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Sonus Faber

VENERE SPEAKERS AND REL T-7 SUBWOOFER

\$5,593 BY BRENT BUTTERWORTH

Italian fashion for less!

AUDIOPHILES KNOW SONUS FABER as the creator of beautiful speakers handcrafted in Italy. The very name is Latin for "artisanal sound." But as anyone who has ever visited Whole Foods Market knows, "artisanal" usually means "expensive" — and indeed, Sonus Faber speakers have always been expensive. Until now.

The new Venere line blends Sonus Faber's Italian design and engineering with the efficiency of Chinese manufacturing. The result is a beautiful speaker at a price you'd expect to pay for a boring box-shaped model. The new Venere 2.5 tower, for example, costs just \$2,498 per pair, \$500 less than the company's Toy tower in gloss finish, and half the price of the Liuto tower I reviewed in the October 2011 issue. Honestly, I like the look and form factor of the Venere 2.5 better.

The Venere's curving, lyre-shaped profile serves as more than just a tool to help gain the approval of significant others. The shape greatly reduces standing waves, or resonances, inside the speaker. I suppose it helps stiffen the sidewalls, too, although they didn't seem any stiffer than usual when I knocked a knuckle against the 2.5.

Sonus Faber carried the curved-cabinet concept into the other models in the line: the \$1,298/pair Venere 1.5 minispeaker and the \$798 Venere Center. More Veneres are coming soon, including an on-wall model. They're available in gloss white or gloss black. To me, the white looks like something a smarmy bad guy in a movie would use to furnish his spectacular Hollywood Hills home financed through nefarious activity like arms smuggling or directing the *Transformers* movies. Sadly, my review samples arrived in black.

With two 7-inch drivers — one set up as a mid-range/woofer, the other used only for bass up to 250 Hz — the 2.5 tower wouldn't seem to need a subwoofer. But just to be sure, Sonus Faber's U.S. distributor, Sumiko Audio, included a REL T-7 subwoofer with my review system. The \$999 T-7 incorporates an 8-inch woofer, a 10-inch passive radiator, and a 200-watt amp.

SETUP

There's nothing complicated about setting up the Venere system. With the 2.5 tower, attach its glass base and twist the pointed feet into the base. With the center, plop the speaker down on a large rubber base that keeps it from rocking back and forth on its curved bottom. To support the 1.5 minispeaker, Sumiko sent me a \$398 pair of stands made specifically for it.

The REL T-7, though, is a different deal. REL and Sumiko recommend connecting your front left and right amp channels to the T-7's speaker-level inputs, instead of or in addition to using the sub's line-level input with your surround processor's subwoofer output. This arrangement means that your front left and right main speakers run full-range, and the subwoofer will merely augment their bass rather than handling all bass reproduction. (I did wind up using the subwoofer crossover in my surround processor for the

KEY FEATURES



Venere 2.5 (\$2,498/pair)
+ 7-in woofer; 7-in midrange/woofer; 1-in tweeter;
43.6 x 13.4 x 17.2 in; 43 lb

Venere 1.5 (\$1,298/pair)
+ 6-in woofer; 1-in tweeter; 15.6 x 8.2 x 11.9 in
(42.4 in high on stand); 13 lb

Venere Center (\$798)
+ (2) 6-in woofers; 1-in tweeter; 8.8 x 19.7 x 11.5
in; 21 lb

REL T-7 (\$999)
+ 8-in woofer; 10-in passive radiator; 200-watt
Class A/B amp; line-level and LFE RCA inputs;
speaker-level Neutrik Speak-On input; LFE
and line/speaker input level controls; low-pass
crossover freq control; 13.75 x 12 x 13.75 in; 34 lb



VERDICT

A great-looking, great-sounding, affordable line from one of the best-known names in high-end speakers.

+ PLUS

- Delivers satisfying home theater sound even without a subwoofer
- Great looks

- MINUS

- Venere 2.5 has a trace of midrange coloration

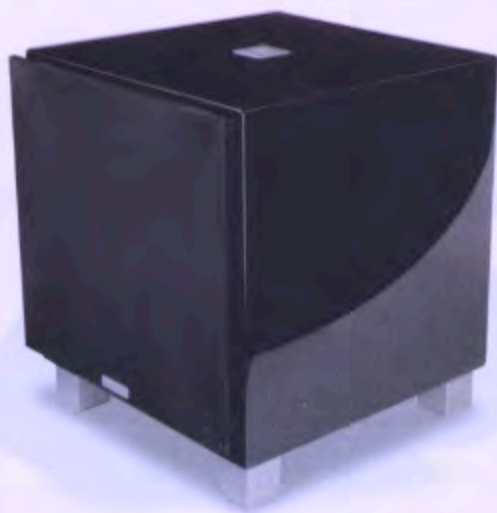
center and surround channels, setting it for 80 Hz.)

This setup offers two potential advantages. First, you bypass the filters in the surround processor's subwoofer crossover. But that's only an advantage if you believe these filters introduce unacceptable artifacts. (I don't.) The other possible advantage is that having the bass come from three separate sources (the two main speakers and the sub) will lessen room modes. I also see two potential disadvantages: You must calibrate the subwoofer's level and crossover frequency by ear, and feeding deep bass into your main speakers will make them more likely to distort (or even blow).

I drove the 2.5 towers (and, later, the 1.5 minis on their own) using my Krell S-300i integrated amp for records and computer-sourced high-rez music. For Blu-rays and DVDs, I put the Krell in theater bypass mode and used my Denon A/V receiver to power the Venere Center and the 1.5s used as surrounds.

