

SONUS FABER LUMINA SURROUND SPEAKER SYSTEM

# Luminous Surround

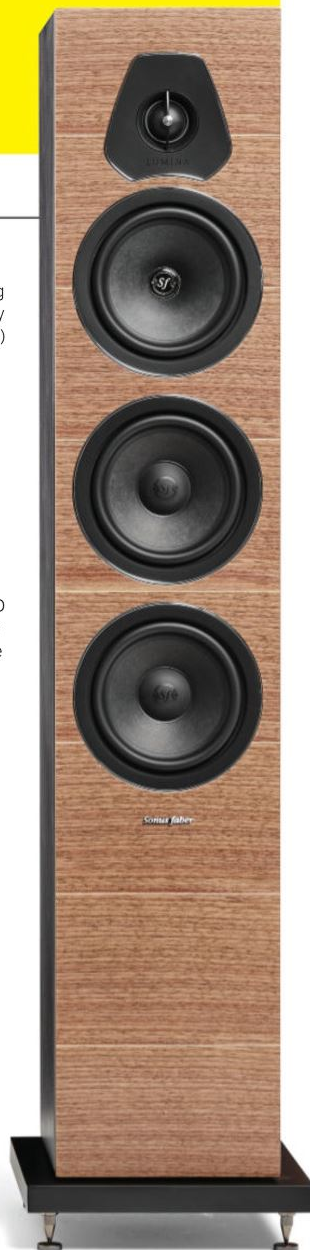
By Thomas J. Norton

**LOUDSPEAKER MANUFACTURER** Sonus faber was founded in the early 1980s by the late Franco Serblin in Vicenza, Italy. It's been known since then for offering superb sound with classic Italian attention to style, with products aimed at buyers for whom price was at most a secondary consideration. But in recent years the company has tested more affordable waters, particularly in its home theater offerings, with the latest addition to its lineup, the Lumina Collection, designed to appeal to a wider range of listeners with real-world budgets.

Sonus faber's Lumina series consists of three models, all of which I used in the system under review here. The Lumina III floorstander is a three-way design that consists of two 5.9-inch paper-cone woofers, a 5.5-inch paper-cone midrange, and a 1.1-inch soft dome tweeter. (A similar tweeter design trademarked DAD, for Damped Apex Dome, is also used in some of the company's more upscale designs.) The center of the tweeter's dome is gently restrained

to keep it from moving in a different direction from the rest of the dome which, should it happen, can affect performance. (This damping technique, though relatively rare, is also used by other manufacturers but under different names.)

The Lumina CI center is a two-way design with its DAD tweeter flanked by two 4.7-inch woofers. A pair of the tiny Lumina Is, used here for surrounds, is also marketed as a two-way speaker for modest two-channel systems (though at \$900/pair, not too modest!). These employ the same DAD tweeter, together with a 4.7-inch paper-cone woofer. The Lumina III tower crosses over at 350Hz and 3.5kHz,



while the Lumina I bookshelf and Lumina CI center both cross over at 2kHz.

All Lumina models use ported cabinets. In the CI and I, the ports radiate from the bottom via sturdy, black plastic fixtures. The Lumina III, however, uses a conventional port firing from the cabinet's bottom. The III's wood base, or plinth, not only stabilizes the cabinet but also forms part of the port length and it shouldn't be removed.

The III comes with spikes that set the plinth high enough off the floor to let the port breathe. This is where I encountered my only setup issue. Since my speakers sit on a room-sized carpet with a hardwood floor beneath it that I'm careful not to scratch, dent, or puncture, I don't use spikes. (Sonus faber includes protective spike footers, but for me using them wasn't practical, as I'd have to fish around blindly under the carpet to position them accurately.) Instead of the spikes, I installed aftermarket speaker outriggers that I've used for a number of other reviews. These raised the Lumina III high enough to comfortably clear the port, further stabilizing the speakers (but not as rigidly as spikes would), and allowing for slight tilt adjustments. (Similar but not identical footers are available from Parts Express.)

The Lumina speakers come with magnetically attached grilles. A quick measurement indicated that the sonic effect of the grilles was minimal. Nevertheless, I removed them for all of my subsequent listening and measurements.

There are no subwoofers specific to the Lumina range, but Sonus faber sent us its Gravis II subwoofer, a model employing a down-firing 10-inch woofer driven by a 350-watt (continuous) class-A/B amplifier plus a front-firing 10-inch passive radiator. Its specified response is from 25Hz up to the low-pass filter setting. Connections and controls are relatively standard and minimal:

**RATINGS**

Speakers

- PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
- VALUE ★★★★★



**RATINGS**

Subwoofer

- PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
- FEATURES ★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
- VALUE ★★★★★

Hi/Low line-level input with level control, a separate LFE line-level input with its own separate level control, and a two position (0- or 180-degree) phase switch. There's also an Auto-on switch that activates the subwoofer when it senses low frequency information and a main power switch. The sub's speaker-level input uses a Speakon jack—an unusual feature in a consumer product, though an adapter is provided.

