


Equipment Reviews

Sonus Faber Olympica Nova III Loudspeakers

Details

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What this world needs is a great loudspeaker costing under \$15,000 USD per pair.

Many audiophiles don't consider a speaker costing 15 grand per pair expensive. My non-audiophile friends consider this amazingly misguided. It wouldn't take an exhaustive

Internet search to find a reviewer somewhere saying something like this: "You can expect only so much for \$15,000."

Should we expect more for our money? Now we've got it. Sonus Faber's Olympica Nova III has raised my expectations of what we should expect in a loudspeaker costing \$13,500/pair.

Olympica Nova III

At 43.5"H x 14.8"W x 18.1"D and weighing 77.1 pounds, the III is the second-largest floorstanding loudspeaker in Sonus Faber's new Olympica Nova line. Above it is the three-woofer V (\$16,500/pair), and below it the smallest floorstander, the II (\$10,000/pair). The Novas replace the original Olympica line, with many differences from their predecessors that Sonus Faber claims improve the sound quality.



The four drivers are arrayed vertically. The tweeter, an updated design based on SF's Damped Apex Dome (DAD) technology, is a 1.1" silk dome driven by a motor system with a neodymium magnet. Arching across the front of the dome is a bow of die-cast aluminum, this revised over the previous model, and acting to damp resonances and thus extend and linearize the tweeter's reproduction of high frequencies. SF specifies the III's highs as extending up to 35kHz -- much higher than most soft domes can go.

The midrange is handled by a 5.9" drive-unit with a cone made of cellulose pulp, kenaf (a kind of hemp), kapok, and other natural materials. This material blend is then air dried with a special process claimed to optimize the cone's balance between rigidity and damping. Tweeter and midrange are surrounded by a tasteful swath of Italian leather applied by hand, at the bottom of which is a small Sonus Faber badge.

Below this assembly are two 7" woofers. Their cones comprise two layers of cellulose pulp sandwiching a layer of syntactic foam; Sonus Faber says the result has low mass but is very rigid.

The III's cabinet is built up of eight layers of bent wood bonded with strong adhesive. Inside, ribs strengthen the structure and reduce its ability to produce unwanted resonances. To further reinforce the overall strength and integrity of the cabinet, its top and bottom are capped with plates of die-cast aluminum. The cabinet is roughly triangular in cross section, and each of its three panels -- the front baffle and two side panels that taper back to almost meet at the rear -- is slightly convex. It has no rear panel per se -- instead, that narrow rear edge is occupied by Sonus Faber's Stealth Ultraflex port, a

vertical slot running the cabinet's entire height and slightly offset to one side -- these speakers are sold in "handed" pairs. The port is also made of aluminum, this time a single extruded piece in a shape inspired by ocean waves. The Stealth Ultraflex port reportedly reduces air turbulence and therefore lowers port-borne distortions. Its slight offset gives the user the choice of having the two ports of a pair of IIIs vent inward, toward each other, or outward, toward the sidewalls. This may affect the ports' reinforcement of the speakers' bass output in some rooms, but in mine I heard no difference, so I went with the ports facing out. The bottom plate includes an integral outrigger system, into which steel spikes can be inserted for a firm foundation on your floor. The spikes are locked in place with top caps that give the bottom of the speaker a finished look.



Two pairs of custom-made Sonus Faber binding posts are available for biwiring, and are easily tightened by hand. These posts can be linked by included jumpers of solid metal; a small badge below them displays the speaker's serial number.

The Olympica Nova III's three-way Paracross crossover network includes ClarityCap capacitors custom-made for Sonus Faber, who claim that their crossover topology rejects radio-frequency interference, which they say improves transient response and lowers the noise floor. The tweeter is crossed over to the midrange at 2500Hz, and the midrange hands off to the woofer at 250Hz -- pretty standard. The III's specified frequency range is 35Hz-35kHz, its nominal impedance is 4 ohms, and its sensitivity is a highish 90dB/2.83V/m.

