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## Speaker Focus

# Sonus faber Olympica Nova III Loudspeaker

## More Than Skin Deep

Andrew Quint

**I**t's a ritual that plays out every time loudspeakers arrive here for review. After they've been unboxed, roughly positioned, and are breaking in with Flim & the BB's set to infinite repeat, I'll ask my wife for an opinion regarding their appearance. For 40 years, she's been the arbiter of what's attractive and what isn't in all save one room of our home—the one with the audio system. Though there have been a few exceptions—the JWM Alyson AML IIs, fashioned from mango hardwood and reviewed back in Issue 282, or the sleek granite SRC-1s from Acora Acoustics covered more recently—mostly, my spouse is unimpressed. “They're speakers!” she'll observe with a decidedly exasperated tone of voice, turn on a heel, and depart.

It was a different story with Sonus faber's Olympica Nova IIIs. Standing in the doorway of the listening room, my wife took them in and announced, dispassionately, “These could go in the living room.” Of course, if the speakers did migrate there, we couldn't actually listen to any music, as the amplifiers, cabling, and other audio paraphernalia required to produce sound would not be invited along. So my evaluation of the Nova IIIs proceeded in the usual place. But the compliment was duly noted.

Sonus faber's Olympica “collection” was introduced in 2013, the first of the Italian manufacturer's loudspeaker lines to incorporate drivers designed entirely in-house. The whole Olympica range was updated late last year, hence the Nova designation. There are three floorstanders as well as two center-channel options and a wall-mounted surround for home-theater applications. Priced at \$13,500 per pair, the Nova III is the middle model of the floorstanders—a three-way, four-driver system standing 43½" tall. The company has always been proud of the visual impression its loudspeakers make, noting a kinship to fine musical instruments, specifically old Italian ones. Many Sf products have been given names that refer to the great violins crafted in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries: There have been Cremona, Amati, Guarneri, and Stradivari models. Like earlier Olympicas, the Nova III has an asymmetric lute shape that assures the lack of any parallel flat internal surfaces, a key design goal.

Though the general look of the new Olympicas hasn't changed much, the structure of the enclosures has advanced considerably over the original series. The cabinet is now fabricated from eight layers of banded wood set into an aluminum “exoskeleton,” a methodology that has trickled down from the pricier *Homage* and *Reference* lines. This woodworking technique results in a



very rigid cabinet, and strategic internal bracing further increases the strength of the enclosure. CNC-machined aluminum plates are incorporated into the top and bottom surfaces. According to Paolo Tezzon—until recently Sf's Chief of Acoustics, Research, and Development, now the company's “brand ambassador”—the metal elements of the Nova III's enclosure “act like a clamp over the wooden structure, making the whole thing virtually resonance-free.”

As I said above, the drivers are all designed by Sonus faber, the parts manufactured by Dr. Kurt Müller GmbH & Co in Krefeld, Germany. The top of the frequency range is handled by a 28 mm (1.1") silk-dome tweeter featuring

Sf's Damped Apex Dome technology. A solid piece of die-cast aluminum that applies local dampening to the dome is part of the driver's construction; it's said to improve the anti-phase behavior inherent to this type of tweeter. The 150mm (6") midrange driver is Sf's pride-and-joy, an air-dried blend of cellulose pulp plus kapok and kenaf fibers that give the diaphragm a slightly rough surface to provide damping and better distribute cone resonances. The two identical 180mm (7") woofers are connected in parallel. Their diaphragms have a sandwich construction with external layers of cellulose pulp surrounding a layer of syntactic foam to fulfill the widely sought goal of loudspeaker driver design—low

# Speaker Focus **Sonus faber Olympica Nova III**

## Specs & Pricing

**Type:** Three-way, para-aperiodic vented box

**Driver complement:** One 28 mm (1.1") silk-dome tweeter, one 150 mm (6") cellulose/kapok/kenaf midrange, two 180 mm (7") cellulose/syntactic foam woofers

**Frequency response:** 35Hz-35kHz

**Impedance:** 4 ohms

**Sensitivity:** 90dB

**Dimensions:** 14.8" x 43.5" x 18.1"

**Weight:** 77.1 lbs. each

**Price:** \$13,500

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mass and high rigidity.

The loading of the Nova III enclosure—and most currently available Sonus faber loudspeakers—is an aperiodic design, a kind of hybrid of infinite baffle and bass-reflex. There's a port, but it's partially obstructed. The Nova III's resistive port is Sf's ominously named Stealth Ultraflex system, a length of extruded aluminum with fins that extends vertically from the top to the bottom of the speaker. A slot between two of these fins allows the internal volume of the enclosure, both the midrange and woofer sub-compartments, to communicate with the outside world. The vertical vent is located at the rear of one of the curved sides of the Nova III and the speakers can be positioned in a room with the ports facing in toward each other or out toward the sidewalls. Users are advised to try both orientations, as one will generally be preferred in terms of

low-frequency performance.

