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Speaker Systems

Sonus Faber Grand Piano Home surround speaker system

Michael Fremer, May, 2002

John Lennon's line in "Come Together"—"Got to be good-looking 'cause he's so hard to see"—sums up the sleek, shapely appearance of Sonus Faber's new Grand Piano Home L/R speaker. With its warm, leatherette-wrapped front and rear baffles and sculpted black-lacquer-like side cheeks, the gently sloping design exudes European elegance even as it seems to disappear under its own good looks.



While superficially resembling the original Grand Piano, which I reviewed in the May 1998 *Stereophile*, the Home is larger and trades in the 2-way-with-passive-radiator design for a 2 1/2-way system. Two 7-inch coated glass-fiber-cone woofers handle the lows. The lower bass driver, tuned with a front-mounted port, rolls off gradually above 200Hz. The other 7-inch driver's response continues up to 3kHz. The advantage of this arrangement is that you gain the bass heft of the larger radiating area of the double drivers operating in

tandem, without the beaming and intermodulation (IM) distortion problems that can occur when you try to get a larger, single LF driver to simultaneously produce upper mids and bass. A ferrofluid-cooled, 1 1/2-inch silk-domed tweeter fitted with a "spider" delivers the high frequencies. All drivers are magnetically shielded. The claimed frequency response is 35Hz-20kHz at 90dB sensitivity. The Home's single set of high-quality binding posts replaces the original Grand Piano's biwirable pair.

The new Solo Home center-channel speaker features a familiar-looking, freestanding tweeter in a microphone-like encasing, but it is smaller and far less cumbersome than the company's original center-channel design featured in the Concerto Solo, which I reviewed in July/August 1998. I found the sound of that speaker, with its center-mounted, 3/4-inch tweeter flanked by a pair of 6-inch woofers, to be overly warm in the midbass, giving voices an unpleasant chestiness. The Solo Home uses the same tweeter and 7-inch woofer as the Grand Piano in a smaller, front-ported baffle that shares the Grand Piano's leatherette look. Efficiency is somewhat lower, at 88dB, with claimed response of 40Hz-20kHz.

Rounding out the system is the compact Wall surround speaker, four of which were supplied for this review so I could listen to Dolby Digital EX and DTS-ES. The Wall, too, is a front-ported 2-way featuring a single 6-inch glass-fiber-cone woofer and the same 1 1/2-inch silk-dome tweeter used in the other speakers. Despite its small size, the Wall is claimed to go down to 60Hz—well below the THX standard of 80Hz.

All drivers are built by well-known manufacturers, such as Vifa and Scanspeak, to Sonus Faber's specifications. The unique cabinetry is Sonus's own, as I found out when I visited their factory after covering the Top Audio hi-fi show in Milan a few years ago. The Home-series cabinets consist of a folded MDF center section that's open on the sides and includes the front baffle, rear, top, and bottom. The box is sealed by the side panels, which are decoupled when mounted to control resonances. The design is ingenious, cost-effective, and, in Sonus's hands, aesthetically pleasing.

During that visit I spent time with Sonus Faber founder and chief designer Franco Serblin and watched him "voice" a new speaker, the Cremona, which has since been released. In designing his speakers Serblin uses a combination of science and art to achieve a canny balance to which music lovers and home-theater enthusiasts have responded positively. When I visited, ground was about to be broken for a capacity-doubling new factory.

The Sonus Faber Sound and the Grand Piano Home

Franco Serblin is an all-around aesthete who knows good food, wine, dress, art, music, conversation—and sound. In the Home he's created another gorgeous-looking speaker line with an exquisite sonic balance focused on where the music is: the midband. But more than

that, in the Grand Piano Home he's built a speaker that can play louder, go lower, is easier to drive, and has fewer obvious colorations than the original—especially in the upper midrange, where the GP was slightly prominent. I have no doubt that the Infinity IL60s I recently reviewed will probably measure better, but for sheer listening pleasure, I'd choose the Grand Piano Homes for music and movies.

Sonus Faber's specialty is palpability—the sensation that the event is occurring in your room, or that you've been transported to the event. This is where the art comes in. The Grand Piano Home's tonal balance is wide open, even slightly sharp in the upper mids/lower trebles, but completely free from "electronica" or etch. The top end just seems to sail silkily into airy oblivion—even if, in reality, the very top is probably rolled-off gracefully. Even in less than ideal home theaters, where speaker placement is limited and defined by monitor placement, the GP Homes' sound never seemed to be coming from drivers in a box. This is an extremely difficult sensation to achieve—especially at this price point.

