that bodes well for the company's future direction. Bravo! **tas**