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Sonus faber Maxima Amator Italy's lockdown-inspired loudspeaker



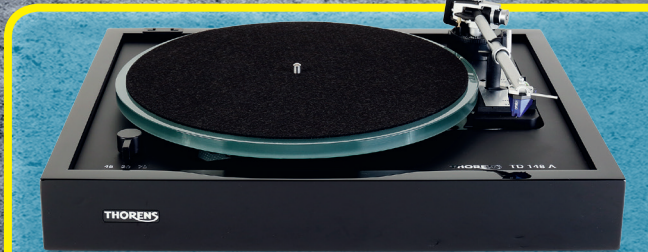
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Sonus faber Maxima Amator

First floorstander in Sonus faber's Heritage range takes its Electa Amator III standmount and raises it up high
 Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

What have you been doing throughout the various lockdowns? Looks like the R&D team at the Sonus faber factory in Arcugnano, Italy, took the opportunity to spend some time revisiting a project it had been keeping on the back burner for a while – a two-way floorstander with a solid wood enclosure to slot into its Heritage collection above the Minima Amator II and Electa Amator III [HFN Jul '19] standmount models.

The concept of the £14,500 Maxima Amator speaker looks simple enough: if you're going to take up floorspace with a compact speaker on a substantial stand, why not fill it with a floorstanding model? The listening-room real estate occupied is much the same at around 300x350mm (wd), and it's not even that much taller – 112cm for the Maxima versus 109.5cm for the Electa Amator III on its optional stand.

MEET THE CABINET

Rather than add a second woofer into the cabinet, Sonus faber has retained the same two-way driver complement as the standmount, allowing the 180mm air-dried cellulose pulp/fibre bass/mid unit to work into an increased cabinet volume. The custom 28mm silk-dome tweeter is the company's DAD (Damped Apex Dome) model, with a three-vane diffuser/phase plate and neodymium-magnet motor system, all loaded into a solid spruce 'labyrinth chamber' behind.

The single bass/mid unit does not have access to the entire internal void, however, because a slanted internal divider isolates the lower third of the cabinet. This is filled with a resonance-damping material, also lowering the centre of gravity, and hosts a third 'acoustically isolated' box for the new 'Interactive Fusion Filtering' crossover...

This is a series-connected crossover with its high-pass arm influencing the low-pass arm and is all-new for the Maxima

floorstander despite it employing the same drivers. In this latest speaker the crossover point is dropped to 2.1kHz from the smaller model's 2.5kHz, and the new speaker has just a single set of terminals, rather than the bi-wire/bi-amp provision elsewhere in the range. This new third-order crossover cannot be 'split' as easily.

