



Ciao bella!



Is Sonus faber's affordable new Venere 2.5 floorstanding loudspeaker more than just a beautiful body? **David Price** says hellooo...

Of all the world's great loudspeaker companies, there is surely none more Italian than Sonus faber? True, there aren't that many speaker makers based at the Mediterranean end of Europe – but of those that do hail from this part of the world, this company occupies a unique position. Just like Sofia Loren or Roberto Baggio, its products have their country of origin running through their very DNA. And surely that can only be a very good thing, or can it?

Of course, culture plays a part, but another vital defining characteristic of any company is who runs it, and indeed how it is run. Sonus faber isn't one of those 'committee' type companies, doing bland, lowest-common-denominator stuff. It's fair to say its loudspeakers are voiced in a particular way and with a distinctive sound, one that won't appeal to all. Things could only be this way, when the founder Franco Serblin is still the chief designer for the company. Just as the company name suggests, all his speakers deliver a 'handcrafted sound', something that could only be the product of skilled people with decades of experience.

Rather than buying in proprietary drivers, Sonus faber has always paid special attention to the drive units – whose importance in the overall sonic scheme of things is often as understated as it is misunderstood. Bespoke drivers also allow the designer to follow the 'less is more' school of crossover design too (most Sf models have a simple first order design), saving a good deal of money to put into doing the best cabinet possible.

The Venere 2.5 is – as its name suggests – a 2.5 way floorstanding speaker, sporting a shape which is said to be an homage to its 'mother' speaker the Aida. Considering its £2,000 price tag, you just can't help wondering how on earth the company managed to

achieve such high levels of build and finish. This price point is a distinctly tricky niche for a big floorstander, as the larger a loudspeaker gets (and the Venere 2.5 isn't small at 1,107x340x437mm) the harder (and more expensive) it is to control.

Think of a standmounter as a nimble little Mini (the real one, not the modern genetically modified mutant) able to change direction at the blink of an eye – and then imagine trying to do the same thing in a big Bentley, with all that weight wallowing around. Speakers are the same, inasmuch as the bigger they are, the harder it is to get a grip on the physics. Floorstanders have long cabinets which can variously flex and/or store unwanted mechanical energy like a capacitor does current. Dealing with this takes careful design, something that's simply not a problem with a small standmount speaker.

The profile of this box is shaped like a Lyre, which the manufacturer

DETAILS

PRODUCT:
Sonus faber Venere 2.5

ORIGIN:
Italy/China

TYPE:
floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT:
19.45kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD mm):
340x1,107x437mm

FEATURES

- specified sensitivity: 89dB
- specified impedance: 6 ohms
- 29mm silk dome tweeter
- 180mm Curv midrange unit
- 180mm Curv bass unit

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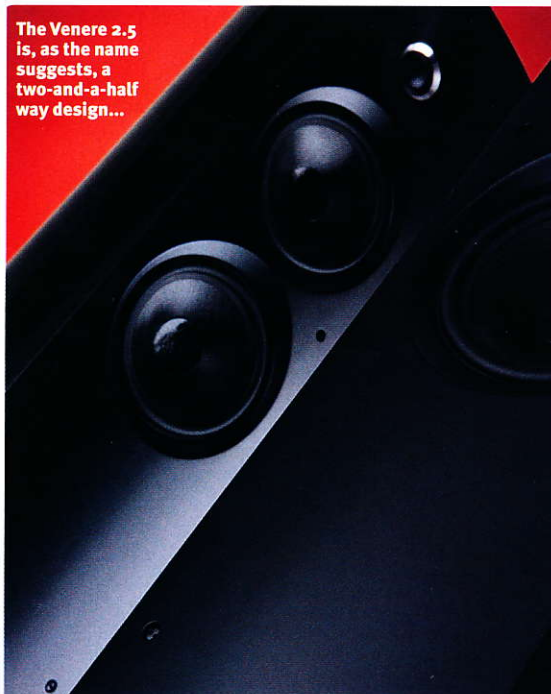
claims ensures structural strength and control of spurious resonance. While this is true to a large extent, I have to say it was still slightly lively – or to be more accurate – 'undead'. But then the same can be said for many £5,000 floorstanders, and it's only when you get to the likes of B&W's £10,000 801Ds that the cabinet seems to be hewn from rock that reaches down to the very centre of the earth itself. So we'll say the Venere 2.5 passes the knuckle-rap test very comfortably, given its size and price.