I found the Gravis II's LFE input superfluous for home theater applications and only used the Hi/Low input. The latter offers continuous low-pass settings from 30Hz-120Hz, but there's no defeat switch for this, so it will operate together with whatever subwoofer low-pass settings you choose on your AVR. Such a tandem configuration isn't generally recommended, but when I set this control to its 120Hz maximum and used different (lower) frequencies for my AVR's own crossover settings, the combination didn't produce any audible issues.

All of the Lumina speakers, and the Gravis subwoofer as well, carry a "Made in Italy"

label, but I wouldn't assume this means "Made Entirely in Italy." (As far as I could determine, Italian export law has a separate "100% Made in Italy" rating. But the latter is difficult to achieve in today's tech-heavy world.) Nevertheless, it's safe to assume that the Luminas were designed and engineered in Italy, with many key parts and perhaps the final assembly originating in or near Sonus faber's headquarters.

Style is a major concern for Italian-made products, and the Luminas are no exception. While keeping costs in check demanded rectangular cabinets free of the swoopy curves found in Sonus faber's pricier speaker offerings, the Luminas lack for little in the looks department. The top and sides are wrapped in soft black leather, and the birch ply front baffles are finished in your choice of Piano Black, Walnut, or Wenge. Matching trims are also available for the Gravis II subwoofer.

**SETUP**

I positioned the Lumina IIIs nine feet apart and roughly four feet out from the back wall with the Lumina CI centered between them on a low stand. The IIIs were angled in toward the center listening seat and tilted just enough upwards to



**At a Glance**

- + Crisp detail and open-sounding midrange
  - + Immersive 5.1 performance
  - + Stylish and affordable
  - CI center speaker has limited off-axis response
- Price:** \$5,296 (as tested)  
sonusfaber.com

accommodate a seated ear height that's slightly above the tweeters. The two Lumina I speakers I used as surrounds were positioned in the rear of the room a bit further back and higher up than classic Dolby recommendations due to room limitations. The Gravis II subwoofer was positioned behind the main listening position—a location that has previously provided good response in my room for a single-sub system configuration—and connected wirelessly using an SVS Soundpath adapter.

A Denon AVR-X6700H A/V receiver was used to drive the Lumina system. All the source material was lossless and included CD, Blu-ray, and Ultra HD Blu-ray discs. The disc players were an Oppo UDP-203 for movies and a Marantz UD7007 for stereo music.

**MUSIC PERFORMANCE**

I started out my evaluation by listening to music with the two Lumina IIIs driven full-range with no subwoofer. As I've mentioned in previous speaker reviews, my room is very large in cubic feet and provides no significant deep bass support. That's been a concern with every speaker I've reviewed in this space and the Lumina III was no exception. Even with a significant boost from the Denon AVR's 63Hz graphic EQ control, the response at the main listening position was down by several dB at 50Hz and fell off rapidly below that point. The resulting bass

## SONUS FABER LUMINA SURROUND SPEAKER SYSTEM

was impressively clean and tight, but not fully satisfying on music with a strong bottom end. Nor is such a bass boost a good idea in a very large room. After only a few selections I dialed in the Gravis II subwoofer and didn't look back. In a smaller room the Lumina III might well offer deep enough bass to not require bass boost or a subwoofer, but despite being a floorstander it's still a relatively small speaker.

Another issue in my room is a significant peak just above 100Hz. That's hard to correct without rearranging the room (not possible to any significant extent in my situation, and in any case not always effective), applying a dedicated room EQ such as the Denon AVR's Audyssey MultEQ XT32 feature, or employing some other form of equalization. I chose the latter here. The Denon offers five graphic (fixed frequency) EQ controls for each channel. I used these to tweak the response but used *only* the 63Hz and 125Hz bands for 2.1 music (and on the center channel as well, but not on the subwoofer or the surrounds for either 2.1- or 5.1-channel listening). These adjustments only impacted the frequency range primarily affected by the room (apart from a barely measurable +/- 1.0 dB setting of the Denon's treble control if needed for a noticeably hot- or dim-sounding source) and were checked by measurements. You may not have access to these exact same controls, but all competent AVRs now offer some means to correct for room-related bass issues. (For a more exhaustive discussion of this specific technique, give a read to my February 2021 *AV Veteran* blog "Taming the Room Monster" at [soundandvision.com](http://soundandvision.com).)

