

Sonus Faber Venere 1.5 Loudspeaker

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I'VE READ ABOUT Sonus Faber for a very long time. I know that some of their designs are completely without compromise and literally handcrafted to extreme levels with unique design flair and care. I was pleased therefore to get the opportunity to review their new Model 1.5, a two-way bookshelf speaker from the Venere line. The stands are optional, in that it doesn't come as a part of the basic package, but it gets the speaker to its correct height and is well made. I had high expectations for this affordable speaker that Sonus promises "...has a unique look, ... youthful and aggressive character and sound that is vivid, agile, dynamic, and powerful." Furthermore Faber's "...legendary design touch is to be found everywhere; from the enclosures sensual lines, down to the aluminum and tempered glass foundation base."

The 1.5 is approximately 15.6 x 8.2 x 11.9 inches and thus is far from a rectangular box; instead, it has a shape inspired by the Lyre with smoothly curved sides and a flat backbone. The top is canted upwards front to back, and the very rigid front plate also leans slightly back to align voice coils of both speakers. This type of design helps keep the wave fronts of both drivers coherent. Both drivers are inset to the baffle, and the dome tweeter in a quasi horn. The specifications of the Venere 1.5 are given as 50 Hz to 25 kHz, 85 dB SPL for 1 watt input (2.83 volts), and nominal impedance is 6 ohms. The drivers are a 1.1-inch, silk-dome tweeter and a 6-inch Curv cone mid/woofer. List price is \$1,198 a pair plus \$398 for the 27-inch tall matching stands. They are 13.3 lbs each.

Despite the conventional wisdom that a speaker enclosure needs to be ultra rigid and non-resonant, Sonus speaker boxes are very lively and tuned to enhance the overall sound. The firm says they don't rely on measurements (and provide none) but use critical listening and computer modeling in developing their designs. The drivers are custom made by the "finest international manufacturers." While this model now appears to be their entry level, as far as cost goes, they borrow from Sonus' great experience building cost-no-object models and I was very eager to hear them.

Inside the shipping boxes, I found everything embedded in a very strong and dense foam, which was custom molded to each piece. The speakers and stands themselves were each clad with their own soft Tyvek

bags, the finishes were beautiful. The set-up assembly is quite solid, and good stability is achieved using the close tolerance hardware supplied. Everything tightens up nicely with the supplied hex key.

ful clarity and detail was entrancing. Pat's angular sliding lines bopped and shimmered and had me twitching. The acoustic bass was marvelously delicate and firm with great body and fullness. The drums alternately

The new Sonus Faber Veneres have breathtaking clarity and offer a beguiling sense of vocal presence.

The included spikes for the bottom tilt the speaker face back a bit and were threaded for some range of adjustment if needed. Protective disks are also included. The rear binding posts are very high quality with knurled ends for finger tightening and several wiring diagrams are included for single, bi-wiring, and bi-amping. I only used them single wired for this review.

For set up, Faber recommends 5 to 8 feet between the speakers and advises that they be kept at least 2 to 2½ feet away from any corners. They also say both that the rear profile of the speaker is optimized for interfacing with the rear wall reflections but that their design makes environmental interaction less problematic and therefore they are easier to set up.

I found that these speakers bass response was far more sensitive to where I placed them relative to the rear wall than is usual with other systems. This allowed me to tune the bass response. The front ports, which are slots in the front baffle, worked well, with zero noise of their own. The system gives a very even and honest bass if just a little generous between 40 to 80 Hz. They ended up 63 inches from the rear wall, 8 feet apart, and 9 feet from my listening position with some toe in.

Out of the box, I took a quick listen and I was struck by their very low distortion. It took only about two days for the bass response to smooth a bit and a few days longer for the extra level of clarity and sense of height to develop. **However, after three weeks**, they absolutely sang. They are a tad dark, which to my ears more closely resembles what is heard live, but had no compromise on top extension.

They seemed to my ears to go lower than 50 Hz or at least the roll off is gentler than usual for this type of speaker. This gives them a low-end power that belies their size. I am very sensitive to drivers' dispersion characteristics and tend to like omni and other non-flat baffles. The Venere cabinets are wonderful in this regard with no beaming or spot-lit annoyances; they sound great off axis with a good-sized sweet spot.

I enjoyed listening to the 1.5s very much and was running them thru their paces with my usual test tracks followed by an assortment of music with female vocals like Suzanne Vega, KD Lang, Mary Black, and Joni Mitchell. I was never less than impressed with the sound of their voices, delicate, breathy, and quite present. Then I switched to several acoustic ensembles, jazz, folk, and rock. The reproduction was beautiful and sensitive with instruments in perfect focus. I was drawn into the music and listened rapt in attention. These Fabers speak in the voice of the musicians with a high level of expression and energy.

