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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Sonus Faber Amati Futura Loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom, photography by Adrian Lyon

The Sonus Faber – that very limited, gargantuan and just all-over extreme speaker titan, which was already pre-sold long before it became a real product – taught the company a lot. The ‘trickle-down’ effect that brings Formula One technology to tomorrow’s automobiles applies here; the skills learned in making the Sonus Faber statement has trickled down to the new Amati Futura.

Apart from the name and being a boat-tailed floorstander aside, there are almost no points of contact between the Amati Homage and Futura. The cabinet is bigger, it uses different drivers... everything changes. And so does the price, but not so dramatically; the Futura model costing twenty-one grand is not so very far from the standard Amati Homage price today. It’s not hard to imagine that this is the first of a trio of Futura models rolling in above the Homage range. The Amati Homage stays in production, but one has to wonder for how long, given the stiff competition from above?

Part of the trickle-down effect from the Sonus Faber is the way the Futura is essentially built around an exo-skeleton of a combination of nickel and Avional, a very high-strength, high-stiffness and low-mass aluminium/copper/magnesium/silicon alloy. The CNC machined back fins and top and bottom plate form this basis, which controls, absorbs and transmits resonance away from more traditional front baffle, side panels and internal architecture of the speaker. But ‘traditional’ isn’t really the right word here; those multi-layered progressively rounded side walls act as constrained layers, are ribbed at key acoustically-significant regions and are thus self-damping. All of which defines ‘science in the service of art’.

The Sonus Faber ACT (Acronym Creation Team) have been hard at work too, moving the LVT (Low Vibration Transmission) system and TMD (Tuned Mass Damper) – as well as the Stealth Reflex System – from the statement piece over to the Futura. In fairness, these acronyms and buzzwords are backed up by a lot of mechanical engineering; TMD, for example, is essentially a tuned shock absorber, which acts to turn another set of stray resonances into heat (in much the same way that shock absorbers in skyscrapers work), LVT effectively ‘floats’ the loudspeaker on an elastomer suspension system to prevent local acoustic feedback and the Stealth system is a series of para-aperiodic enclosure vents. All of this means effectively no resonance on the inside, none on the outside and a ported speaker that is almost completely free from sounding like a ported speaker.

It’s a three and a half way reflex (make that Stealth Reflex) design, sporting a 29mm dome tweeter, a 179mm midrange cone and two 220mm woofers. In many respects, the midrange is the key to the Futura sound; it’s an air-dried doped paper cone fed by an oversized 43mm voice coil and special eddy-current reducing copper rings, and the whole driver is viscoelastically decoupled from the curved front-baffle. The one bit of trickle-up technology is the crossover, because both the Amati Futura and the Sonus Faber flagship use the progressive slope crossover response first seen in speakers like the Liuto. Only this one has Mundorf Supreme caps and Jantzen coils that cost as much as the Liuto itself. Crossover points are at 80Hz, 220Hz and 3.2kHz, and all of those drivers are customised versions of designs made by Scanspeak.

There are those who think the main source of high-end loudspeakers should be well-meaning guys in sheds. But not Sonus Faber; the finish on Sonus Faber always made the grade, even in the early days. It was that top Homage range that really caught the eye. It made other speaker makers raise the quality of finish. But the Futura improves on the Homage on an unprecedented scale. I can imagine more than a few drivers asking Moderna why their latest Ferrari isn’t finished to Amati Futura standards. I can also envisage some angry screaming from other high-end manufacturers, demanding the same uncompromising quality from their woodworkers. It’s that kind of finish.

That’s seven layers of hand-finished lacquer kind of finish, the likes of which you would normally see growing out of the neck of the violin virtuoso. The red side panels have a glowing translucent lustre that will make you walk around and around the speakers, and not be disappointed, ever. Offset by the ‘chrome’ top (actually a ‘we are not telling’ high-tech chemical process that ▶

▶ leaves that almost unbreakable polished finish just 30 microns thick) with the name cut deep, bottom and back and the black strings across the front baffle. These could only come from a Catholic country, because that sin of pride (of ownership) is going to need a lot of Hail Marys. "It's been two CDs since my last confession, Father." This is one of those loudspeakers that sings a siren's song, but this one does it even when there's no music playing. This is what you get when a country can list Sophia Loren and the Ferrari 250 GTO among its style icons.

There has always been something intrinsically lovely about the Amati sound. They have a richness of harmonic structure that befits a loudspeaker as elegant as the floorstanders. If there was a criticism, it was that they went for the 'elegance' and refinement over accuracy and dynamic punch. Not a big trade off, but those after Magico-grade honesty would find the previous Amati polite in comparison. Lovely, yes... but perhaps too lovely.

Which is where the Futura changes are so surprising. It manages to retain the refinement and elegance of the Amati, but gives it more of an edge. It still paints a sweet picture of the music, but there is a lot of detail and precision there too. It manages to give you a very precise sense of the studio, highlighting reverb tails and whether the spatial cues in a mix come down to a natural environment or panning.

