

Ultra Audio

Embracing Old and New: Sonus faber Amati Futura Loudspeakers

Written by Jeff Fritz
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When Sonus faber released the Amati Anniversario loudspeaker in 2005, it was to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the birth of Andrea Amati, the master instrument maker from Cremona, Italy. In fact, Sonus faber has always paid respect to what they see as their national musical heritage, as witnessed by the Homage series of loudspeakers, which has honored such great luthiers as Stradivari and Guarneri, in addition to Amati. But in their tributes Sonus went beyond mere names, designing their speaker cabinets to resemble the classic shape of the lute: “a stringed musical instrument having a long, fretted neck and a hollow, typically pear-shaped body with a vaulted back.” The “grille” of a Sonus speaker is actually a series of vertically oriented strings, which serve to complete the resemblance to a stringed instrument.

Knowing that Sonus faber pays such painstaking attention to the symbolism of their products' appearance, it should have raised more than one eyebrow when the company named their newest Amati model the Futura (\$36,000 USD per pair). On close examination of the brochures and website that were released with the Futura, it didn't take me long to figure out that this classic company was not content to rest on its laurels.

Form

When I interviewed [Paolo Tezzon](#), Sonus faber's chief designer, for the SoundStage! Network's coverage of the 2012 Consumer Electronics Show, he was quick to give me a rundown of the company's design team, including a number of engineers from various technical disciplines. Far removed from the one-man show that Sonus might have been many years ago, Tezzon described a focused collaborative team with a firm grasp of what Sonus wants to accomplish in their current and future loudspeaker lines. The Sonus faber (the flagship speaker), the Amati Futura, the Amati Evolution, and the latest model, the Aida, represent the fruits of the labor invested in making Sonus faber what I like to think of as a bridge company: one that respectfully pays homage to its roots in its choices of materials used in their loudspeakers, such as leather and hardwoods, but one that is also a forward-thinking, engineering-driven company that understands that, today, true high-end loudspeakers must be *more* than what they were ten or 15 years ago.



A technical description of the Amati Futura (46"H x 16"W x 25"D, 122.5 pounds each) needs to start with an overview of the driver complement and how it is implemented. The Futura uses four drivers configured as a 3.5-way loudspeaker: The 1.1" soft-dome tweeter hands off at 3200Hz to a 7" midrange cone of air-dried, non-pressed paper pulp, which in turn hands off at 220Hz to the topmost woofer, an 8.75" unit with a multilayer cone of aluminum-magnesium alloy. Below 80Hz, this woofer is supplemented by a second, identical 8.75" cone. This arrangement, in which the bottom woofer handles only the very lowest frequencies, yields greater driver surface area where it's really needed: in the low bass, where distortion can ramp up rather dramatically. Such a 3.5-way design is simpler to implement than a true four-way, but has some of a four-way's advantages, and can result in a crossover network of fewer parts.

The midrange driver's rather large (1.7") voice-coil indicates good power handling, whereas the woofers have coils of more conventional size (1.5") -- but there are two of them to share the workload. All drive-units are, according to Sonus faber, manufactured by "famous

Scandinavian producers,” then “enhanced” at the Sonus faber factory. As I examined the Amati Futura’s drivers, I noted that I didn’t recall having seen these exact drive-units in any other speaker on the market. I think this is a case where, although Sonus faber doesn’t make their own drivers in-house, they do play a significant part in their design, and thus use drivers that are unique to their products. This arrangement is certainly a step up in sophistication from companies that buy off-the-shelf drivers and simply stamp their names on the rims, if not as impressive as companies that do all this engineering and manufacturing work in house.