The Nova III's crossover is a progressive slope design, with crossover frequencies specified as 250Hz and 2500Hz. The boards employ Jantzen inductors and capacitors that have been newly designed by Sf in partnership with ClarityCaps. (There are actually two crossover networks, one for the tweeter/midrange section and one for the woofers. Each is located near to the relevant drivers and mechanically insulated from the main cabinet with elastomers.) The company bestows yet another trademarked name on the crossover's circuitry, anointing it as a Paracross Topology. (See Sidebar for Paolo Tezzon's elaboration on the theory, implementation, and benefits of this design.) The two sets of 5-way binding posts have robust metal nuts with a grabable ridge that facilitates the secure connection of speaker cables. I also found

the jumpers connecting the two negative and two positive terminals exceptionally easy to remove and reinsert, so experimenting with bi-wiring or bi-amping is a breeze.

The aluminum plate forming the speaker's bottom surface extends laterally in its four corners to create an outrigger structure that the supplied spikes screw into. Aluminum cups to receive the points of those spikes are provided in the event the Nova IIIs are sited on a surface you need to protect.

Sonus faber's ingenious version of a grille, a long-time feature of the manufacturer's products, continues with the latest Olympicas. There's a loom of elasticized strings held taut between two metal bars that attach to the Nova III's front baffle—another design element that evokes a musical instrument. No, they won't protect the drivers from a 3-year-old armed with a screwdriver but their organic appearance is welcome, and they are at least as sonically transparent as any "real" grille I've come across. And what of the "genuine Italian leather" that's been a luxurious touch gracing many Sf loudspeaker models over the years, here found bonded to the front baffle adjacent to the drivers? An elitist affectation? No, says Tezzon. "Honestly, the leather surely has a strong aesthetic impact in the Nova design," he told me, "and it's a powerful display of our artisan tradition. But it is also true that it works as a decoupling element and provides its own special contribution to the tone of our speakers: The loading baffle's material always has an impact on sound."

Setup presented no difficulties. Although I can't say for certain that a dealer or another reviewer hadn't played them before me, the pair of Nova IIIs I auditioned required no break-in to sound their best. In my 15' x 15' room—ceiling height varies from 11' to 13'—the speakers ended up positioned 21½" from the front wall, 8' apart, and 9' from the primary listening position. Bass was better controlled with the ports facing outwards, an orientation that was also advantageous in terms of spatiality. Mostly, the Nova IIIs were driven by Pass XA 60.8 monoblocks, though a Classé Delta stereo amplifier saw service for several weeks. Both amps have dual binding posts that expedited bi-wiring with two pairs of T+A Speaker Hex cables. I listened only to digital sources—an Oppo BDP 103 as a disc transport as well as MusiCHI SRV-1 and Baetis Reference servers, the latter streaming files from Tidal. The DAC was a T+A DAC 8 DSD connected directly to the amplifier(s) with Transparent Gen V balanced interconnects. An Ideon 3R MasterTime reclocker was inserted between the MusiCHI computer and the DAC. Digital cabling included wires from Furutech (USB), Ideon (USB), Revelation Audio Labs (AES/EBU), and Apogee Wyde Eye (coaxial/SPDIF).

For two socially distanced months, the Olympica Nova III was my only loudspeaker and not once did I find myself counting down the days until I could return to my usual Magico S3 Mk2s—a larger, heavier, and significantly more expensive transducer. This surprised me because of what I know—or thought I knew—about the relative capabilities of these two products with recordings characterized by extremes of dynamics, low-frequency content, and tonal density. The objective superiority of the Magicos when playing loud and low was incontrovertible. Yet the more I listened to big band jazz, pedal-to-the-metal rock, exuberant synth-pop, and orchestral "power music" though the Nova

## Paolo Tezzon on Sonus faber's Paracross Topology Crossover Design

■ "The Paracross topology is a passive crossover design and can be briefly described as a semi-balanced/fully-balanced circuit. The key element is that the Paracross topology has reactive elements positioned on the negative rail of the circuit.

"Basically, a Paracross topology crossover exactly replicates the acoustic measurements of a single-ended traditional crossover, but when you compare them in an A/B listening session they sound like night and day. The Paracross has the ability to create a darker background, more refined details, better and more focused placement in the soundstage.