The III is available in real-wood finishes of Walnut or Wenge, and my samples' Wenge veneer was stunning. You must see firsthand the quality of the finish to appreciate the craftsmanship applied in the making of these speakers. It looks virtually perfect, and I don't mean for the price. I mean virtually perfect for *any* price. The subtle inlays of light wood, the fine grain, the wood joinery and seams melting perfectly

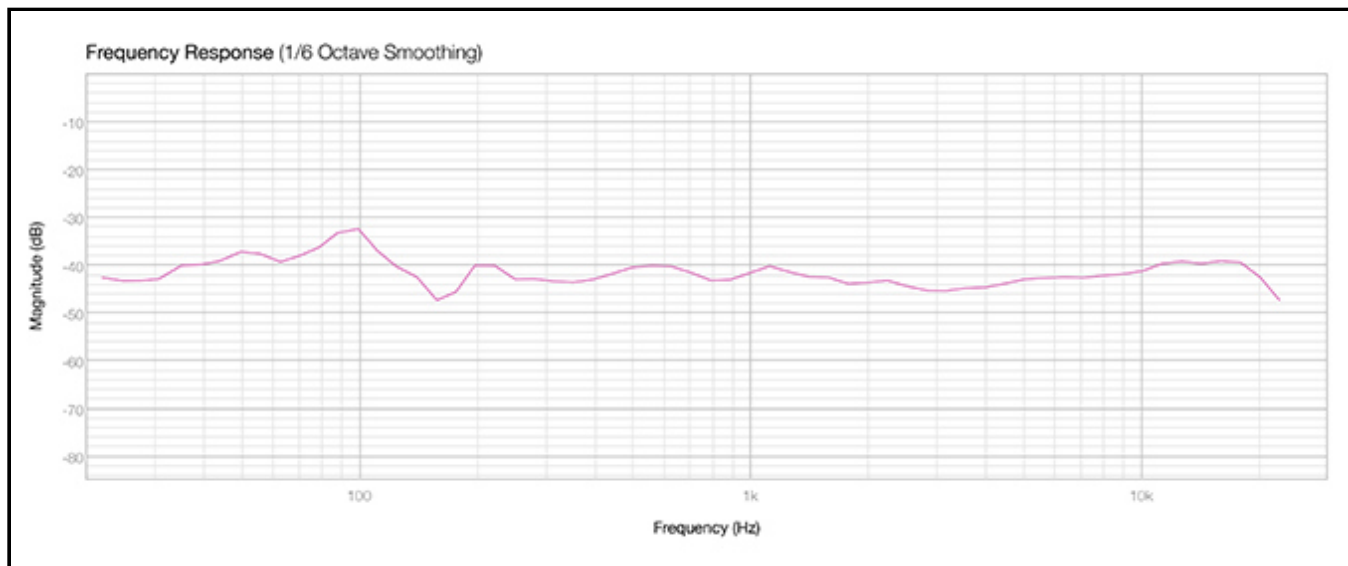
into the aluminum accents -- these speakers are as finely finished as any speaker I've seen. To say that Sonus Faber has got speaker manufacturing down to an art form is no overstatement. The Olympica Nova III should inspire a pride of ownership as high as such pride gets in audio.

System and setup

I single-wired the Olympica Nova IIIs with Siltech Explorer speaker cables to my Boulder Amplifiers 2060 stereo power amp. The source was an Apple MacBook Pro laptop feeding a Hegel Music Systems HD30 digital-to-analog converter. I streamed Qobuz and listened to music files stored on an external hard drive, all managed through Roon music-management software. As you can see, mine is a simple setup.



In their final resting positions, the speakers' tweeters were 28" from the sidewalls and 66" from the front wall. This put them 10' from my listening position and 9' apart, ports facing outward, and toed in so that their tweeter axes crossed just behind my head when I sat down to listen. Positioning the IIIs wasn't at all a fussy process; still, as is my standard practice, I confirmed, through listening tests as well as acoustic measurements using the FuzzMeasure software, that the Sonus Fabers had ended up where they produced the best balance of neutral frequency response and deep, wide soundstages.

