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SONUS FABER IL CREMONESE

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## Sonus faber Il Cremonese



# Just MAGNIFICENT!

**I**f there is one word that epitomises the Sonus faber loudspeaker family, it's craftsmanship. In an age driven by mass production efficiencies and economies of scale, the Italian marque produces its wares with a level of meticulousness and loving attention to detail that's more akin to the art of musical instrument making than mere hi-fi production.

The comparison with musical instruments is no coincidence: Sonus faber has a long history of naming many of its top-end loudspeakers after famous violin makers or their equally famous instruments.

The Il Cremonese floorstanders under discussion here are a case in point. It's the most recent addition to Sonus faber's flagship *Homage Collection*, and pays tribute to Antonio Stradivari, arguably the most famous Italian luthier of all.

More specifically, the Il Cremonese loudspeakers are named after a specific violin, now known as the Cremonese.

The instrument is considered one of the best and most important in the history of Italian violin making, and was crafted by Stradivari in 1715, when the legendary violin maker was in his seventies.

Originally known as the Joachim, after 19th Century violinist and composer Joseph Joachim, the violin was renamed the Cremonese in 1961, after it had become the property of the city of Cremona, where it was originally produced. Today, it is considered the symbol of Cremona's violin-making heritage.

The Cremonese is also the epitome of what makes Stradivari violins so special: its unique design and generous proportions, the sheer beauty of its materials and finishes – and, most of all, the quality and timbre of the instrument's sound.

Against such a venerable background, the Sonus faber Il Cremonese needs to be something special – a loudspeaker that links innovation and craftsmanship to sheer musicality. That's quite a tall order, but one that the handsome, even imposing speaker approaches with both visual and sonic confidence.

But first, let's take a closer look at what makes the Il Cremonese tick. It's a slightly more compact relation of the Sonus faber Lillium – not that speakers close on 1,5 m

There is something particularly special about Italian audio brand Sonus faber's meticulously crafted loudspeakers. Inspired by the traditions of musical instrument making, while remaining true to the art of musicality, Sonus faber loudspeakers are aesthetically arresting, and sonically beguiling. The Il Cremonese is a good case in point.

tall and weighing 84 kg each could ever be considered compact.

The five-sided enclosure is described by Sonus faber as a rhomboidal diamond design, which not only prevents the formation of standing waves, but also ensures a very rigid, solid structure.

Visually, the enclosure allows for a fairly narrow, leather-trimmed front baffle, and a sharply tapering rear, while the top plate is angled upwards. Viewed from the side, the entire enclosure is angled backwards in the interests of time alignment.

Yes, the Il Cremonese is a thing of beauty, with the faceted sides highlighting the gleaming, lacquered, red-tinted walnut finish of the solid wood enclosure, with the thick, brushed aluminium top plate and tempered glass insert adding a contemporary touch.

The base of the Il Cremonese is also solid, brushed aluminium, and provides a home for a quartet of adjustable aluminium decoupling spikes incorporating isolating elastomers, as well as two pairs of immaculately crafted binding posts.

For all its aesthetic appeal, the technology underpinning the Il Cremonese, much of it hidden, is proof of the care and innovation that has gone into its engineering and construction. Thus, the enclosure

features triple-layer, variable thickness walls that dissipate resonance, while sub-structural ribs prevent spurious vibrations.

Those heavy anodised aluminium plates act as vibration dampers by reinforcing the column structures to reduce vibrations, while Sonus faber's 'stealth' reflex porting system uses a pair of orthogonal ports: one behind the midrange, firing rearwards via a trio of small, round ducts, and the other facing down, in the base of the cabinet, for the woofers and infra-woofers.

The main enclosure is home to four separate chambers – one each for the tweeter, midrange, dual woofers, and the side-firing infra-woofers. The suggested configuration is with these infra-woofers facing outwards, towards the side walls of the listening room, and that's the way I set them up.

The driver complement bears closer inspection. All are proprietary designs manufactured in-house by Sonus faber. The 28 mm





## Software

*Diana Krall – All For You (Impulse 96/24 FLAC)*  
*Dire Straits – Love Over Gold (Universal 96/24 FLAC)*  
*Rachmaninoff – Symphonic Dances – Eiji Oue/Minnesota Orchestra*  
*(Reference Recordings 176/24 WAV)*

## Associated Equipment

*Classé Sigma 2200i integrated amplifier*  
*Primare PRE32/MM30 pre-amp/media player*  
*Parasound Halo A21 stereo power amplifier*  
*Bryston BDA-3 D/A converter*  
*Olive One network player*  
*IsoTek Mosaic Genesis and Evo3 Aquarius power conditioners*  
*Synology 216se NAS*  
*XLO Reference and Kimber KCAG interlinks*  
*StraightWire Virtuoso speaker cables*

tweeter is a damped apex dome design with bespoke neodymium magnet motor system. A slim vertical bar aids efficient dispersion.