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While the Home system's bottom end was crossed over to a subwoofer (in this case a REL Storm III, distributed by Sonus Faber importer Sumiko) at the THX-specified 80Hz, it was clear that the GP Home's bass was rhythmically agile and texturally satisfying. Later listening in my 2-channel system confirmed this. The GP Homes went surprisingly deep without getting sloppy in the midbass. Though the cabinet design is a cost-saving idea, it is also said to effectively damp resonances and release unwanted energy. The front port means you can place the speaker as close to the front wall as you like, but excess midbass will result. These speakers deserve to be a few feet away from the front wall, where they should sound remarkably free of obvious boxy colorations. It's also important during setup to get the rake right—the angle at which the speaker slopes back from vertical. Driver integration and the speaker's overall image focus will lock in at one particular, not-too-narrow window, depending on your

listening height. Adjustable spiked feet make optimizing this reasonably easy.

I played a variety of sound-effects-heavy movies as well as music videos, and the Grand Piano Homes did justice to both, never sounding strained or dynamically compressed in my fairly large living room—even when I cranked them up to well over 100dB. The GP Homes delivered a superb combination of textural delicacy, transient clarity, and believable liquidity on the Three Blind Mice/JVC XRCD edition of the Takayuki Kato Trio's *Guitar Standards* (TBM-XR-5041), which I wrote about in my review of the Infinity IL60 in January 2002. The Infinity system did a credible job. The Grand Pianos added a dimension of believability to the performance, bringing the Trio into my living room in a way the IL60s hadn't. Yet on sound-effects-laden movies like the unbearably stupid *The Mummy*, none of the impact was lost. Through the Home system, Roy Orbison's *A Black and White Night* was truly memorable.

While large-scale dynamics are key to good home-theater performance, both music and movie sound reproduction are more convincing when a system can deliver microdynamics—those low-level shifts in volume at the bottom end of the loudness scale. This is where small speakers, and those designed to a price point but with good frequency extension, often fall down. The Grand Piano Homes did not. They exhibited a sophisticated transparency and low-level resolve usually found in far more expensive speakers, where you feel as if you can look far into them and hear layered elements deeply buried in a mix. When you locate such an element, it comes to life aided by those small dynamic gestures.

Despite its smooth, almost forgiving overall sound, the GP Home will reveal limitations in associated equipment. Drive it with high-quality electronics and the speaker's transparency, lack of obvious colorations, and ability to retrieve low-level detail will have you hearing things you never knew were lurking in the backgrounds of your favorite movies. But drive them with lesser gear and the shortcomings will be apparent—as if a scrim had been placed across the soundstage. Speaking of which, while nicely made grilles are provided, the Grand Piano Homes sounded better with them off. They looked better, too.

The Solo Home Center Channel

As Thomas J. Norton frequently asks, why do so many manufacturers continue to build center-channel speakers with a mid/woof on either side of a tweeter? You end up with lobing, which creates serious response dips and peaks that rob off-axis performance of the intelligibility center channels are there to provide in the first place. The reason is aesthetic to some degree: consumers don't want a vertical stack on top of their video monitors, so when adding a midrange driver is not possible due to cost and complexity,

manufacturers end up where they started: with the woofer-tweeter-woofer configuration. Sonus solves the problem with a 2-driver setup, stacking the tweeter in its own unobtrusive housing, which leaves the Solo looking like a horizontally configured speaker. It's not original—you've probably seen it elsewhere—but it looks good and it works.

The leatherette-clad Solo Home weighs almost 19 lbs and delivers the same smooth, open, nonmechanical, well-integrated, seemingly uncolored performance as the Grand Piano Home, with 2dB less efficiency and slightly limited LF extension (40Hz vs. 30Hz for the GPH). The Solo's match with the GP is hardly surprising—it uses the same drivers. What is surprising is the Solo's relatively high price of \$950 when a single floorstanding Grand Piano Home costs \$1625. You could say the GPH is an exceptionally good value at its price, or that the Solo's price is steep. It's certainly steep compared to the superb-performing (and -measuring) four-driver, 36-lb Infinity IL36, which sells for an amazing \$499, but of course it would be a mistake to make the substitution.

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The Solo Home is voiced to match the Grand Piano Home, and it does so to perfection, helping to create a broad, expansive, well-integrated front soundstage. While it doesn't have the Infinity's crisp, almost highlighted vocal intelligibility, the Solo's driver integration is quite effective over a wide horizontal arc. I found that propping up the rear of the speaker and aiming the tweeter down toward me improved high-frequency response and driver integration. Most important, the Solo never sounded mechanical or boxy, nor was there a sense of there being a tweeter and mid/bass that never quite met in the middle—which is often the case when listening to dialogue through smallish center-channel speakers. Well-integrated pink noise backed up that observation.