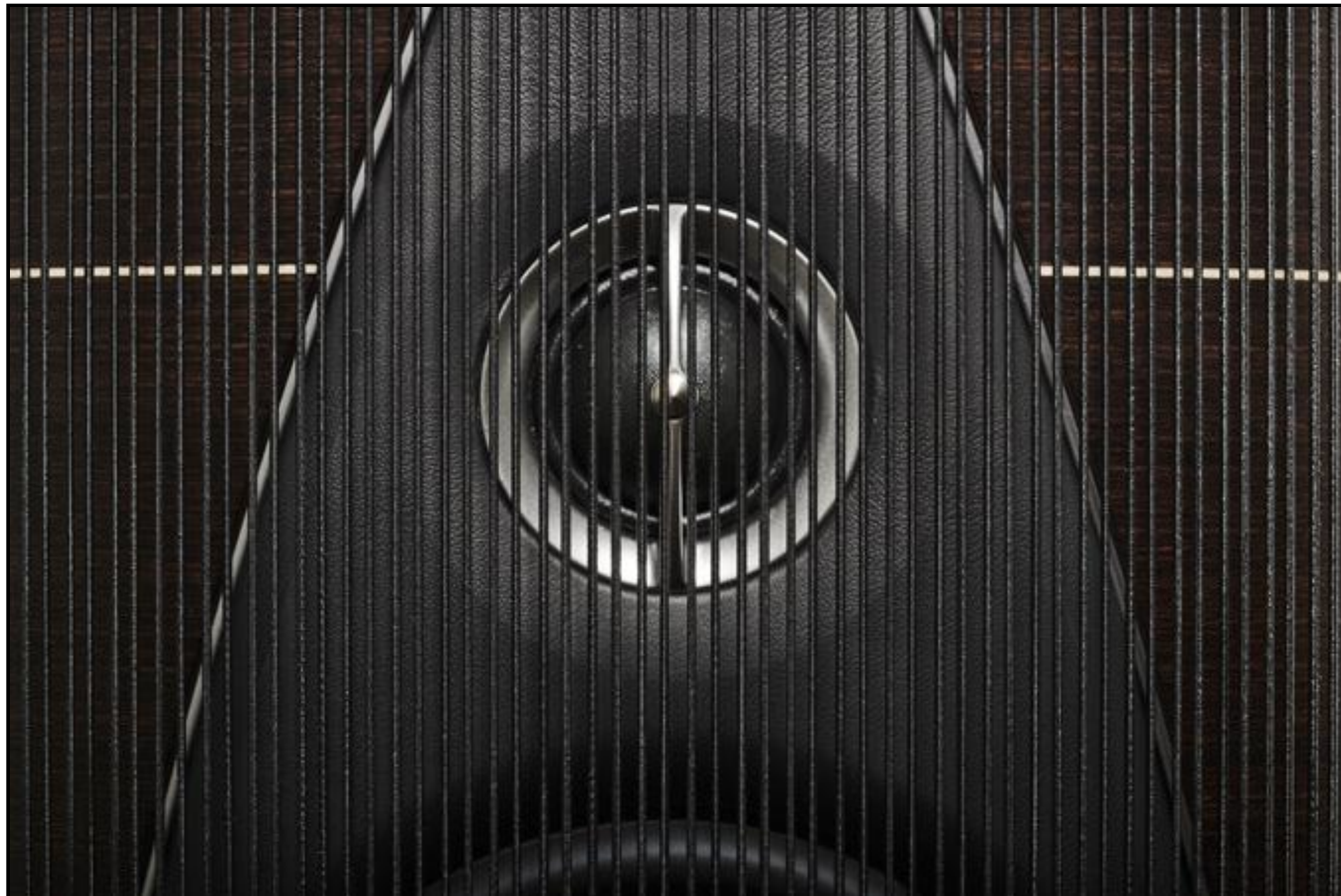


In-room frequency response

Sound

I began my listening by blasting my teenage daughter's playlist, featuring Dean Lewis and other artists -- actually, it's very similar to Hans Wetzel's playlist. This told me a couple of important things about the Olympica Nova IIIs. First, their overall sound character -- clean, never harsh, tonally *almost* neutral -- was easily heard at low volumes, and remained unchanged at higher volumes. Experience has told me that a speaker whose sonic character is consistent regardless of volume level is a speaker whose drivers are of high quality and whose cabinet is robust enough to contain the acoustic nightmare that unfolds inside that cabinet at high volumes.