The tweeter shares a decoupled sub-baffle with the generously proportioned 180 mm midrange, again powered by a neodymium magnet motor system, and featuring an eddy current-free voice coil, thanks to a composite former and copper-clad aluminium wire.

The cone material is an all-organic mix of air-dried cellulose pulp, kapok, kenaf and other natural fibres, damped using a transparent viscous coating.

The twin 180 mm woofers are identical, and employ a sandwiched cone material consisting of two cellulose pulp layers separate by a syntactic foam core. The high-power motor system and extended-excursion surround promise ample pace and control, as well as low-frequency reach.

The two side-firing 220 mm infra-woofers use the same cone material as the 180 mm front-firing woofers, together with a powerful motor system featuring a 51 mm voice coil. The progressive slope crossover is an optimised amplitude/phase response design using high-quality components,

including Mundorf capacitors and Jantzen inductors. Crossover points are at 80 Hz, 250 Hz and 2,5 kHz.

A glance at the spec sheet suggests that the Il Cremonese shouldn't pose too tough a challenge for amplifiers: quoted sensitivity is a benign 92 dB, although the 4 ohm nominal impedance means that actual impedance will dip below 3 ohms.

However, I'd suggest that the Il Cremoneses demand, and deserve, decent amplification with ample power and headroom, regardless of how efficient they may appear to be on paper. The Classé Sigma 2200i used for this review delivers up to 600 watts into 4 ohms ...

It took a fair bit of elbow grease and muscle to install the Sonus fabers – not only because they're heavy, but because the five-sided profile, and the exposed drive units, make them difficult to get out of their plywood shipping crates and into the right listening position.

Once placed, the big Italians were connected to the Classé 2200i integrated amp (reviewed elsewhere in this issue) via twin runs of StraightWire Virtuoso speaker cable. Source material was accessed from a Synology NAS via an Olive One network player feeding one

of the amp's 192/24 coaxial digital outputs.

The *Audio Video* listening room is arguably a little on the small side for speakers of this magnitude, and I was concerned that the low frequencies would become overwhelming, especially given the outward-firing infra-woofers.

But I need not have worried. With the infra-woofers about 55 cm from the side walls, and the rear wall a good 1,9 m away, the Il Cremoneses were impeccably behaved, with the low frequencies never becoming boomy or intrusive.

Just how much toe-in should be dialled in depends on personal taste. Imaging remains resolutely focussed almost regardless, with predictable variances in depth and width as you point them closer to the listening position. I preferred them toed in halfway between firing dead ahead and pointing directly at the listening seat.

Those adjustments also affected the tonal character of the speakers, though: pointed directly at the listener, the upper trebles had a bell-like clarity and attack that some might consider too honest. Reducing the toe-in added midrange lustre and mid-bass heft, while injecting some upper-end smoothness, too.

The review pair had been used before, so required only a few hours of settling in before I could sit down for some concentrated listening. I had heard the Il Cremonese's big sister, the splendid Aida, in their owner's home accompanied by VTL amplification and a DCS digital front end, but even so, I wasn't sure what to expect.

It didn't take long to realise that these Il Cremonese floorstanders are detail merchants of the highest order. They have an ability to unfurl gossamer layers of information – subtle accents, fine-grained tonal hues, unexpected slivers of detail – that significantly enrich the listening experience.

At the same time, there is something natural, something organic about their sonic diction – a real ability to express the essence and integrity of the music. Listening to the Il Cremonese, voices and instruments come alive with an

intensity that lifts the electronic barriers between the captured performance and the listener.

You certainly don't end up listening to the loudspeakers, nor the ancillaries connected to them – you're only aware of the music and its easy, unfettered flow. If ever there was a loudspeaker more akin to a musical instrument than an audio component, this is it.

In many ways, I prefer Diana Krall's earlier, more spontaneous albums, and *All For You* (96/24 FLAC) is a particular favourite. Her rendition of 'Boulevard Of Broken Dreams' is dark and atmospheric, like listening to live music in a smoky bar well after midnight.

Krall's vocals command centre stage, but it's the way her reflective piano is engaged in quiet conversation with Russel Malone's liquid guitar, while the ambulatory upright bass of Paul Keller and Steve Kroon's delicate tom-toms provide a gentle backbone of rhythm, that makes this such an evocative rendition of the Cole Porter classic.

The Sonus fabers retained all the delicacy and subtlety of the performance, but managed to extract so much more than expected, not only in terms of ambience and atmosphere, but also in the way they allowed the performers to come alive.

The soundstage was open and inviting without disturbing the intimacy and intuitive interaction between the players, simply allowing full access to every element of the performance.

When Krall eases into a solo passage, her piano is spread across the entire width of the soundstage, with a brilliance that's never too bright, but brings the percussive clarity of the instrument to life with vivid intensity. Similarly, Malone's guitar jumps into the spotlight with agile yet fluid alacrity when it's his turn for a riff.