Pat Metheny's new quartet with sax player Chris Potter, bassist Ben Williams, and drummer Antonio Sanchez utterly floated my boat. The sax with wonder-

burst and waned, Sanchez is a unique and gifted player. The warmth of these speakers is without any sort of resonance or overhang, while bass was impressive and offered a nice weight to all but the lowest notes. I really like this new system from Sonus Faber.

I played some live Led Zeppelin (BBC Sessions) to see how loud these speakers would get before sounding compressed. To me, 85 dB SPL is loud and that level was easily achieved. But on peaks above 100 dB, I did feel the bass was no longer as dynamic and unstrained sounding, yet there was no distortion or port noise at all. These might not be the best choice for bass fiends who want it really loud and thumping, but for those who love acoustic music, classical, jazz, electric jazz, and classic rock, the Fabers did justice to everything I played. Electric guitars reared their heads in smoldering glory; angry or impudent as played. Acoustic guitar had an amazing level of communication; each pluck, fingering, and tone of the instrument lay bare, only a shade less bright and piercing than live.

NOTES

Sonus Faber Venere Model 1.5 Loudspeaker, \$1198.00; stands, \$398. U.S. distributor, Sumiko, 2431 Fifth St., Berkeley, CA 94710; phone 510/843-4500, fax 510/843-7120; e-mail mail@sumikoaudio.net.

Associated Equipment

Krell KAV-300iL integrated amplifier, Monolithic PS-1 phono stage with PS-1 power supply, Revox B791 turntable, Dynavector 17D m.c. cartridge, Audioquest Sorbogel mat, custom record weight, Stealth Ulimite phono cables, VPI 16.5 record cleaner, North Star Designs M192 DAC, Audio Alchemy Digital Drive System transport/player, Pioneer Elite D45A universal player w/IEC adapter, Echo Audio Layla 3G audio interface, Human Solutions Quad-core PC DAW, Stealth Sextet BNC digital cable, Stealth M-21 Signature, Stealth Sakra, Stealth Indra audio cables, Stealth M7000, M7 Signature, Cloud 9, Cloud 99 a.c. cables, Black Diamond Racing and Polycrystal cones, Shakti Stone, Chang Lightspeed CLS 6400 power conditioner, and PS Audio Power Port wall outlet.

In particular their clarity is breathtaking and what little they were missing is slight and subtle compared to the very best systems I've heard. Solo piano in particular was heavenly through these speakers. I felt they are a bit soft at about 6,500 Hz, which may contribute to their non fatiguing character. Some cymbals were less metallic sounding than live but it didn't bother me a bit. The cymbals on the newly remastered Abbey Road CD, *Maxwell's Silver Hammer*, were almost shockingly palpable. The remaster really brings out the drums, synths, and strings. I really enjoyed it and cranked it up loud. The level of intelligibility of dialog would make these great Home Theater speakers I think and a complete package of them would be dynamite with a worthy subwoofer.

Now that I had put in enough listening hours to have a handle on these in particular speakers, it was time to play some of my own recordings of a local chamber orchestra made in an old stone church. This time the orchestra was joined by a very talented choral group from nearby Westmont College as well as finally making use of the very fine pipe organ there. A really nicely restored Flemish-style harpsichord featured in the second half. I was not at all disappointed, the size and width and depth were nearly as large as with my big floor-standing reference speakers. While the sense of space was curtailed a bit on the Veneres and the rumble of traffic outside was not there, the sound picture I had was really terrific, I could easily "see" every musician and singer in place and even the height seemed to be right on. It took me right back to that night, just a bit less immersive than I've heard but no less gorgeous. These speakers made a very coherent and seamless image with an excellent sense of presence to each voice and instrument. They were particularly beguiling with

voices, the driver integration is superb and the level of fine detail generous and unhyped.

I thought the Veneres might have the most wonderful reproduction of sibilance I may have yet heard. They didn't quite nail the sense of "there-ness" and timbral texture of speakers orders of magnitude more expensive, but for their size and class, they hit well above their weight. While they lack very deep bass, what they did reproduce was nothing to be ashamed of. Your neighbors and housemates might be grateful for that.

They had a very effortless and relaxed sound with more than adequate spaciousness. Images hovered solidly and extended beyond the edges of the speakers. Each voice and instrument inhabited its own acoustic within the overall sound portrait which was just behind the plane of the speakers. Voices, female voices especially were silky smooth, firmly anchored without the slightest smearing or bloat. The fine details of any recording played were beautifully rendered in all their subtlety and finesse. Decays, reverb trails, and the walls of the recording venue were easily heard and appreciated with just the least bit of depth curtailed by the lack of really deep bass. The bass they did have was wonderfully warm, round, and organic.

Dynamically, they were nimble with a naturalness, speed, and effortlessness that make them nearly invisible. The micro-dynamics were exceptional and on a macro level very fine for speakers this size. They have a startling precision without the least bit of hardness.

I have to say "Bravo Sonus Faber!" This new line is going to give the competition a run for the money. The rest of the Venere line can only be better IMHO. Try and hear this system somewhere. State of the art is trickling down!

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