I also enjoyed the way the music unfolded in my room. As Lewis sang "Waves," from his *A Place We Knew* (16-bit/44.1kHz FLAC, Island Australia/Qobuz), I experienced a deep soundstage -- his voice seemed to emanate from several feet behind the plane described by the speakers' frontmost vertical edges. As I raised the volume, the depth of that soundstage remained constant, even as it widened as the music's power grew in overall intensity. The guitar's sound never hardened but remained clear and easy to listen to.



That lack of hardness in the treble was what I wanted to explore next. I've long gravitated toward hard tweeter domes, but not so exclusively that I can't appreciate a great soft dome for what it does right. Still, I've often been bored to tears by a soft dome's lack of sparkle and treble extension. So to evaluate the purity of a tweeter's treble reproduction, I love to listen to Jerry Junkin and the Dallas Wind Symphony's *Crown Imperial: Festive Music for Organ, Winds, Brass & Percussion* (24/176.4 WAV, Reference HR-112). This recording, engineered by Keith O. Johnson, sounds amazing. I chose William Walton's *Coronation March: "Crown Imperial"*, and cranked up the volume with the Hegel DAC's volume control -- this recording's wide dynamic range requires a higher volume so that I can hear far into the highs. At 45 seconds in, the orchestral bells were *sparkling* and easily audible, just as they should be. I was impressed that the Olympica Nova IIIs' DAD tweeters weren't limiting the treble extension in any way I could hear. Listening to the highs, I wouldn't have been able to confidently declare, "Ah yes, a soft dome." This was a very good result for a silk dome.

With this album already cued up, I used it to explore the opposite end of the audioband. I pressed Play on Richard Strauss's *Festival Intrada*, to hear if the Olympica Nova IIIs could reproduce the massive sound of the pipe organ when organist Mary Preston pulls out the 32' pedal stops. Uh, not quite. What the Sonus Fabers *could* do was re-create the huge soundstage and very strong bass (down to about 35Hz) of "Orinoco Flow," from Enya's massive 1988 hit album, *Watermark* (16/44.1 AIFF, Reprise). The bass was supple and full, flowing into my room with surprising power and downward reach but with nary a hint that the III's woofers were straining to energize the room. I also enjoyed the fleet-footedness of the SFs' midbass -- I heard nothing approaching the slow, plodding sound that some speakers can produce with this track.



Simple female vocals should be easy to reproduce for any competently engineered speaker. So these days I'm not so keen to throw a soft pitch to speakers by playing recordings of simple smooth jazz vocals. One vocal track that's *not* easy to reproduce is Sia's acoustic version of "Chandelier," from her *1000 Forms of Fear: Deluxe Version* (16/44.1 FLAC, Monkey Puzzle/RCA/Qobuz). I cranked it up to over 90dB as measured at my listening seat. The Sonus Fabers sounded open, propulsive, and quite willing to soar right along with Sia as she sings the chorus. The vocal power was faithful to what I know is on this recording from listening to it through many other speakers, all of them costing more than the Olympica Nova IIIs. Sonus Faber's combination of DAD tweeter and 5.9" midrange driver could easily keep pace with this high-flying music.

SFs vs. TADs

My memories were still vivid of hearing the Sia track described above through TAD's Evolution One TX speakers (\$27,995/pair), which I reviewed (</index.php/equipment-menu/897-tad-evolution-one-tx-loudspeakers>) with the same associated equipment in September 2019. As I then wrote, "Chandelier" through the TADs "soared while remaining crystal clear, not harsh, and sounding entirely effortless." Would you be surprised to learn that the Sonus Faber Olympica Nova IIIs accomplished exactly the same thing? I can't say that the two speakers sounded identical -- for that, I'd have to have the Evolution Ones back here, side by side with the IIIs. But despite the fact that the TADs cost twice as much as the Sonus Fabers, I'd describe the sound of Sia's voice through the Sonus Fabers with the same language I used last September.