Whoever voiced these speakers spent a lot of time listening to voices. They project into the room with the sort of naturalness you might expect from a three-way box from the BBC school. Except it goes further, not just the voice... the passion behind the voice is expressed perfectly. This might cause you to have some kind of X-Factor-esque play-off, trying to separate those who 'mean it' and those who 'phone it in' (because this speaker will let you know in seconds). When you listen to a musician that means it – Robert Wyatt or PJ Harvey, for example – you feel their pain. Playing Nick Drake or Schumann through these speakers is like a psychotherapy session.

There's an old statement in audio; get the voice right and the rest of the sound will follow. It applies across the midband, in part because it's the part of our hearing to which we are so strongly attuned. It's the crying baby range, and the sound of leaves rustling as the sabre-tooth tiger creeps up on us. It is also the place where any mistakes are easy to spot. Sadly, this seems to be the least remembered old statement in audio, with many companies skipping over the midrange to add more boom and tizz. The Amati Futura gets the voice and the midrange very, very right indeed. And then it goes on to do the difficult next step; and making that right sounding midband extend up and down the frequency range.

It's a truly homogenous sound, not in a wall-of-sound way, but a sense of music knitting together perfectly. It's like a small two-way loudspeaker that has subwoofer-like extension, but without the almost inevitable change in pace such a system produces. It does this on any kind of music it seems; even live cuts like Van Morrison's classic *It's Too Late To Stop Now* spring to life with a sense of rooted solidity. Not bass burbling along for the sake of having some bass, but taut, controlled and deep, with a sense of locking musicians to their physical spaces on a live stage. It's not uncanny, but it is extremely entertaining.

I'm going to get a lot of flak for this, but the main word that kept coming up was 'sensual'. The sound of these speakers is just so damn sexy, and I wish I knew what it is that made these speakers sound this way, because I'd bottle it and make a fortune. It might be the voice and the way it can extract the passion behind the music. Two things emerge from this; the first is that all you need is a bottle of good wine, your other half's favourite artist playing

softly through the Futuras and... well, lets just say things happen. The other big thing is if you listen to these for an hour of your own favourites and don't find yourself moved to tears, you have no soul.

In a way, the best of all possible Sonus Faber worlds would be a loudspeaker that combines the small-speaker clarity of the Guarneri with the grace of the Amati and the bass energy and dynamics of the Stradivari. And, while all of these Homage loudspeakers remain in the catalogue, the Amati Futura is that best of all possible worlds. It combines the benefits of all three, and adds that uncanny sensuality and passion. This is a real game-raiser!

OK, so it is first and foremost a Sonus Faber in sound, look and build. That it is possibly the best of all of them in combination doesn't change the fact it's still a Sonus Faber. Go looking for the sort of gut-churning bass-guitar impact at ear-threatening levels, or plan to make your speakers double up as a PA system and you'll keep looking. Likewise if you are expecting Quad or MartinLogan like imagery, buy a Quad or a MartinLogan. The fact that it can combine the benefits of

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

3.5 way reflex ported loudspeaker

Drive Units: 1x 29mm tweeter, 1x 179mm midrange, 2x 220mm bass units

Frequency response: 25Hz - 30kHz, including Stealth Reflex Port

Sensitivity: 90 dB SPL (2.83 V / 1 m)

Nominal Impedance: 4 ohms

Power: 30 W - 300 W without distortion

Dimensions (H x W x D): 116 x 40.5 x 63.5 cm

Weight: 111 kg per pair / 145 kg packed per pair

Finish: "Amati Red" or "Graphite"

Price: £21,000 per pair

Manufactured by

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URL: www.sonusfaber.com

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the Guarneri, Amati and Stradivari in one is pretty damn remarkable; expecting it to also do a good impression of every other speaker out there is asking a bit too much.

I have to find the good and the bad in every product. The bad here is simple; for many people, this will be the most expensive product they buy. Not just in more music, but in your furniture, décor, house, everything. This isn't the kind of speaker that ends up with a plant pot on the top three months after buying it. This is the kind of speaker that makes you call the interior decorator to rework your house to match the Futuras.

It even effectively cuts out the one big problem every speaker maker faces; cloners. The loudspeaker market is like the fashion trade, in that 10 seconds after some stick-insect sashays down the catwalk wearing ten-grand's worth of couture, the owner of a sweatshop somewhere on the planet already has pattern cutters at work making knock-offs. The audio business isn't so cut-throat, but a small army of bodgers and DIY'ers will take any new design and copy it. This has nearly killed off a number of relatively big names, that end up finding the ripped-off version of their own design undermining their own design. It's not possible here; the end result is just too elegantly constructed and it would end up costing more than the Futura to clone the Futura.

The worry with any really, really pretty thing is getting past the surface attraction. It's a seemingly natural human male affliction to put their critical faculties on hold in the presence of beauty. You just go gormless. The great thing here is beauty is not only skin deep; something looking this good really shouldn't sound this sexy too.

'Sounds good, looks bad' is not a way to succeed when designing luxury goods. We collectively need to get past the 'ugly as a sack of hammers' school of design, and the Amati Futura does that beautifully!

Let's look at it this way. Sometimes non-audiophiles cry "how much?" and laugh when faced with the price of some hi-fi. Not this time. This time the expense is justified and justifiable. Not only do the Futuras look the part, they sound the part too. Every particle of this speaker bespeaks the best of high-end. +