The sound of the II Cremonese speakers is tonally comprehensive, but it never becomes overwhelming – in fact, the sound was almost unexpectedly understated. The low frequency presentation was both emphatic and palpable, but was never allowed to become overbearing. Instead,



## VITAL STATS

Enclosure type .....	3,5-way bass reflex, 'stealth'-ported
Drive units .....	28 mm damped apex dome tweeter
.....	180 mm organic pulp cone midrange
.....	2x 180 mm cellulose sandwich cone woofers
.....	2x 220 mm cellulose sandwich cone subwoofers
Bi-wiring .....	Yes
Impedance .....	4 ohms nominal
Sensitivity .....	92 dB (2,83V/1 m)
Frequency response .....	25 Hz – 35 kHz
Power handling .....	100 watts – 800 watts
Dimensions (HxWxD) .....	1 450 x 398 x 622 mm
Weight .....	84 kg each

Price .....

R699 990

### Verdict

The appeal here is all in the detail: meticulous design, engineering and construction translates into an articulate, beguiling sound that befriends and seduces the audience until the listening experience becomes utterly addictive. Demands equally top-class ancillaries – and ample space!

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OUR RATING: 91 / 100





the tonal range remained perfectly structured, allowing the music to be smoothly and seductively presented.

But the real highlight was the midrange: full and textured, it did full justice to the timbre and bravura of the instruments, but with a light touch that steered well clear of oversaturation. It's a core element of the sweet, open voice these gentle giants possess.

The clarity of the trebles is not only central to the ability of the Il Cremonese loudspeakers to bring even the subtlest facets of the musical picture to the fore. It also ensures that a vital zing of energy and excitement garnishes their tonal character.

Despite their considerable stature, the physical presence of the Sonus fabers never got in the way of the music's presentation. They present their musical fare with such grace, ease and transparency that I couldn't help but become engrossed.

The sound was generous but never exaggerated, neither enlarging nor expanding the sound picture beyond the scope of the original. The presentation encouraged insight and transparency, removing all obstacles between listener and music, and presenting a sound that always sounded like music, and not just mere hi-fi.

I've probably listened to Dire Straits' 'Private Investigations' (from *Love Over Gold*, 96/24 FLAC) a thousand times, and it remains a demo stalwart, but there's something enduring about this music that has, miraculously, stood the test of time.

There's the slow, haunting build-up, with Mark Knopfler's pristine acoustic guitar overseeing the crystalline xylophone, the sonorous bass guitar and the subtle piano, all almost lost in the vast soundscape of the recording.

That space is highlighted by the fine details (footsteps, shuffles, breaking glass), while the beautifully dimensional imaging allows close scrutiny of each instrument without losing sight of the overall performance.

The Il Cremoneses sounded almost too subtle, too gentle here, even though they did full and arresting justice to the urge and momentum of the percussion, the edge of the electric guitar, the piano's shimmer and the sinewy power of the bass.

They provided a comprehensive overview of the music that was compelling and engaging, but there was an element of politeness that didn't suit the essence of the music – like arriving at a garage party dressed in top hat and tails.

However, Eiji Oue and the Minnesota

Orchestra's performance of Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* (Reference Recordings 176/24 WAV) showcased the considerable talents of the Sonus fabers to far more convincing effect.

The recording's scale is magnanimous and the performance majestic, with a richness of tone and a density of detail that requires composure and lucidity to believably translate. But the Il Cremoneses rose to the occasion with enthusiasm, doing full justice to the scale and grandeur of the music.

The pace and power of the opening bars of the 'Non Allegro – Lento Tempo I in C Minor', with its almost explosive kettle drums, frenetic woodwinds, blaring brass and soaring strings was performed with all the brio, stature and excitement they deserve.

By the same token, the almost melancholy interlude, with flute and bassoon taking centre stage against the orchestra's almost dreamy accompaniment, showcased the revealing delicacy, elegance and velvet-gloved authority that these Italian aristocrats are capable of.

The Sonus fabers easily reflected the huge dynamic swings, the broad tonal range (including some truly wall-shaking low frequencies) and the sheer pace of the music, thus confronting the listener with the full might, heart and soul of the music.

I'll revert to what I said at the beginning of this review: the true magic of the Sonus faber Il Cremonese loudspeakers is an almost uncanny ability to reveal the full scope and reach of the music they are asked to translate.

They unshackle the sound from the recording with an almost visceral intensity that makes it sound real, and alive. But at the same time, the Sonus fabers have a penchant for elegance and composure – an effortless grace that leaves them unflustered even when under sonic duress.

Always truthful, always musically satisfying and built to exceptional standards of craftsmanship, the Sonus faber Il Cremonese is a remarkable loudspeaker. Would Antonio Stradivari approve? I think so ...

Deon Schoeman