I hear you -- these speakers are separated by a huge difference in price. But otherwise, I think I'm comparing apples with apples here. Consider that the TAD measures 47.8"H x 13.8"W x 20.2"D vs. the SF's 43.5"H x 14.8"W x 18.1"D -- not much difference. And while the SF has two 7" woofers vs. the TAD's pair of 6.3" drivers, both speakers are three-way designs. Setting aside price, in terms of their dimensions, driver complements, classy looks, first-class build quality, high levels of engineering, and ability to reproduce music with little if any compromise, both of these smallish floorstanders would be considered by the same customers. Their sonic similarities are striking -- I'd call the bass extension of the two models about even: down to the middle of the 30-40Hz decade. Their bass characters, too, were similar: a touch rounded but energetic and athletic, the SFs being just a smidge tighter. They both played loud and clean, their small cabinets putting out more sound than you'd think possible. And while you might expect the TAD, with its beryllium dome with a claimed extension to 60kHz, to also *sound* a lot more extended in the treble, that wasn't at all what I heard. The TADs weren't overly treble-centric, and neither were the Sonus Fabers. In fact, I'd say that, in terms of detail retrieval in the highs, the Olympica Nova III equaled the Evolution One TX. Instead, the biggest difference in these models' sounds was in the midrange. Voices were thicker and warmer through the TADs, a touch more subdued and holographic through the SFs. This difference was not night-and-day, but with certain recordings it was consistently there. I give the SFs the slight advantage in the lower mids/upper bass, where they were just a hint quicker and more agile.

You might assume that the TAD, at twice the price, is built to a higher standard -- that for double your money you'd get a nicer-looking, better-built pair of objects sitting in your room. Nope. The Evolution One TX is exceptionally well made, but while the finish is different -- paint vs. wood -- the Olympica Nova III is every bit its equal in terms of quality of build and finish. Hands down, my wife preferred the look of the Sonus Fabers to the TADs.



All of this leads me to a simple conclusion: I'll no longer recommend the TAD Evolution One TX to those looking for a smallish, exquisitely built, superbly engineered, floorstanding loudspeaker that makes music absolutely come alive. How could I, when they can get every bit of all those qualities in the Sonus Faber Olympica Nova III -- for half the price?

Conclusion

The Sonus Faber Olympica Nova III is pretty much the ideal small floorstanding loudspeaker for the discerning audiophile. In terms of fit'n'finish, it cedes not an inch to any other speaker at any price. It gives no hint that its price is far below those of the stratospherically priced speakers in the upper echelons of the market. Except that it's not massive.

But high-end looks and build wouldn't mean much if the Olympica Nova III didn't also *sound* the part. It does. You already know that a 77.1-pound speaker won't shake the foundations of your home with bass -- but beyond that expected tradeoff, the SF cedes little to far costlier speakers. More than anything else these days, the best speakers are distinguishable from the rest of the pack by their designers' choices in tonal balance, and that's where the III shines -- its sound is mostly neutral, with only a slightly attenuated midrange adding any sort of character. But even that character -- revealed by, among other things, soundstages slightly deeper than you'll hear from, say, a pair of Revel speakers -- will be counted a strength by the many listeners who like a more three-dimensional sound.



Last is the question of value for money. The Sonus Faber Olympica Nova III will give you qualities of sound and build just as good as those of the TAD Evolution One TX, for half the price. When I realized that, I took my recommendation of the TAD off the table.

Which leaves me with one last thing to say: The Sonus Faber Olympica Nova III is now my favorite speaker for under \$15,000/pair.

... *Jeff Fritz*

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Associated Equipment

- **Loudspeakers** -- Rockport Technologies Avior II, Vimberg Tonda
- **Amplifier** -- Boulder Amplifiers 2060
- **Preamplifier-DAC** -- Hegel Music Systems HD30
- **Sources** -- Apple MacBook Pro computer running Mojave 10.14.5, Roon, Qobuz streaming service
- **Cables** -- Siltech Explorer interconnects, speaker cables, power cords
- **Rack** -- SGR Audio Model III Symphony

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Price: \$13,500 USD per pair.

Warranty: Three years parts and labor.

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