PERFORMANCE

Sonus Faber products are generally designed for enthusiasts who spend a small fortune to hear every last detail in their Diana Krall records. That's why I'm so surprised to be in the position of describing the Venere 2.5 as a fun speaker.



When I played "May 1, 1990," from guitarist/vocalist Adrian Belew's *Here*, the Venere 2.5 lit up my listening room with loads of ambient detail, powerful groove from the kick drums and bass, and vivid vocals and guitar. In places, this recording switches abruptly from super-dry mono snippets to huge-sounding, reverb-drenched passages, and the Venere 2.5 conveyed every note, every harmonic, every reverb tail with impressive precision. I especially loved the tuneful, effortless bass reproduction; the 2.5's



BASS LINE RBL's T-7 sub pushed the bass in the *Walk the Line* DVD from satisfactory to satisfying.

port-loaded 7-inch woofer pulled off the tough trick of sounding simultaneously full and tight.

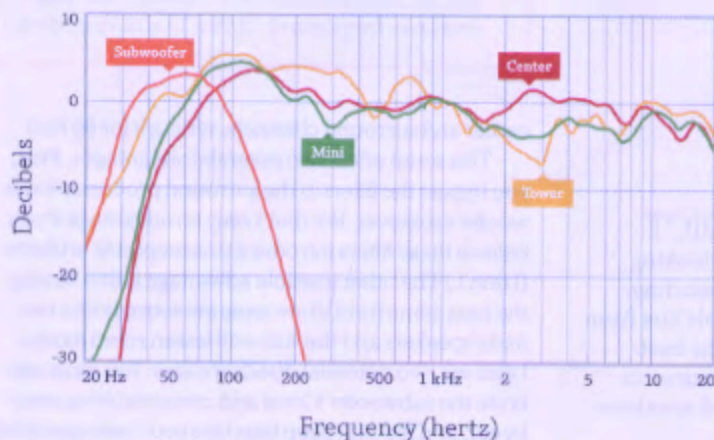
"Sounds so lush and so right," I wrote in my notes as the Venere 2.5 delivered the lively, danceable beat and the room-wrapping background vocals in Cape Verdean singer Fantcha's "Cme Catchor," from her *Criolina* CD. I did notice a bit of coloration in Fantcha's vocal, though: a trace of excess sibilance and a bit of "cupped hands" coloration in the lower treble, which made the sound seem a little more confined to the speakers. I heard the same effect with most other singers, too. Still, it was never enough to lessen my overall enjoyment of the Venere 2.5; in fact, I was able to focus on this anomaly because I found nothing else to complain about.

Replacing the Venere 2.5 towers with the 1.5 minis eliminated the cupped-hands coloration — no big surprise, considering that the 2.5's 7-inch midwoofer crosses over to the tweeter at 2.5 kHz, while the 1.5's 6-inch midwoofer crosses over at 2 kHz. (For a simple explanation of how and why this matters, read "Crossovers: A Show and Tell" on soundandvisionmag.com.) Suddenly, the midrange opened up wide. Even with a sound as seemingly simple as George Benson's hollow-body jazz guitar on "What's New," from his *Giblet Gravy* CD, the mini's mids sounded more natural and spacious than the 2.5 tower's. There was still a touch of sibilance in the vocals, and of course there wasn't much bass, but the sound was cleaner and more natural than most other speakers I've heard in the 1.5's price range.

The foolproof fun of the 2.5 tower carried on into the home theater realm. When I played the *Walk the Line* DVD, I immediately fell in love with the Venere Center. It seems to have a subtle lower-treble emphasis that enhances vocal clarity without in any way sounding unnatural. All of the voices in my toughest dialogue tests, such as Chapter 4 of *Star Wars, Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, sounded extremely clear with no harsh edge and no bloating.

Throughout my DVD and Blu-ray Disc explorations, I switched the T-7 subwoofer in and out of the system, and found it to be a welcome yet strictly optional enhancement. The Venere 2.5 towers had plenty enough bass on their own, but adding the T-7 brought the bass on "Get Rhythm" in *Walk the Line* from satisfactory to satisfying. Likewise, the Venere 2.5 had loads of punch during explosions and impacts in action movies; adding the T-7 just gave the lowest bass frequencies a greater sense of shake.

TEST BENCH / FREQUENCY RESPONSE



- Tower 41 Hz to 20 kHz ± 6.2 dB
- Center 61 Hz to 20 kHz ± 4.8 dB
- Mini 54 Hz to 20 kHz ± 5.4 dB
- Subwoofer 29 to 103 Hz ± 3.0 dB

The Sonus Faber Venere Center and 1.5 minispeaker both measure well, with extremely flat response through most of the audio band. The Venere 2.5 tower has a response dip at 2.9 kHz that throws its measurements off a bit. The 2.5 and Center are easy enough for most amps to drive, but the 1.5 mini's low measured sensitivity of 81.9 dB demands an amp with a decent amount of power. CEA-2010A bass output measures roughly the same for the 2.5 tower as it does for the T-7 sub, hitting an average of 112.2 and 112.3 dB (respectively) in the low bass (40-63 Hz) octave and 95.3 and 97.7 dB in the ultra-low bass (20-31.5 Hz) octave. — *A.B.*

BOTTOMLINE

The Venere line may be less expensive than other Sonus Faber speakers, but don't you dare describe it as "cheaper." In fact, compared with Sonus models I've tested in the past, I found the sound more accessible — more suitable for rock and pop music, more impactful for home theater. From design to performance, the Venere line is an unqualified success. **SV**