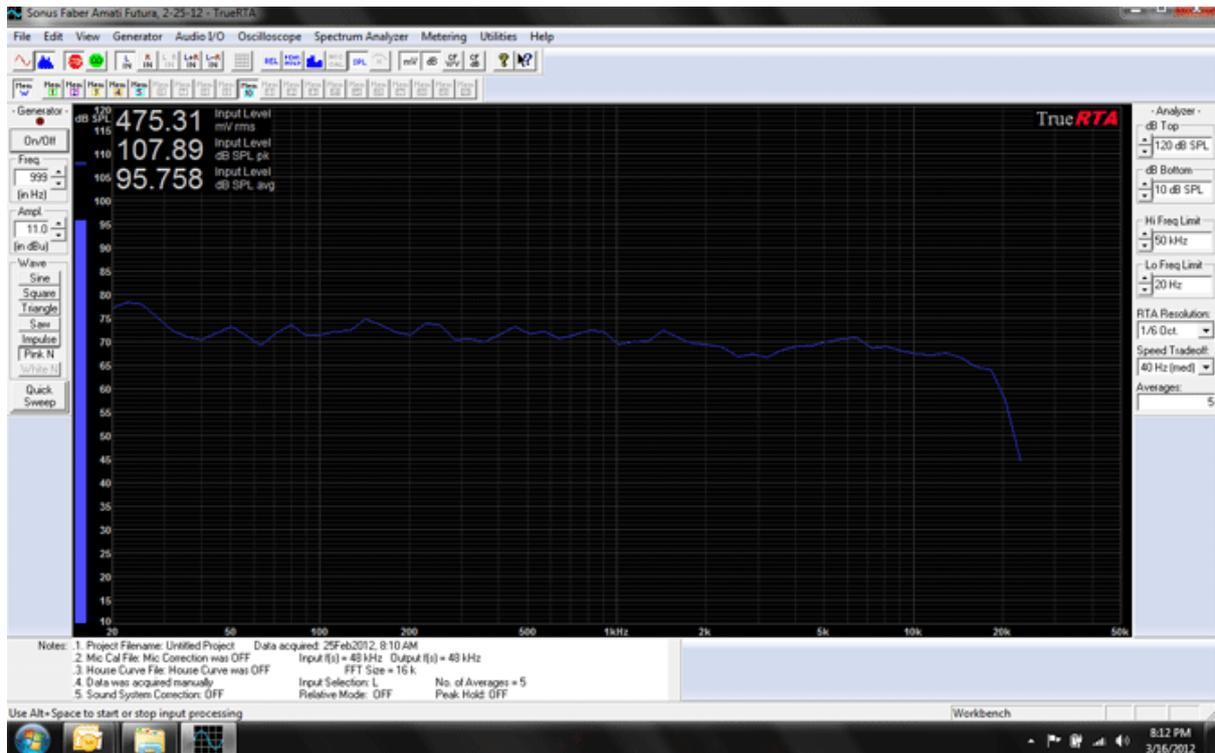
Sonus has chosen what they call a “progressive-slope crossover filter,” and paid particular attention to the phase integration of all the drivers. I interpret *progressive slope* as meaning that the rolloffs are not strictly textbook affairs, but likely get steeper the more the frequencies exceed each driver’s passband. Individual crossover components are sourced from Mundorf and Jantzen, use of the former seeming to be de rigueur among high-end speaker makers these days. The dual sets of binding posts -- one set for mids and highs, another for the bass -- on the Futura’s rear panel allow it to be biwired or biamped. These posts can be connected with metal jumpers (included) for single wiring.



The Amati Futura is put together in a rather unique fashion. The top and bottom caps of nickel-plated Avional (a high-grade aluminum alloy) are joined together by two Avional rear wings, which combine to form a clamping structure designed to route unwanted vibrations to the base of the cabinet, where Sonus faber’s unique Low Vibration Transmission (LVT) spiking system takes over. Essentially, LVT comprises a second bottom plate of Avional, separated from the Futura’s base by elastomer grommets. The spikes are screwed into this bottom plate, and it’s these that make contact with your floor. What Sonus calls a “tuned mass damper,” a device used in some high-tech automobiles and skyscrapers, is pressed into service to further combat resonance. According to Wikipedia, “Tuned mass dampers stabilize against violent motion caused by harmonic vibration. A tuned damper reduces the vibration of a system with a comparatively lightweight component so that the worst-case vibrations are less intense. Roughly speaking, practical systems are tuned to either move

the main mode away from a troubling excitation frequency, or to add damping to a resonance that is difficult or expensive to damp directly.”

Clearly, considerable efforts have been made to contain or eliminate vibrations in the Amati Futura’s cabinet, though the approach differs from that seen in speakers with massive, highly damped, superrigid enclosures. At 122.5 pounds each, the Amati Futura is a virtual lightweight compared with many speakers in its price range. Although this may work against the Futura in terms of perceived value, the technology used should counteract that supposition to some degree.



In-room frequency response in Jeff Fritz's Music Vault listening room (smoothed to 1/6th octave).

Between the rear wings of Avional are two of Sonus faber’s Stealth Reflex ports, described by the company as a “para-aperiodic” solution. Each port is lined with a felt-like material designed to alleviate the “chuffing” commonly heard through the ports of lesser speakers when played at high volumes. Sonus faber has concluded that lining the ports with this soft material doesn’t reduce the size of the port that the drivers “see,” but has advantages in terms of airflow management. Reportedly, this venting system also makes possible a smaller cabinet, though no explanation was provided as to exactly how that works.

Much has been written about the physical beauty of Sonus faber speakers. From the wood-slat side panels finished in Amati Red Violin or Graphite and seven coats of lacquer, to the chromed and engraved top panels, to the leather-covered front baffle, Sonus has managed to combine disparate materials in a way that creates a unique and very attractive whole. To live with these speakers is to daily admire their physical presence in the room. I never grew tired of glancing at them while listening to music, or of brushing my hand against one of them when walking by. In the way they add enjoyment to my living environment, they are like works of art.