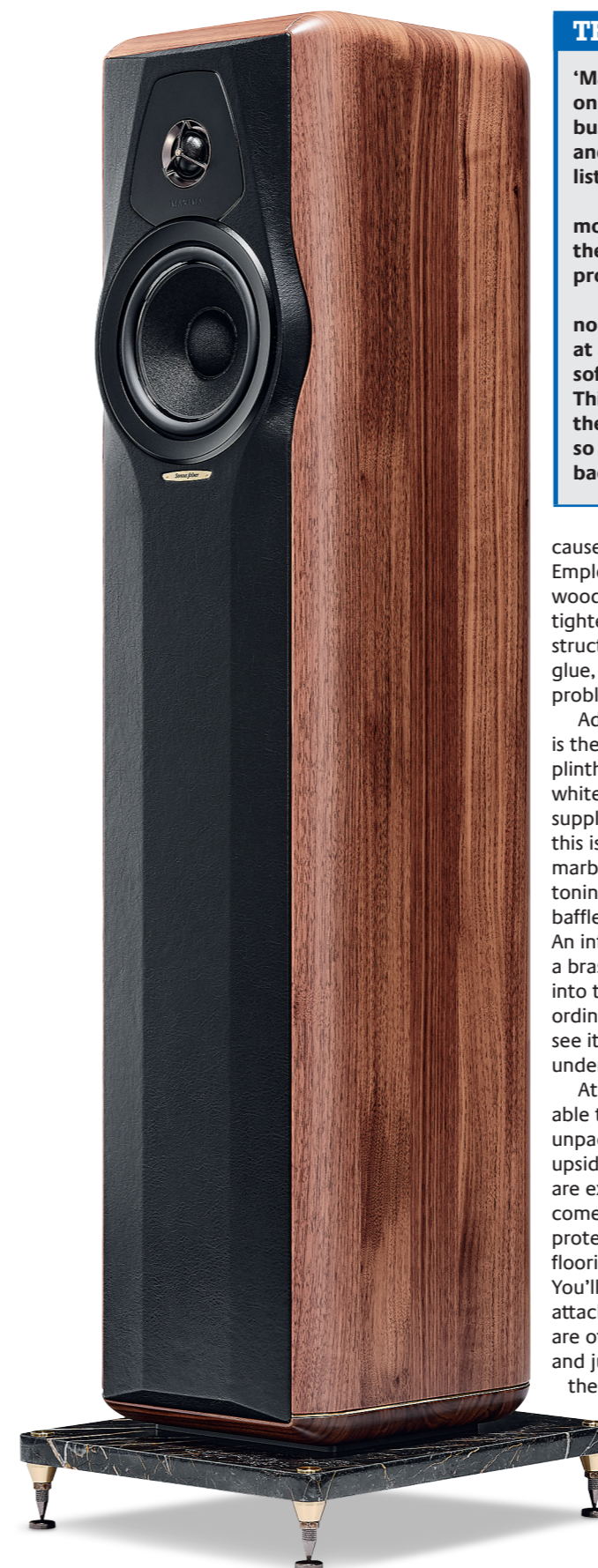
REAR WINDOW

The choice of crossover components was also fine-tuned over long listening and testing sessions – Sonus faber selecting Litz wire coils impregnated with wax to damp vibrations, combined with metallised-polypropylene capacitors and non-inductive resistors. The design team are so proud of this new filter [see boxout, p53] that they've displayed it in a window at the base of the rear panel. Not unlike some Italian supercars that make a statement of their engines beneath a rear window!

What first grabs the attention about the Maxima Amator, apart from that slightly unusual 'two way in a big cabinet' design, is the sheer quality of the finish, as one might hope for the money. As is the Sonus faber way, the entire enclosure is handcrafted from solid walnut, rather than a layer of veneer over a material such as MDF or ply, giving a combination of solidity, rigidity and inertness, with the front and rear baffles finished in soft leather.

That construction is common enough on smaller Sonus faber models, but the larger ones tend to be made up from multiple layers of wood sandwiched together in a stack. The long single panels of the Maxima Amator brought their own difficulties, not least from the inevitable ageing of the wood over time which, *in extremis*, could

RIGHT: Leather-cloaked baffle, polished marble plinth and spiked gold feet all say 'Sonus faber'. The 28mm 'Arrow Point Damped Apex' tweeter and 180mm pulp and fibre mid/bass driver were debuted in the Electa Amator III



THE LOCKDOWN PROJECT

'Maxima wasn't on our 2020 product plan – it started as a challenge to work on something that reflects our personal wishes without any deadline or business plan', recalled Sonus faber's Livio Cucuzza. 'With production empty and the office silent, due to the Covid situation, we had more time to sit and listen, as a way to escape all the terrible news.'

'The idea was to follow the tradition of early two-way Sonus faber models: I've always been a fan of pure two-ways, finding them more intimate and magical with some musical programmes, of course accepting the limits they have.'

'We tried several crossover designs, and – with no restrictions on budget or timing – we arrived at a new kind of third-order filter, via simulation software, a lot of listening and some good wine! This new crossover [see inset and p55] really is the heart of the new Maxima Amator and we're so proud of it we decided to show it off on the back of the speaker.'



cause deformation or even cracking. Employing a combination of in-house wood-drying, CNC-machining to achieve tighter tolerances and the use of structural ribs attached with flexible glue, Sonus faber is confident these problems have been avoided.