All stereo music listening was done with the Denon AVR set as described above. With the Gravis II subwoofer engaged, overall system

balance was excellent from top to bottom. Detail retrieval was superb, without any harshness or exaggeration. Imaging and soundstage precision were well-handled, and the bass, thanks to the Gravis II subwoofer, was clean and tight. Years ago, I created a compilation CD featuring a wide range of challenging bass tracks including hard-hitting Japanese Taiko drums, conventional orchestral drums, powerful organ passages, and deep electronic bass. While the Gravis II couldn't quite match the sheer power of the much larger SVS PB-3000 sub (\$1,400 each) pair I had been using in my room, I never felt shortchanged, either in quantity or quality, by the single, smaller Sonus faber sub (roughly one quarter of the total volume and around half the price of the SVS pair).

Solo and group vocals from Josefine Cronholm, Holly Cole, Elvis Presley, Willy DeVille, Judy Collins, Toto, Nils Lofgren, The King's Singers, and more sounded almost universally

excellent—and I say "almost" only because the Luminas appeared to be telling it like it is. No speakers can do more than reproduce a recording accurately, and I found the Lumina IIIs, supported by the Gravis II, to be rewardingly neutral. Nothing appeared to be over-emphasized or underplayed, though as with all loudspeakers personal taste will always factor into how neutrality is judged by any given listener. If I had a mild reservation, it would be that in my listening the Lumina IIIs with the Gravis II lacked a little of the grandeur often attributed to much larger (and pricier) Sonus faber designs. But that was easily remedied when I fired up the full 5.1 system. Read on.

## MOVIES PERFORMANCE

*Ford v Ferrari* is a demo-quality Ultra HD Blu-ray, and the first disc that came to mind to evaluate the Lumina system's dynamic range. (I only later noticed the irony of using a film about Ford scrambling to



beat the world's most iconic auto company, Italy's Ferrari, at Le Mans '66 to audition a set of Italian speakers!) The roar and growl of engines, the screaming of brakes and tires, the screeching of twisted metal as cars spin out and sometimes shatter—*Ford v Ferrari's* soundtrack is enough to challenge any audio system, but the Luminas weren't phased by any of it, apart from the Gravis II subwoofer deciding to take a leisurely walk across my floor! (It likely won't move on a thick carpet—while most of my floor is carpeted, the location that was chosen for the sub is in a hardwood area.)

There was nothing small-scale here, confirming that you don't need big speakers for a big sound even in a big room. The Gravis II subwoofer didn't detract from the experience by dominating the show or shortchanging it, but instead became an integral element of the broader soundscape. The overall sound was exceptionally dynamic, well-balanced, and not overly bright even in the most challenging scenes.

*Midway* (2019) offered a similar but at the same time very different experience. If anything, it was louder than *Ford v Ferrari*, this time with the sounds of warships and planes instead of race cars. Bass effects here were even more prominent, and the Gravis II subwoofer easily kept up without obvious distor-

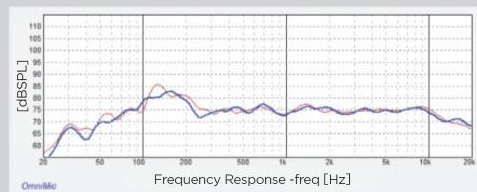
tion. Even at a playback level 3dB below reference (i.e., very loud), the Sonus faber system held it all together. The sounds of battle, with carriers pushing through relentless waves, aircraft launching from their decks (particularly the bombers taking off for Jimmy Doolittle's raid on Tokyo just months after Pearl Harbor—the film covers a lot of ground!), anti-aircraft fire, and dive bombers screeching seaward at an 80-degree-plus angle filled the room. And while here, as above, the Gravis II's bass extension and ability to unclog my sinuses wasn't quite up to the level offered by those two SVS PB-3000 subs, I never gave the difference a thought when watching either film.

Both *Ford v Ferrari* and *Midway* offer more than just action. Both films have a superb, and superbly recorded, music score, even if it's often obscured by aggressive action. *Midway's* moving closing montage in particular provided a warm, rich accompaniment to the brief summaries of the real heroes that were key players in the actual battle, and the Luminas conveyed it perfectly. I also watched the closing credits from beginning to end, not to read the credits themselves but to further immerse myself in the score. It ranged from an imposing orchestral sweep to a fully played and sung performance of the 1940s hit, "All or Nothing at All," which was also

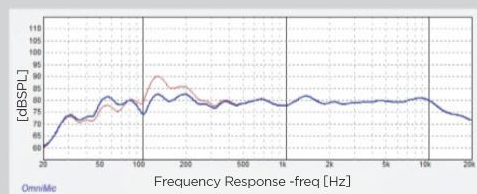


# Test Bench

I conducted several in-room measurements using the Parts Express Omnicore measuring software and microphone, a \$300 package that offers a usefully accurate response of a speaker at the main listening seat. The results shown here are for my room. All were taken at the



► **Fig.1** The in-room responses of the left and right Lumina IIIs with no subwoofer and no EQ. The left channel is in red and the right in blue.