Like Sofia Loren or Roberto Baggio, Sonus faber's country of origin is in its DNA

The piano gloss lacquer finish is superlative at its price. There is little sense of this speaker being the poor relation to the marque's higher end offerings, despite being made in China. Indeed Sonus faber has worked very closely with its far eastern partner, training its people at the Arcugnano head office in Italy, with Italian technicians and carpenters working in China too. The result is a beautiful design by Paolo Tezzon and Livio Cucuzza (engineer and stylist respectively), made to very high standards yet sold at a price that's considerably less than would otherwise have been possible closer to home.

So, the Venere 2.5 gets off to a good start in life, with a beautifully finished yet very substantial and 'quiet' cabinet, into which some high quality Sonus faber-designed drivers are bolted. The treble unit is a 29mm German DKM silk dome with no ferrofluid, claimed to go from 25kHz up top, down to 2,500Hz whereupon a 180mm driver with a composite plastic Curv cone takes care of the midrange duties. It then passes the baton to another similar driver that goes from 250Hz down to a claimed 45Hz. These are set into a curved, inclined baffle – with the bass driver loaded by a reflex port on the front. Tempered glass is set into the base and top, and the speaker sports adjustable aluminium feet.

The overall package really is quite superb – you can't help feeling you get an awful lot of speaker for your money, something that looks three times its price. It sat very happily in my largish listening room, its shiny surfaces glinting in the daylight.



The Venere 2.5 is, as the name suggests, a two-and-a-half way design...

Q&A

Mauro Grange
Sonus Faber, CEO



DP: What's the aim of the new Venere series of speakers?

MG: To address the music and cinema lovers' desires and needs doing this with an 'audiophile attitude', with a strong design concept, with a natural and 'easy' and 'happy' sound performance and with a very good overall value for money ratio. It represents the enter door into the Sonus faber word and it really aims to be suitable for everyone.

How do you solve the classic problem of getting a large floorstander's cabinet to be stiff?

In the most traditional Sonus faber way, by using a curved side instead of a straight one which is now to be stronger and stiffer than a straight one and adding inside a proper amount of sub-structural ribs to stiffen and reinforce the structure.

Why did you choose reflex loading on this big cabinet?

Generally speaking it means better extension to the low frequencies when compared to a closed box design having the same dimensions. Another important reason is related to the drive units, there's a wide choice of types for reflex loaded boxes.

Why did you choose silk for the tweeter material, and why doesn't it have Ferrofluid cooling?

Silk material has been chosen simply because it sounds the way we like, and the silk diaphragm is produced by the best European components manufacturer. Ferrofluid badly affects the transient response so we did not use it.

Why does Sonus faber use its plastic Curv material for the midrange and bass units?

This thermo-moulded polypropylene textile material performs much better in terms of detail resolution than a standard injected polypropylene cone – and offers better sound per pound. The addition of a paper-coated dustcap confers on them a very nice, natural and warm sound.

Sound quality

The great thing about a speaker of this size is that it's possible to make it usefully efficient – and so the Venere 2.5 proved. With a quoted sensitivity of 89dB, you don't need a direct feed to Didcot power station to tickle its transducers. I auditioned it with two amplifiers – the new solid-state Musical Fidelity M6 500 integrated and a not-so new World Audio K5881 tube amp fed direct from the variable output of an Audiolab M-DAC. In both instances, these speakers were well able to communicate the relative differences in sonic character between the amps (and there sure is a difference), telling me that they weren't interfering too much with the signal sent to them. This can only be a good thing...

The speaker proved relatively easy to set-up, with no strange rituals required. It certainly wasn't anywhere as sensitive to toe-in as some of the other speakers I've had in my listening room recently, such as the MartinLogan Montis, for example. Just a few degrees of angling towards 'the couch of revelation' (i.e. my sofa upon which I do the listening) saw them imaging very nicely indeed. The only issue (if that's not too strong a term) was the distance from the rear wall, which needed to be a little more than many floorstanders I audition in my room. The Venere 2.5 needed to come out a good 25cm, lest its bass wasn't boomy – many speakers I've tried work closer to the back wall, I've found.