Male voices were portrayed with proper authority, free of chesty or boxy residues. Female voices were equally unencumbered by

unpleasant artifacts, and sibilants were smoothly rendered yet with exemplary clarity and detail.

The Wall Home

The small, solid, leatherette-covered Wall Home surround speaker is wall-mountable and comes with adjustable brackets that screw into threaded holes drilled into the baffle's rear. These Walls won't come tumbling down, and can be horizontally adjusted or raked up and down over a 30° arc, depending on orientation. They can also be used as L/R/C and rear satellites in a smaller system. As surround and "effects" speakers, they worked quite effectively with the Solo and Grand Piano Homes, producing the requisite acoustic bubble. The silk-dome tweeter's apparently smooth response made localizing the speakers difficult (a good thing, of course), even though the "effects" pair were within 2 feet of my ears. In my home theater, all four Walls were stand-mounted at ear level.

I was so impressed with the Walls' musical performance on DTS music discs that I took a pair downstairs to my 2-channel room to have a listen. Despite the low-frequency limitations of such a small speaker, two Wall Homes produced a credible and musically pleasing sound accompanied by an open, 3-dimensional sonic picture. As in every other Sonus Faber speaker I've auditioned, the Wall's tonal balance has been cannily drawn—in this case, to give a sonic impression of more low-end heft than there probably is, but without the usual midbass bloat such attempts usually create. If you're considering Grand Piano Homes up front, Wall Homes should be your choice in back.

Conclusions

You couldn't ask for a greater study in contrasts than the Infinity IL60 system I recently reviewed and Sonus Faber's Grand Piano Home system. The former was produced under the supervision of Dr. Floyd Toole, a brilliant technocrat, the latter by an artisan using science as a valued resource but not as the primary determinant. One is from a large conglomerate with almost unlimited financial and manufacturing resources, the other from a smaller specialty firm dependent on custom outsourcing for driver technology. The results embody two very different answers to the same question: How do you get some pulsating cones in a box to sound like live music?

If I were setting up a home-theater room in which music and aesthetics took distant back seats to cinematic sound and technology, I'd probably go with the Infinity system, which costs thousands less and includes powered subs. Looks are subjective, of course, but I find the Infinity's appearance more appropriate for the set of Star Trek than for a living room, and its sound didn't move me emotionally—the hair on the back of my neck never stood up. But for sheer visceral pleasure and crisp, clear, "cinematic," movie theater-like sound, the Infinity IL60 is superb and a bargain.

If I were setting up a movie and music system in a living room or

other mixed-use room in which aesthetics are important, I'd opt for the Sonus Faber Grand Piano Home system. Its sleek looks are dramatic, but not to the point of dominating a room, and the Home's sound is intoxicating for music, and robust and sufficiently dynamic and powerful for films. It will play loud without strain and has superb dynamics, resolution, and transparency. Well-recorded musical scores can sound almost too good, drawing attention to themselves as entities separate from the picture. But that's a problem I can handle!

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Grand Piano Home 2 1/2-way front L/R speaker

Drivers: 1 1/2" silk-dome tweeter, two 7" multi-coated glass-fiber-cone woofers

Frequency response: 35Hz-20kHz

Nominal impedance: 6W

Sensitivity: 90dB (2.83V @ 1m)

Recommended amplification: 30-250W

Dimensions: 42.5" x 9" x 11.5" (HxWxD)

Weight: 55 lbs

Price: \$3250/pair

Solo Home 2-way center speaker

Drivers: 1 1/2" silk-dome tweeter, 7" multi-coated glass-fiber-cone woofer

Frequency response: 40Hz-20kHz

Nominal impedance: 6W

Sensitivity: 88dB (2.83V @ 1m)

Recommended amplification: 30-200W

Dimensions: 18.5" x 9" x 10.5" (WxHxD)

Weight: 18.7 lbs

Price: \$950 each

Wall Home 2-way surround speaker

Drivers: 1 1/2" silk-dome tweeter, 6" multi-coated glass-fiber-cone

woofer

Frequency response: 60Hz-20kHz

Nominal impedance: 6W

Sensitivity: 88dB (2.83V @ 1m)

Recommended amplification: 30-150W

Dimensions: 13.5" x 18.75" x 6" (HxWxD)

Weight: 11 lbs

Price: \$995/pair (including wall-mounting hardware)

Manufacturer

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Camelot Technologies Round Table DVDplayer

Arcam DV27 DVD player

RCA DTC-100 HD digital tuner

Panasonic TU-DST50 HD tuner

Panasonic PV-D1000 D-VHS recorder

Display

Philips 55PP9701 55" HD-ready RPTV

A/V Receivers

Kenwood Sovereign VR5900

Integra DTR-9.1

Subwoofers

REL Storm III

Aerial Acoustics SW-12

Cables

TosLink: Kimber Kable

Digital: Wireworld Eclipse Gold and Digital, XLO Reference

Speaker: Sumiko OCOS (L/C/R/surround)

Video: AudioQuest S-video, component

Misc.