Function

I thoroughly enjoyed my time with the Amati Futuras. After learning about their design and the company's current engineering team, I knew I would either be in for a huge letdown or be mightily impressed with the sound. The latter turned out to be the case. My listening notes affirm Sonus faber's design choices, and I'm sure the Amati Futura's sound will find many fans. I'm one of them.



The Amati Futura's tonal balance is the result of hours of listening tests the company performed, and from the first moment it was quite easy to hear which decisions had been made. Longer-term listening yielded deeper insights into what, precisely, the Futura's sound is.

"Gravity," from Alison Krauss's *Lonely Runs Both Ways* (16/44.1 AIFF, Rounder), had a weighty, solid lower midrange and upper bass that gave the song a distinctive physical presence that I could easily sink my ears into. This was the antithesis of that threadbare sound that can sometimes plague lesser speakers. This weightiness was smoothly coupled with a neutral upper midrange and a gently detailed, relaxed treble that I could not imagine ever becoming fatiguing.

The Amati Futura had a sound that could at once relax me, but also draw me into the performance -- two things that rarely arrive in the same package. How many times have you heard a laid-back speaker that puts you to sleep? (My hand is raised.) Playing Lyle Lovett's "North Dakota," from his *Live in Texas* (16/44.1 AIFF, MCA), at a slightly louder volume than I'd played the Krauss track illustrated just how much presence in the upper midrange and lower treble the Sonus faber could provide. Lovett's voice was finely textured, and the drums had a rounded, full-bodied character that gave firm foundation to the music.



Together, the Krauss and Lovett tracks illustrated just how nicely balanced, tonally, the Amati Futura was. I would almost call it subdued, but the word conjures up visions of a distant or laid-back midrange, and that was not the case. The Amati Futuras were a touch polite in terms of tonal balance, but at the same time they did a fine job of painting three-dimensional outlines of singers right in front of me. It is this sort of midrange fidelity that made the speakers thrilling to hear.

I think the Amati Futura's high frequencies will please most listeners. The speakers didn't sound egregiously rolled off in my room, but they did lean toward the, again, polite side of the ledger. Some might fault them for not sounding as airy and ethereal as speakers sporting supertweeters or hard-dome main tweeters that are super-extended in frequency response. I could understand that criticism. But then, the Futuras didn't exacerbate the flaws in poor recordings that remind me that I'm hearing a . . . well, a poor recording. Still, the Futura's detail retrieval was very, very good, particularly as you move toward the midrange and lower treble. Audiophiles, including myself, often talk of texture, valuing speakers that don't, for instance, gloss over the tiny microshifts of inflection that make a voice sound human. The Amati Futura was adept at revealing such textures in male and female voices in all the vocal music I played.



To find out how the Amati Futura fared with high-resolution recordings, I listened to the entire *2L-TWBAS 2012 Sampler* at 24-bit/176.4kHz. The Norwegian Armed Forces Staff Band's rendition of Eugène Bozza's *Children's Overture* proved that the Sonuses could weave all of this track's disparate elements into a cohesive whole. Notably, the bells at the beginning were crystalline in clarity, with just the right length of decay, and the drums were impactful and perfectly weighted. Pacing was just as it should be, and the Sonus fabers handled this recording's large dynamic swings without ever sounding compressed, or sonically or structurally stressed out.

I was perhaps most impressed by the Futuras' bass. In my room, the bass response was very impressive down into the upper-20Hz area. Again, the words *weight* and *substance* best describe it. There were only a few tracks with which I wanted more bass extension and control. The Cikada Duo performing Arne Nordheim's *Colorazione* sounded *huge* in my room through the Futuras -- I mean wake-the-neighbors, melt-the-walls huge. This aspect of the Futura's sound was somewhat of a surprise; I'd thought they'd be a touch too laid-back to do it. But the Sonus fabers could morph and adapt to the music like chameleons. If you prefer a more rounded, full bass sound, but one that can also provide physical impact, then the Futuras will suit you just fine.

The Sonus fabers were soundstaging champs. As I said earlier, they could melt walls and expand the space around performers out to realistic scale. They walked a fine line between precision -- I could easily map soundstages with them -- and three-dimensionality, whereby the performers have realistic size and form. What they thankfully *didn't* do was shrink the size of performers or the stages they performed on.

