

EQUIPMENT REPORT

Sonus faber Liuto

The Bad Boy from Italy

Neil Gader

I'd just finished shutting off the system after a lengthy session listening to a wide range of LPs. There was The Police's *Synchronicity*, a smattering of Jennifer Warnes and Holly Cole and Tom Waits, and, just for good measure, the Atlanta Brass Ensemble performing Copland's *Fanfare For The Common Man* on no less than the classic Crystal Recordings direct-to-disc LP. As the mighty Plinius Hiato integrated amp (with 300 raging Aussie watts per channel) cooled down I began noting my impressions, I thought to myself, *mamma mia*, a speaker even Slash would love. Meet Liuto, the latest addition to the Sonus faber family. The name is Italian for lute but any resemblance to the baroque-era gut-string instrument brought to life in concert by virtuosos like Julian Bream, Narciso Yepes, or John Williams is purely coincidental. This is the speaker your mother warned you about. One that'll get you blacklisted by that stuffy condo homeowners association. Yes, a Sonus faber—the same manufacturer known for its elite *Homage Series* speakers christened with iconic names like *Guarneri* and *Stradivari*. The Liuto is the devilish bad boy of the lineup with no respect for its elders.

Technically, the Liuto replaces the *Domus* line, and falls between the *Toy* line and the *Classic* models like the \$13k *Cremona M*. It's available not only as the floorstander considered here but as the *Monitor*, a stand-mounted compact, and the *Smart*, a multipurpose surround/center channel. While Liuto maintains classic Sonus visual cues such as the lute-shaped side panels, Liuto is a cleaner, more contemporary take that should be an easier and more décor-neutral fit into most rooms. Dressed in a glossy rock-star black finish, Liuto is positively stunning. The only awkwardness is that the outrigger-style spiked footers stabilizing the rear have not been carried forward to the front—a visual mismatch.

The Liuto is a three-way, vented, medium-sized floorstander roughly 41" tall. It uses all new drivers including a 6" polypropylene/textile midrange, a 9" aluminum/magnesium woofer, and a return to the larger 1" soft-dome



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tweeter of earlier models. Its sensitivity and impedance suggest it's an easy speaker to drive, and sure enough lightweight amps will do the job, *kind of*. But as is always the case in audio the more watts you bring to the party the more good things are bound to happen. So it was with the Liuto.

John Hunter of U.S. importer Sumiko told me the Liuto reminded him of early SF designs like the Electa and Electa Amator. The difference is the improved speed of the newly developed damped-aluminum-cone woofer. In opting for the speed and slam of the new driver and in order to maximize its potential, a lower crossover point of 350Hz was required. Sonus therefore needed a midrange that could kick in at a lower frequency and a tweeter which could also perform a half-octave lower. Enter the large chamber soft dome instead of the smaller-surface-area ring radiator of Sonus Domus models. As Hunter explained, for Sonus, this has always been the order of things—the primary directive is to get the drivers right and the crossover will fall into place, rather than “fixing it in the mix.”

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Sonically the Liuto applies its handiwork with a familiar Sonus blend of midrange warmth, instrumental detail, an enveloping soundstage, and low-frequency extension that seems comfortable well into the 30-cycle range. It's a signature sound that embodies the kind of va-va-voom sensuousness you can sink into. Like the perfect *doppio espresso*, complete with golden *crema*, there's a slightly darker tonal character to the weighty, chocolaty low-end, and an appealing treble that is detailed but doesn't skew to the clinical. As good as the bass is (and it truly is *robusto*) it will require some serious attention to placement or it can get a bit thick and unruly (as deep bass does if not optimized). Find the sweet spot, however, and the low frequencies impart a wonderfully tactile impression that lets you hear the skins of drums, the fingertips lighting on the strings of a standup bass, any kind of deep acoustic instruments that sends low-frequency ripples into the air. Is it the fastest bass I've heard? No, but it's very good, especially for a bass-reflex design of this magnitude. The Liuto's treble region has the knack of balancing articulation and refulgent harmonics while steering clear of raw edginess. The brass ensemble from Holly Cole's “The Briar and the Rose” [Alert] is one of my favorite tests. It can and has sounded horribly synthetic, but the Liuto conveys the specific natural timbre of each player, all superbly delineated.