Audio Power Industries Power Wedge 116 line conditioner

Terk Pi indoor powered FM antenna

Terk AM Advantage AM-1000 indoor AM antenna

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The Grand Piano Home's ported cabinet is tuned to approximately 39Hz. Its sensitivity is about 88dB/W/m, and its impedance bottoms out at 3.8 Ω at 39Hz and at 3.2 Ω at 7.1kHz. We would rate the Home's nominal impedance at 5 Ω ; it should not be a difficult load for any competent amplifier.

The pseudo-anechoic response of the Grand Piano Home at tweeter height, averaged over a 30 $^\circ$ forward horizontal angle and combined with the nearfield responses of the woofers and port, is shown in Fig.1 (violet). The useful bass extends down to approximately 37Hz (-10dB relative to the output at 1kHz). The response exhibits a smooth but prominent emphasis in the presence region at about 1.6kHz, and another in the mid-treble at about 8kHz. Together, these suggest a slightly forward sound with a trace of emphasis in the low-treble/sibilance region. (MF did note a slight sharpness in the upper mid/lower treble, but was not bothered by it.) The rise at 1.6kHz disappears as you move far off-axis, which may well reduce its audibility.

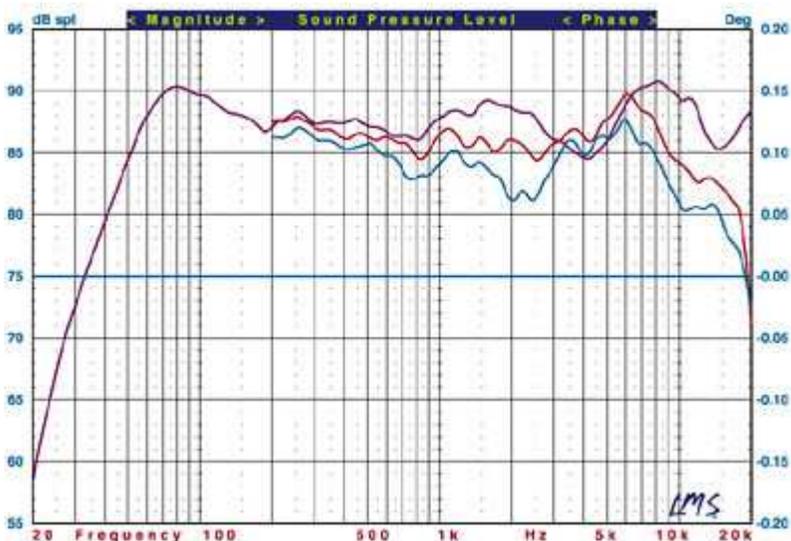
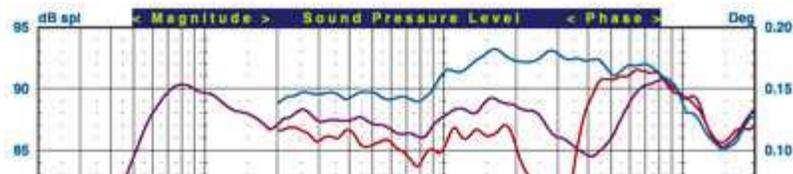


Fig.1

Fig.2 again shows the Grand Piano Home's averaged horizontal front response (violet), plus the vertical responses taken at +15 $^\circ$ (red) and -15 $^\circ$ (blue) relative to the tweeter. Oddly, the overall response is significantly smoother slightly below the tweeter axis. Sitting with one's ears higher than the tweeter (red curve) should be avoided.



