

Sonus faber Lumina III floorstanding loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom

Sonus faber makes some of the best looking, most sumptuous loudspeaker cabinets money can buy. That's not exactly a controversial statement; the lute-shaped, curved cabinets and rich finishes synonymous with the Italian brand are the stuff of legend within the audio world, to the point where even those who don't like the sound they make and decry high-end audio as a waste of money admit – albeit sometimes grudgingly – that Sonus faber speakers look good. The problem is that what makes them look so 'good' is also in no small part what makes them 'high-end'; hand-finished loudspeaker cabinets that owe as much to 'marquetry' as they do to 'marketing' do not come cheap. The question then is what happens when you want to make an entry-level loudspeaker? How do you produce something that still ticks the 'aesthetics' while still sounding good? In fact, there are two ways; build it cheaply abroad (Sonus faber tried that with the older Principa range) or build a simpler design in Italy... which is when we get to Lumina.

Lumina is Sonus faber's current stand-alone entry-level line, replacing predecessors like Principa and Chameleon. Like these two starter series, Lumina comprises just three models; the £799 Lumina I two-way stand-mount loudspeaker, the £649 Lumina C1 centre channel loudspeaker and the Lumina III, which comes in at £1,995 per pair. Normally, we don't make a big deal about price in the main part of the review (in part because *Hi-Fi+* strives to be a truly international magazine, and in part because when you start discussing a cable that costs as much as a fairly good saloon car, you run the risk of falling into "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore" territory). However, in this case it's worth making an exception because Sonus faber is really trying to balance country of origin and performance, and that price is a key part of the plan. Granted there will be those who demand the moon on a stick; wanting the hand-crafted finish of top Sonus faber speakers, made by Italian artisans, for less than the cost of the Lumina III, but by the same token, I'd like a new Porsche for £500... but it probably isn't going to happen. So, what you have instead is a very nicely-finished and good-looking loudspeaker, with great lines but in the more traditional rectangular box design. In this case a nicely finished black floorstanding box with a contrasting flat front baffle finished in one of three elegant designs.

The flagship of the range, Lumina III is a three-way floorstanding, reflex-ported design, with the port venting to the base of the cabinet. It uses the company's signature drivers throughout, drawing inspiration from units in higher-end models in the Sonus faber line-up, such as the 29mm high definition ►



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- ▶ DAD tweeter and the 150mm paper midrange unit in the company's own low compression basket. They might not be identical to the tweeter and midrange in the Sonnetto III design, but they are very similar in basic architecture. It's a different story with the twin 150mm bass units; these are conventional paper cone designs with a dust-cap rather than the continuous aluminium cones in the more up-scale design. However, they are made specifically for the task and also use the aforementioned basket system to help make the bass more sonically close to the midrange unit. Lumina III also retains the use of Sonus faber's patented 'Paracross' crossover technology, which includes impedance compensation at low frequencies as well as optimised amplitude/phase response for improved midrange and treble speed, coherence and air. The crossover frequencies are at 350Hz and 3.5kHz; this leaves much of the all-important midrange virtually free from mechanical intrusion from the crossover network or other drivers. This is all trickle-down technology from considerably more expensive Sonus faber designs. The loudspeakers are bi-wirable.

The Lumina III has an integral plinth. This causes some consternation in some circles (not just in the Lumina) for reasons I can't quite fathom. I think some would prefer the narrow lines of the speaker to extend into the floor, rather than terminating in a wider plinth. However, such speaker designs fail tilt tests and anyone who has kids or pets going through their 'parkour' phase will attest, having a loudspeaker with a lower centre of gravity is a good thing. As the bass port exits through the rear of the loudspeaker, the air-gap caused by the spikes is mandatory, and Sonus faber provides spike shoes for those not wanting to ding up their nice new floor.