Adding to the stability of the speaker is the substantial – and hefty – marble plinth on which it stands. Unlike the white Carrera marble of the stands supplied for the smaller Amator models, this is in darker Port Saint Laurent marble, quarried in Morocco and toning well with that leather-clad front baffle and the dark walnut cabinet.

An interesting touch is a brass nameplate inset into that plinth though, ordinarily, you'll never see it as it's fixed on the underside of the marble.

At least you are able to admire it while unpacking the speaker upside-down to insert the spikes, which are exceptionally well-finished and come complete with disc-shaped floor protectors should you have wooden flooring as costly as the speakers. You'll also discover small, magnetically-attached grilles in the packaging – these are of a vestigial 'inverted shield' shape, and just cover the drivers, rather than the whole length of the speakers.

SWEET DREAMS

To understand the strengths of the Maxima Amators, you really have to ask yourself who would buy a product like this. You see, while for much of the time

they sound pretty gorgeous, they are not the one-stop solution for rockers looking to raise the rooftops! So let's deal with this caveat swiftly and with Supertramp's 'Rudy' [Crime Of The Century; A&M 192kHz/24-bit download] by way of example. Via the Maxima Amators, the opening sounds suitably distant, the instruments and vocals snapping into focus as the track grows, but as the momentum builds this clarity and sharpness is suppressed. There is, it seems, a dynamic 'sweet spot' for this speaker...

SNAP TO IT

What the Maxima Amators do, however, is sound just as refined and classy as

they look, provided you realise the limits of what is essentially a standmount design writ large, and your musical tastes play to their strengths. So, with the live recording of the 2019 Vienna New Year's Day Concert [Sony

19075902822] – a PM favourite as he was present in the Golden Hall of the Musikverein at the time – the speakers offer a lovely sense of smoothness and warmth, the soundstaging wide and the percussion crisp or as fragile as the occasion demands.

You might almost describe its sound as 'respectful' as evidenced, again, in the slightly reserved but dutifully controlled sound experienced with the Barenboim/Berlin Staatskapelle Orchestra recording of Elgar's *First Symphony* [Decca 4789353].

These speakers deliver the stately third movement with fine depth and weight, with a beautifully-textured string tone on the slow theme. Though it's still important not to get too exuberant with the volume. ☞

'They revel in the closely observed solo instruments'

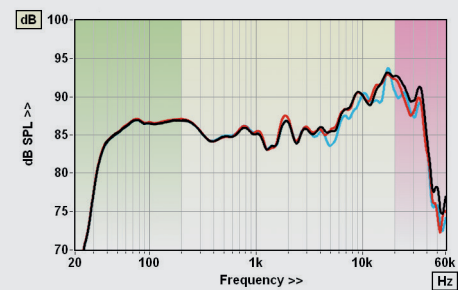
LAB REPORT

SONUS FABER MAXIMA AMATOR

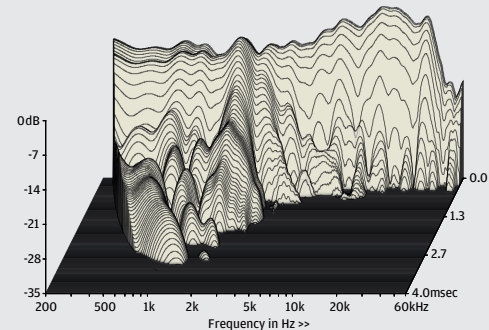
Compared with the Electra Amator III [HFN Jul '19], the Maxima's more complex third-order crossover (down from 2.5kHz to 2.1kHz) and increased cabinet volume bring improved bass extension and ease-of-drive for a slightly reduced 87dB (200Hz-20kHz) or 85.5dB (500Hz-8kHz) sensitivity. The Maxima is still a nominal 4ohm load, but its minima are *higher* at 4.0ohm/16.5kHz, 4.05ohm/142Hz and 4.5ohm/38Hz, while phase angles are 53°/55Hz and -62°/70Hz. So it's only moderately challenging!