Dynamics could be the biggest story here. At micro and macro levels, the Liuto really turns up the heat on many fine two-ways, 2.5-ways, and even some three-ways. Lively would be an understatement—call Liuto, Sonus Unchained. For example the massive arrays of percussion and tympani during *Fanfane* swept across the soundstage like cascading howitzers evincing an utter lack of smearing during the full-bore brass passages. Likewise,



SPECS & PRICING

Type: Three-way vented box
Drivers: 1" fabric dome tweeter, polypropylene/textile 6" mid, 9" aluminum/magnesium alloy woofer

Frequency response: 40Hz-25kHz

Sensitivity: 89dB

Impedance: 8 ohm

Dimensions: 40.6" x 9.3" x 16.25"

Weight: 66 lbs.

Price: \$5998/pr.

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ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT
Sota Cosmos Series III turntable; SME V tonearm; Sumiko Palo Santos, Ortofon, 2M Black; JR Transrotor Phono II; Simaudio CD3.3; Simaudio i3.3, Plinius Hiato; Synergistic Tesla Apex, Wireworld Platinum; Synergistic Tesla, Wireworld Silver Electra & Kimber Palladian power cords

string-section layering, microdynamic interplay, and depth cues were vividly and authentically rendered.

Almost as impressive is an all-encompassing soundfield that moves energy into every corner of the soundstage. Orchestral depth is simply stunning. Even in my small room I could hear the mass of chorus and horns layered along the wall behind the speakers as I listened to the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth in the Solti/Chicago version [Decca]. I don't hear a Jekyll and Hyde split between on-axis and off-axis behavior that tends to lock heads in a single position. I'd guess its power response measurement is likely excellent.

The Liuto may not possess the last scintilla of nuance or the haughty finishing school behavior of the Cremona and the Homage Series flagships, but it's a high-voltage performer.

It's a matter of taste whether one will object to the soothing quality that the Liuto applies to vocalists. It's a subtle inflection but as I listened to Tom Waits perform "Georgia Lee" and "Take It With Me" from his *Mule Variations* LP [Anti/Epitaph] I came to the conclusion that a portion of his throaty near-guttural presence was slightly weakened. It was indeed the same voice, but through the Liuto it sounded as if Waits had just downed a hot tea with honey and lemon; the pointy shards of vocal grit and gravel had been smoothed over. For female singers, however, this tonal equation resolved somewhat differently. During Jennifer Warnes' "The Ballad of the Runaway Horse" from *Famous Blue Raincoat* [Shout/Cisco], the Liuto pulled a bit more articulation and transient information from her voice, which lent the track a slightly drier, tighter character. In the upper mids there was brief dry patch as if a bit of energizing air had escaped the soundstage. In my view, more a small subtraction than a weakness, but unlike the Waits, which maintained an overall warmer tonality, the Warnes cooled the sound slightly. Ultimately I found that I could improve this coloration somewhat (not entirely) by reducing the lateral spread of the speakers in my room and distancing the sidewall reflection point a few inches. It improved the body and the centering of the vocal and pulled the singer into stronger focus.

Since the Liuto was designed to bring much of the performance of the

Cremona M to a less lofty price point, comparisons to that vaunted speaker are inevitable. The Liuto fares well even though it is a different animal. The Cremona M is a bit flatter tonally across the octaves, goes a bit deeper, and commands greater control. It also exhibits a more exacting top end. However, it may not be quite as viscerally exciting. Like I said the Liuto has this effusive and unabashed party animal signature whereas the Cremona M seems a bit more buttoned down and thoughtful about each note it reproduces. And it's pretty much a dead heat on transients. The Liuto's interdriver coherence is very good for its price, but depending on the recording there isn't quite the same of-a-piece quality as the superbly integrated Cremona M. And neither has the point-source single-driver-style coherence of a great two-way like my reference ATCs. Fact is, for less than half the cost of the Cremona M, you'll be getting a speaker that comes mighty close to the Cremona's stomping grounds, which is very good news for the prospective Liuto buyer.

The Liuto may not possess the last scintilla of nuance or the haughty finishing school behavior of the Cremona and the Homage Series flagships but it's a high-voltage performer, both infinitely entertaining and musical. It's also a flat-out great value—not a virtue always associated with Sonus faber. In fact during these hard luck times for everyone's beaten-down 401(k), the Liuto might be just the stimulus we've been waiting for. Pound for pound, dollar for dollar, it's the best speaker in the proud Sonus family. **tas**

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