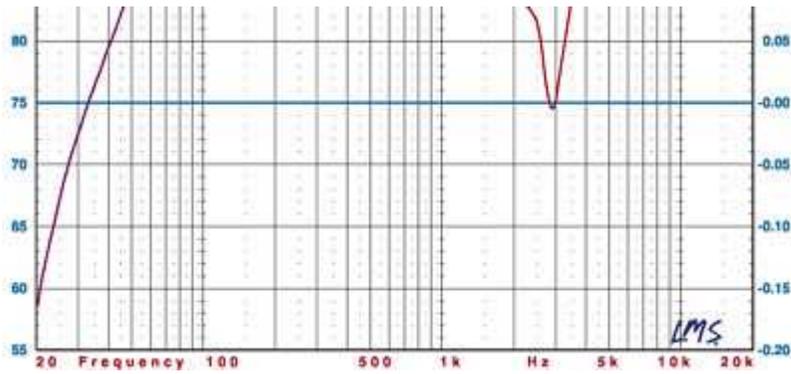


Fig.2

The center-channel Solo Home's cabinet is tuned to about 50Hz. Its sensitivity measured approximately 86dB/W/m, with minimum impedances of 5.2 Ω at 50Hz and 3.1 Ω at 4.5kHz—a fair rating for the nominal impedance would be 6 Ω . A good amplifier should have no problem driving this speaker.

The Solo Home's measured front horizontal response, taken on the tweeter axis and averaged in the same manner as described above for the Grand Piano Home, is shown in Fig.3 (violet). The useful bass extension is approximately 45Hz (-10dB). The Solo Home's response is smoother overall than the Grand Piano's, and apart from a mild suckout centered between 800Hz and 1kHz, the horizontal off-axis performance is very good—and far better than that of typical center-channels, in which the tweeter is placed between two horizontally configured woofers. The Solo's $\pm 15^\circ$ vertical off-axis performance (Fig.4) is excellent, as long as the listener's ears are no higher than the tweeter axis.

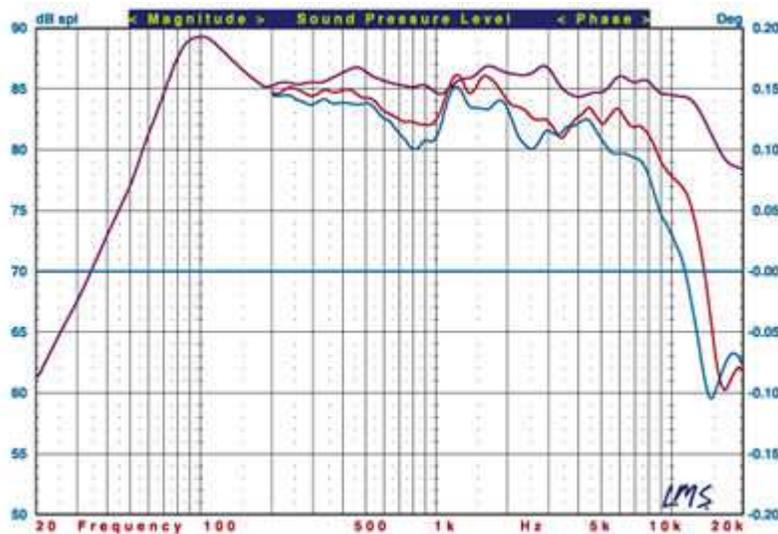
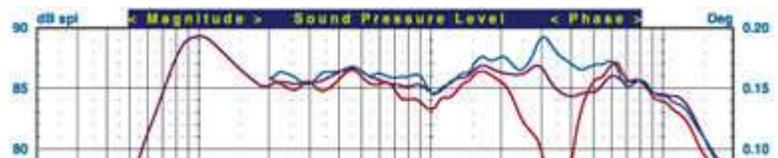


Fig.3



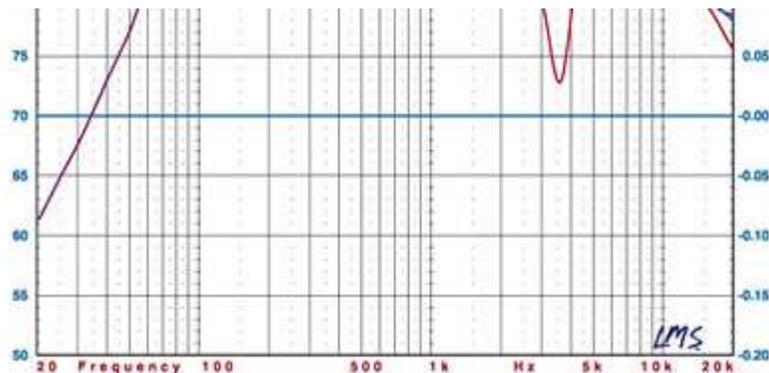


Fig.4

Altogether, this is a good set of measurements, limited only by the slightly lumpy average frontal response of the Grand Piano Home. But set up properly—perhaps with a slightly more pronounced tilt-back to the Grand Piano than that provided by the cabinet itself—Sonus Faber's Grand Piano Home system is clearly capable of fine performance, as MF confirmed in his listening tests. —*Thomas J. Norton*

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