► **Fig.2** The in-room responses of the left channel Lumina III and no subwoofer in red with no graphic EQ, and in blue with graphic EQ applied at 63Hz and 125Hz. Note that the EQ has essentially no effect above 250Hz and minimal effect between 200Hz and 250Hz.

heard (though in a shorter form) in the movie itself.

How a speaker system deals with a film's music is often more important to me than how well it supports action and effects. The latter count, of course, but while we know what music should sound like, most of us have no sonic reference for explosions, gunfire, rocket launches, and general chaos. The Luminas did a series of star turns on some of my favorite film scores such as the electronic-based one for *Oblivion*, the surprisingly lush 2003 miniseries *Children of Dune*, and *Score*, a terrific documentary about film music ranging from a brief glimpse of a young Hans Zimmer playing keyboard for

the rock band The Buggles to a sonically stunning (but sadly unidentified and all too short) orchestral flourish at the end.

Despite my very positive impression of the Lumina 5.1 system, it does have one significant weakness. The Lumina CI center speaker is a two-way design in a woofer-tweeter-woofer horizontal configuration. I did all of my serious listening from the middle seat on my couch, and from that position it performed very well, with enough power to deliver clear, spit- and sizzle-free dialogue in the most difficult passages. But all such two-way designs I know of suffer from off-center issues and the CI is no exception. It's simple physics: When you move

single, seated, ear-level position. (Experience in my room has shown that an average of several readings, taken across a span of about 2 feet, differs little from the single position measurement apart from smoothing out small ripples.) The graphs here are  $\frac{1}{6}$ <sup>th</sup> octave smoothed.—TJN

## Specs

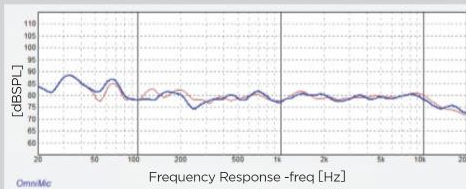
**LUMINA III TOWER** (\$2,199/pair): 2 x 5.9 in paper cone woofers, 5.5 in paper cone midrange, 1.1 in soft dome DAD tweeter; 9 x 38.9 x 10.9 in (W x H x D); 35.1 lb

**LUMINA CI CENTER** (\$699): 2 x 4.7 in paper cone woofers, 1.1 in soft dome DAD tweeter;

20.6 x 6.6 x 8.4 in (W x H x D); 16.8 lb

**LUMINA I SURROUND** (\$899/pair): 4.7 in paper cone woofer, 1.1 in soft dome DAD tweeter; 5.9 x 11 x 8.3 in (W x H x D); 11.9 lb

**GRAVIS II SUBWOOFER** (\$1,499): 10 in paper cone bass driver; 10 in passive radiator; class- A/B amp (350W, 670W peak); 14 x 15.9 x 16 in (W x H x D, including feet); 47.3 lb



► **Fig.3** The total in-room responses of the left and right Lumina IIIs together with the Gravis II subwoofer, as auditioned with graphic EQ applied to the Lumina IIIs at 63Hz and 125Hz. The left channel is in red and the right in blue.

four feet off-center to the left or right, the CI's horizontally arrayed drivers interfere with each other, audibly crunching the midrange. This reduces overall impact and makes the dialogue less natural-sounding and intelligible. The Lumina lineup deserves a three-way center with the midrange and tweeter mounted vertically between the woofers, even though this more advanced and flexible design would increase the system price.

## CONCLUSION

Despite a few minor reservations, I enjoyed every hour I spent with this stylish and great-sounding Sonus Faber Lumina

system. There's heavy competition at its \$5,296 price point, but the Luminas are nonetheless worth a close look and a serious listen. Together with the Gravis II subwoofer, they handled some of the most difficult source material in my very large room without a whimper, and that's saying a lot.

## The Verdict

The name Sonus faber conjures up visions of exotic speakers priced at a level that will buy you a reasonably nice house in some places. But a full 5.1 package from the company's new Lumina line will cost you less than a modest patio upgrade.