Amati Futura vs. Magico Q3

In comparing these speakers, my first inclination is to say that someone who loves the look of one will hate the look of the other. But that would be to discount my own experience -- for

completely different reasons, I admire both. The [Magico Q3](#) (\$38,950/pair) is in great contrast to the Amati Futura in terms of industrial design. Whereas the Amati Futura marries disparate materials, and embraces such natural elements as wood and leather, the Q3 is like a Swiss watch with its machined alloys bound together with ultraprecise fittings. Sharing space with the Futura is like being hugged by the fine interior elements of a luxury automobile; examining the Q3 is like gazing under the hood of a super sports car and marveling at the high-tech engine components. The Q3's weight of 250 pounds indicates a solidity and density of build bested by no other speaker of its modest dimensions. The Amati Futura's ample dimensions and contrasting elements are simply elegant. From a physical standpoint, both speakers provide equally impressive but very different sensory experiences.

The Magico and Sonus also greatly differ in design philosophy. Through in-house, cutting-edge engineering, Magico has sought to remove from the Q3 all distortions and nonlinearities that have always, to varying degrees, plagued loudspeakers. The Futura, by contrast, walks a fine line between being a highly engineered and expertly voiced stereo component and a thoroughly enjoyable work of functional art. The two models are alike in that each accomplishes the goals set by its designers. Each is a wholly finished product in every sense, to a degree that there is little competition for them in the marketplace; compared to either, most other speakers look merely cobbled together. These are two winners at their respective games -- but games that, to a large degree, are very different.

In terms of sound, too, there is fairly wide divergence. The Amati Futura is more neutral than any Sonus faber speaker I've heard, but not at the expense of the beauty and richness of sound for which the company is renowned. It's a tightrope walk, to be sure, but I found the Amatis worked very well with the vast majority of music I played through them. They didn't scream "voiced," in the sense of obvious colorations coming to the fore that were clearly the result of one person's skewed version of sonic reality. What they were was nicely balanced to reflect what is on the recording, while simultaneously maintaining a respectfully demure personality when faced with the brashest recordings.

On the other hand, the Magico Q3 is ultimately about sheer transparency to the source, extreme resolving capability, and blindingly fast speed and articulation. The Q3 has a see-through sound coupled with an instant-on startup matched by only the best electrostats. But the Q3 has dynamic propulsion that no electrostatic can match. These qualities open a view into the recording that is untainted by the typical tonal colorations and distortions, and produces a sound that can be disconcerting in its fidelity when heard for the first time. But when you get used to the Q3s, oh my! The Futuras simply sounded lovely the first time I heard them, with an inherent rightness that felt like home the moment I walked through the sonic door they opened.

The Q3 does not in any way sound etched or bright -- in fact, it's the antithesis of that. Transparency of the sort the Q3 is capable of draws one into the performance. By the same token, the Futura never sounded dull or congested, and never outwardly obscured information, even if it was not as ultimately resolving or as extended in the highs as the Q3. The Futura was eminently involving, particularly in that neutral midband. Bass extension was subjectively about the same from both models, with a rounder quality from the Futura, and greater articulation and speed from the Q3. The Q3 had more extension in the very uppermost registers, but the Futura never sounded terribly rolled off with any music I listened to. Both pairs of speakers could cast a magnificently large and precise soundstage, and both played cleanly, with no sense of strain at the higher volume levels I occasionally prefer.

Ultimately, the Magico Q3 is the higher-fidelity device in the truest sense of that term, but you have to be ready to accept the recorded reality it's being more faithful to, and all that

comes with it. The Sonus faber Amati Futura, on the other hand, will give you a healthy dose of high fidelity, but blends with it the voicing that Sonus would say comes from, among other things, the types of materials they have so carefully used in this speaker. I think each model successfully follows the path its designers have laid out. Which you choose to make your own will require careful examination of your musical and aesthetic priorities.

Conclusions

Have you ever seen an automobile with some really nice visual elements that are ruined by something like a clunky rear quarter panel? There are some nice parts there, but clearly the design was never conceived as a coherent whole. Well, the Sonus faber Amati Futura is a speaker system in which *all* the various parts and pieces combine perfectly into a beautiful, complete whole. The Futura was conceived by people who understand that the sum of great parts is not enough to make a special loudspeaker. And this is a special loudspeaker.

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- **Speakers** -- EgglestonWorks Andra, Magico Q3
- **Amplifier** -- Gryphon Colosseum, McIntosh MC452
- **Preamplifier** -- Gryphon Mirage, Ayre Acoustics KX-R
- **Sources** -- Apple MacBook running OS X Snow Leopard, iTunes, Amarra 2.1, Audirvana; dCS Debussy DAC
- **Cables** -- Nordost Valhalla, AudioQuest Wild Blue Yonder interconnects; Nordost Valhalla, AudioQuest Wildwood speaker cable

Sonus faber Amati Futura Loudspeakers

Price: \$36,000 USD per pair.

Warranty: Three years parts and labor.

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