One of the good things about Sonus faber almost without exception (the Extrema notwithstanding) is their relative ease of drive. And with an 89dB sensitivity and a pretty benign four-ohm nominal impedance, the Lumina III is no exception. In fact, the less expensive a loudspeaker design, the more important these figures get, as the Lumina III is likely to be partnered with decent – but not super high-end or super-powerful – designs. While there is an obvious family connection with the McIntosh brand (and, let's face it, those big blue power meters of McIntosh typically show a brand that is no stranger to the Watt), this is not a model that needs hundreds of Watts or the current delivery of an arc welder to make a noise, and its rated 50-200W amp suggestions ring true. I used a Primare i35 Prisma integrated amp to great effect, and I'd suggest you'll find a perfect partner for the Lumina III in solid-state amps in the £2,000-£4,000 price bracket. That being said, the important part is more to do with installation than partnership, as these are loudspeakers that do benefit from reasonably careful installation in room. In particular, take the rear and side wall placement into close consideration, and possibly consider a slight up-tilt of the front baffle. I found an extra turn or so on the front spikes just gave the loudspeaker an extra 'focus' to the treble, but your mileage may differ. ▶

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▶ Sonus faber has a reputation for making loudspeakers that sound as good as they look; sometimes sounding a bit too ‘nice’ in the process, with an indistinctness and warmth in the lower midrange. In fairness, many love this kind of sound, but those who want a bit of pep and pace to the sound often think they should look elsewhere. Recent designs have challenged that perception, and the Lumina III is very much cut from the same nu-Sonus cloth. This is a far more exuberant design; not quite ‘boisterous’ and far from ‘uncontrolled’ but more direct and forward sounding than you might expect from a Sonus faber design. This is, I suspect, a conscious voicing to try and bring new listeners to the Italian brand. And, if that is the case, it works extremely well. Forget polished recordings (it does them well, of course, but so does everything); I played Shame’s ‘Nigel Hitter’ from the excellent post-punk *Drunk Tank Pink* [Dead Oceans, on Tidal]. This might be delayed 2020 angst released in early 2021, but it’s choppy Television/Talking Heads sound filtered through COVID-lockdown drudgery. If you think modern London music is all grime, all the time, this angular, guitar-driven claustrophobia-fuelled assault on the senses will shake you back to reality, and is played very well through the Lumina III. The sound is as tight and edgy as the music itself, with a fast and dramatic bass line that is big enough to cope with the live-sounding drums and the head’s down pace of most tracks. It makes a good soundstage too, even if the material doesn’t lend itself to discussions of imagery and spaciousness.

Of course, ultimately the Lumina III doesn’t stray too far from well-trodden Sonus faber territory; there is still a lot of refinement and grace to the sound when called for, but there is dynamism and energy when it is not. Curiously, Rossini shows us the way; listen to the full William Tell overture [LSO, Gamba, Decca, from 1960], which almost everyone forgets actually starts with the slow ‘Dawn’ passage and gradually builds to the ‘March of the Swiss Soldiers’ (better known as the theme to *The Lone Ranger*). Traditionally, Sonus fabers were magical in the Dawn bit, and get a bit lost when it gets to the ‘Hi Ho, Silver... Away!’ part, but through the Lumina III there is more of a sense of balance; perhaps you lose some of the majesty and magic of the slower and pastoral sections (the bits Disney uses to accompany animated ‘morning!’) but the Lumina III wins in the more excited passages.

Sonus faber’s Lumina III is perhaps an exciting glimpse into the company’s future. It’s hard to make a loudspeaker look good, sound good, be made in the West and not cost a King’s Ransom, but the brand has cracked the code here. It’s a more lively and forward sound than many expect from Sonus faber, but it doesn’t ‘throw the baby out with the bathwater’ and retains much of that inviting and impassioned signature Sonus faber speaker sound. Best of all, it’s capable of playing rough music without ever sounding rough round the edges itself, and that’s a welcome addition to the audio canon. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker system. Vented box design

Drive Units: 1x 29mm DAD tweeter, 1x 150mm paper cone mid-woofer, 2x 150mm paper cone bass units

Frequency Response: 40Hz–24kHz

Sensitivity: 89dB SPL (2.83V/1m)

Nominal Impedance: 4 ohm

Crossover frequencies: 350Hz, 3.5kHz

Amplifier power recommendations: 50–250W, undistorted signal

Front Baffle Finish: Black, Wenge, Walnut

Dimensions (HxWxD): 98.9 x 22.8 x 27.8cm

Weight: 15.9kg

Price: £1,995 per pair

Manufacturer: Sonus faber

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