Properly set up, the Venere 2.5 gives a wide, smooth and spacious sound. As you'd expect at the price (and considering its junior status in a very prestigious range which spans up to the heavens, in pricing terms), it's not quite as delicate, incisive and subtle as its bigger brothers, but it still retains very large amounts

of Sonus faber character in the way it behaves. This of course is no bad thing. Feed this speaker some pulsating pop, and it dives into it with the aplomb of something that's had an energy drink or three too many – there's plenty of emotion and brio. Yet hit it with some contemplative classical and it steps back respectfully and quietly decants the sherry, as if it's aware of the deference it needs to show such programme material. Clever, that.

Tonally it is generally closer to the deep, dark, sultry school of speaker design that a great many modern boxes. You'd never call it dull, but neither is it from the 'blow your wig off' school of speaker design. The tweeter is a nice delicate device; inferior treble units have an amazing ability to spoil things lower down the frequency spectrum and lop the bite from the leading edges of instruments – but this does not. Ride cymbals on Caravan's *Nine Feet Underground* track were very well carried indeed, although there's a little less top end sparkle and nuance than you'd get from a speaker with a good ribbon such as Monitor Audio's GX200.

All three drivers integrate well – it's a two-and-a-half-way design but it gives the impression of being cast from solid. This means that while the speaker is able to tell you all about the vivid attack transients from the steel guitar strumming on – for example – Tears for Fears' *Pale Shelter*, it doesn't lacerate your eardrums, leaving you dripping blood on the carpet. And moving to valve amplification smoothed things even more of course, making for a magically mellow listening experience, even with shouty modern digital remasters.

Although the Venere 2.5 is a peppy loudspeaker, it gets its speed not from an artificially edgy tonal balance, but from high

IN SIGHT

ON TEST

Sonus faber claims 89dB sensitivity for the Venere 2.5, which is about 1dB optimistic according to our pink noise measurement of 88.2dB, averaged for the review pair. The specified nominal impedance of 6 ohms is also somewhat high given our measured minimum modulus of 3.5 ohms, which indicates that a 4 ohm rating would be more appropriate. But the Venere 2.5 is nonetheless a relatively easy load to drive with a minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance, which also takes into account impedance phase angle) of 2.2 ohms at 90Hz. Frequency response errors 200Hz-20kHz, measured on the tweeter axis, were a little high at ±6.4dB and ±6.6dB respectively, principally because of a narrow notch in output between 6kHz and 9kHz, but careful selection of listening height may reduce this. Otherwise the overall response trend is quite flat before a 3dB

- 1 29mm silk dome tweeter gives a smooth sound
- 2 180mm Curv polypropylene mid driver integrates nicely
- 3 180mm Curv woofer gives plenty of bass heft
- 4 bi-wireable binding posts are beautifully finished
- 5 front mounted slot type reflex port moves a lot of air
- 6 internally ribbed, curved cabinet is superbly finished

plateau in the last audible octave. Bass extension is commendable at 30Hz for -6dB ref 200Hz, explaining the modest sensitivity figure. Pair matching was a little disappointing at ±1.4dB. The cumulative spectral decay waterfall shows fast initial energy decay with only some low-level resonances at treble frequencies. KH



Cabinet detailing is lovely – even the binding posts are finished like jewellery



THE PRINCELY SUM OF £2,300 BUYS YOU MONITOR AUDIO'S SUPERB GX200. This is one of the closest price rivals of the Sonus faber Venere 2.5, but you'd never know it listening to the two together...

They're as different as an Aston Martin DB5 and a Ferrari Daytona, the Italian speaker sounding more exuberant emotionally, a little more expressive and generally a more engagingly emotional experience.

The British box is an altogether more measured affair, and if truth be told a good deal more accurate. Bass is more even and slightly tighter; midband offers a touch more detail (although the soundstaging can't quite match that of the Italian), and that gorgeous tweeter gives the sort of high frequency insight that you just can't get from something sporting a cloth dome.