"The technical reasons for this result are subject to debate, given the fact that the acoustic measurements stay unchanged. One possible explanation is that such a circuit is less sensitive to radio frequencies than traditional single-ended crossovers. Some electro-acousticians associate this effect with so-called 'look-back impedance'—the impedance as seen from the speaker's perspective; the amplifier as a load to the speaker. Honestly, what matters most to Sonus faber is getting as close as possible to the most natural music production. In all the listening comparisons we made, the Paracross topology always proved itself a powerful tool allowing us to achieve our final goal."

III's, the more I admired these Italian beauties. Bass was punchy and tuneful with the B-52s' *Party Mix*, fully communicating the loopy ebullience of those songs, and when I put on Olivier Lattre's *Midnight at Notre Dame*, it was impossible not to listen all the way through this program of occasionally over-the-top pipe organ arrangements of pieces by Bach, Wagner, Berlioz, and others. Experiencing this kind of challenging recording through the Nova III's didn't feel like a compromise, despite the absence of some of the more visceral aspects of low-bass reproduction—the rattles accompanying the deepest organ pedal stops as the listening room is energized or the wavefront of air produced by a closely miked kickdrum hitting you in the chest, as it would if you were standing near the band in a bar. To be sure, substituting a beefier power amplifier like the Classé Delta resulted in more snare drum "sock" and fuller bass, but even with the 60Wpc Passes driving the Sf speakers, there was no sense of anything fundamentally lacking with large-scale music.

The Olympica Nova III's can bring off this sleight-of-hand, I believe, because other key aspects of their performance are exceptional. First of all, these speakers are fast—nearly electrostatic-fast. Pianist Marc-André Hamelin's technique is legendary and it's on full display with *Kaleidoscope*, a collection of 20 miniatures, including the soloist's own Etude No. 6: Essercizio per pianoforte (Omaggio a Domenico Scarlatti), a not entirely serious tribute to the Baroque composer. The notes fly by with astounding velocity, yet there's no blurring, smearing, or overhang—each is distinct from the one behind and the one that follows. Related is the Nova III's capacity to reveal meaningful musical detail. Lucinda Williams' 1998 masterpiece *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road* features multiple acoustic and electric guitars on most tracks; the nuances with which the parts interlock and complement each other is presented with a natural ease. The same can be said for jazz guitarist Timothy Young's comping behind leader Wayne Horvitz's solos on "LTMBBQ" from *Sweeter Than the Day*. The spotlight may be on the pianist but Young isn't slumming and each of his support-

ive licks registers as thoughtfully considered.

Soundstaging and image stability are excellent on symphonic recordings and specific to the venue, as with the Haitink/Concertgebouw version of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 15. The most cataclysmic orchestral eruptions—for example, the opening bars of the last movement of Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony—maintain coherence to a surprising degree when played back at levels approaching those in a concert hall. But the one sonic attribute that makes the Nova III more than the sum of its parts is the neutrality of its reproduction of instrumental/vocal color and texture.

For her debut compact disc *Fantasy*, violinist Tessa Lark had the good fortune to be recorded by veteran engineer/producer Judith Sherman. Several of the works on the CD are unaccompanied, including a pair of Telemann Fantasias and Lark's own *Appalachian Fantasy*. The tonal shadings created by the soloist on her 1683 Stradivarius

are reproduced with realistic immediacy through the Sonus faber speakers—bow grabbing string, the resonance of the instrument's hollow body, minute changes in bow pressure, the room adding body to the sound issuing from the violin. String quartets, solo wind instruments, and keyboard recitals are enthralling, utterly believable in tone and timbre—these loudspeakers are a chamber music lover's dream. And aficionados of great singing will find the most distinctive voice rendered with every ounce of its character intact.

There's no smoothing over of shortcomings in a recording or remastering, I hasten to point out. The Nova III's will not make a silk purse of a sow's ear. I have a 24-bit/88.2kHz file of Linda Ronstadt's *Greatest Hits*. Phony-sounding strings, a pedal steel that sounds like a primitive synthesizer, a lack of dimensionality, and an aggressive edge to Ronstadt's vocals are heard in all their off-putting glory. I can imagine that other loudspeakers might be kinder to a recording like this. But is that what we're after as audiophiles? Of course not.

For most people, \$13,500 is a lot of money to spend on a pair of loudspeakers. But even a non-audiophile that examines the Nova III's may conclude that they're worth the asking price, based strictly on aesthetics and the quality of their manufacture. When music is played, there could be a bona fide epiphany as well for that civilian, that there's actually something to this peculiar hobby of ours. The Sonus faber Olympica Nova III's are beautiful, alright, but the beauty is way beyond skin deep. **tas**