These impedance and phase spectra also reveal a mild inflection at the ~2kHz crossover, seen as a reinforcement in the forward response [black/red traces, Graph 1] and as a dominant mode in the CSD waterfall [Graph 2] – possibly a misterrmination between the pulp bass/mid cone and its rubber surround. THD also rises slightly from the low ~0.4% achieved through bass and treble to 0.5-0.6% at this same 1-5kHz (re. 90dB SPL at 1m). Otherwise, the Amator Maxima's response trend is flat to within ±2.0dB prior to a +5dB lift above 5kHz (measured on Sonus faber's reference axis *above* the treble dome). Toeing the speakers a little off-axis will likely bring the mid and treble into balance at ~3m listening distances. Pair matching is superb at 1.0dB (200Hz-20kHz) while the small magnetically-attached grille has little adverse impact [blue trace, Graph 1].

The pulp bass/mid driver has a usefully wide 52-440Hz/-6dB bandwidth while diffraction-corrected nearfield measurement shows this combines with the higher-Q 35Hz output of the rear port (albeit with spurious modes at 240Hz and 780Hz) to deliver a generous 37Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz) bass extension. PM



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed driver/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left, black; right, red; w. grille, blue



ABOVE: Resonances are quickly suppressed, albeit with a mode remaining near the 2.1kHz crossover [Graph 1]

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V - 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	85.1dB / 85.5dB / 84.5dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz-20kHz)	4.0ohm @ 16.5kHz 48ohm @ 63Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz-20kHz)	-62° @ 70Hz +53° @ 55Hz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz-20kHz)	1.0dB/ ±4.9dB/±5.0dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	37Hz / 40.6kHz/38.9kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.4% / 0.55% / 0.35%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	1120x300x350mm / 38kg

LEFT: Mid/bass driver is reflex-loaded via a substantial rear-facing port while a single pair of 4mm terminals serve the two-way, third-order crossover, visible behind a transparent panel, below

Monty Alexander's take on 'Sex Machine', from his *My America* set [Telarc Jazz SACD-63552], has real weight and boogie in the rhythm section behind the piano, and excellent imaging. This is a super-clean recording that, along with the Maxima Amators themselves, really benefits from being partnered with very capable amplifiers – the Constellation Inspiration Monos [HFN Oct '19] in this instance.

WHIPCRACK TAPS

And that seems to be the story with these speakers: playing the McGarrigles' *Dancer With Bruised Knees* [Warner 7599-25958-2] the harmonies on, for example, 'Perrine Était Servante' are wonderfully delicate and breathy, with great body to the accompanying instruments. The same goes for folk group The Unthanks' 'Hawthorn' from their *Mount The Air* album [Rabble Rouser Music RRM013] where the Maxima Amators ensure these voices just hang in space in an entirely captivating manner.

Then, turning to a real demo warhorse, Antonio Forcione and Sabina Sciubba's *Meet Me In London* [Naim CD021], sees the duo's take on 'Why Can't We Live Together?' revealed here as notable not only for the power and scope of the voice as for Forcione's guitar stylings and whipcrack fretboard taps. You'd almost think it was an Italian thing! 🇮🇹

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Looks are not deceiving – these are elegant, classically-styled and designed loudspeakers for lovers of equally refined, classically-themed recordings. Think of them more as compact standmounts built into a floorstanding frame and you will not go far wrong. So when the Maxima Amators are in their happy place, with crisply-recorded vocals and instrumentation, they *do* sound every bit as gorgeous as they look.

Sound Quality: 85%



Switch to a simpler recording, such as the Andrew Manze/Rachel Podger set of Bach *Single & Double Violin Concertos* [Harmonia Mundi HMU907155], and the speakers revel in the closely observed solo instruments, while presenting the accompanying forces of The Academy of Ancient Music with a wonderfully light and delicate touch. All the performers are clearly delineated, and the music is driven along with fine snap and speed, and impressive instrumental texture.

Similarly, the sound is all about focus on a couple of crystal-clear piano recordings: with Murray Perahia's set of Chopin *Études* [Sony SK61885] every note is revealed in striking detail, without losing sight of the scale of the instruments while