Annoyingly though, just simply can't ascribe an outright win to either. They're simply different, the Monitor Audio being a calming, dry Earl Grey tea to the sweet frothy Cappuccino that is the Sonus faber. That's exactly why – yes that's right – you need to find a good dealer and go and listen for yourself, preferably with your own amplifier and ancillaries. Either way, you'll end up a happy customer.

quality drive units – which are faster than a Britney Spears wedding and held back very little by those capacious cabinets. For this reason, these loudspeakers excell through the midband. True, they're not totally transparent – you'd never confuse them for a MartinLogan CLX for example – but you can forgive the very slight opacity of those Curv drivers lend to the sound because they are basically accurate and consistent. This makes it easy for the ear to tune in to them, and for the brain to tune them out. Kate Bush's *The Big Sky* is relatively compressed, but really gets going as she gives her lyrics both barrels towards the end of the song. The Venere 2.5 proved well able to impart the subtle dynamic contrasts in the song, hanging things together beautifully as the song progressively gets more complex, without descending into any hint of hardness or muddle.

Indeed detailing was generally very good, the Sonus fabers proving well able to spotlight Johnny Marr's deft rhythm guitar work on The Smiths' *Headmaster Ritual*. And they scythed through the mix to throw up plenty of detail about the backing guitar tracks. I also found myself very pleased with the way they handled vocals, showing not a sign of nasality or edge – they were nicely balanced and let the emotion in Morrissey's plaintive voice shine through. The result was an engaging, sometimes mesmeric performance that totally belied the fact that I was listening to a mid-priced pair of loudspeakers.

It's a very mature performer at a price where many rivals all too easily betray a lack of breeding...

I'm sure those elaborately shaped and angled cabinets play at least some part in the success the Venere 2.5s have with imaging. Again, they're not up with electrostatic panels in their ability to hang voices or instruments in space like specific stars in the night sky, but still proved very handy at articulating a coherent stereo image and ramming it out into the room with no apologies made. Jazz is of course a great test for this, so I donned my black polo neck and sparked up a Silk Cut for John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman's *My One and Only Love* – a seminal early sixties Impulse offering if you're of the goatee bearded, Jack Kerouac reading persuasion. These boxes sure got on this track on the road; the saxophone sound was sublime, the vocals arresting and the piano a joy.

None of this would have been possible of course without a powerful yet disciplined bass performance. You'd never call it light – even when carefully positioned the low frequencies announced their presence on everything I played – but it was always enjoyable. There was a physicality to the proceedings that suited rock and jazz really rather well, but you might find it a little

overpowering in smaller listening rooms, or if you like the sort of anechoic chamber bass which is ultra damped. In my room it was great – sumptuous and extended right down to the bottom octaves.

So many floorstanders of this size and price seem to slur the leading edges of new notes and cling on to the fading remains of the old ones, but you could never say that about these Sonus fabers. But neither does the low bass stop and start with the speed of a light emitting diode. Instead it always feels weighty, and this tends to push the song along very enjoyably. Grace Jones' *Slave to the Rhythm* proved wonderfully fulsome and powerful sounding, but there was just the *teeniest* sense of overhang on those bigger bass notes.

The only other mark on an otherwise squeaky-clean copybook was the very slight compression you get when the volume is turned up in anger. At high levels, the dynamic accenting on hard hit snare drums isn't quite as explicit as, say, on a similarly priced PMC. Generally this is pretty hard to spot, it's just when the drummer gives it ten tenths the Venere 2.5 doesn't *quite* go the extra mile. Again however, as soon as you remember the price, such criticisms seem churlish...

Sound quality

Although not *quite* the most forensic or revealing at the price, this speaker boasts a wonderfully smooth and sumptuous balance that's delightful to set ears on, yet still exhaustively imparts the music embedded in any recording. It's a very mature performer in a way that's frankly unexpected at the price – one where many rivals all too easily betray their lack of breeding. Factor in the superlative build, styling, finish and pedigree – and Sonus faber's new Venere 2.5 floorstanding speaker is pretty hard not to love. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Smooth, polished tonal balance; expansive soundstaging; overall musicality; superlative build and styling

VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



DISLIKE: Bass prominent, especially in smaller rooms

EASE OF DRIVE



WE SAY: Beautifully presented, great sounding affordable floorstander

OVERALL

