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FRANCO SERBLIN  
Ktêma

Reviewer: Wojciech Pacuła

CD player: Ancient Audio Lektor Air

Phono preamp: RCM Audio Sensor Prelude IC

Cartridges: Air Tight Supreme, Miyajima Laboratory Waza

Preamp: Ayon Audio Polaris III with ReGenerator II power supply

Power amp: Tenor Audio 175S and Solution 710

Integrated amp: Leben CS300XS custom

Loudspeakers: Harpia Acoustics Dobermann

Headphones: AKG K701, Ultrason PROLine 2500, Beyerdynamic DT-990 Pro 600 Ω

Interconnects: CD-preamp Acrolink Mexcel 7N-DA6300, preamp-power amp Wireworld Platinum Eclipse, speaker cable Tara Labs Omega Onyx

Power cords: Acrolink Mexcel 7N-PC9300 (all equipment)

Power conditioning: Gigawatt PF-2 Filtering Power Strip

audio stand: Base under all components, Pro Audio Bono under CD

Resonance control: Finite Elemente Ceraball under the CD, turntables change continuously

Review component retail in Poland: 99.000/pr zł

Last year (2010) exactly 30 years had passed since Franco Serblin presented to the world his very first loudspeaker system called Snail. That's no mistake. Rather than set of speakers, the Snail was a system of two small monitors plus single subwoofer. These small satellites were mechanically mounted on long extension arms off a central subwoofer all fashioned from wood. Although the 2.1 concept wasn't exactly completely novel by then, it still was a pretty unusual setup for the times. It was only when home cinema became popular that subwoofers began to play any earnest support role for satellite speakers. This happened many years later. Serblin's successful carrier thus began with an unusual concept and by 1980 his legendary company Sonus Faber started to write its chapter in the annals of the world's audio history.

By February 2007 Franco had sold his famous company to private Italian holding firm Quadrivio SGR which a year later acquired another audio industry legend in Audio Research. Nobody really expected Serblin to retire to his beautiful home in the vineyards and spend the rest of his life enjoying fame, glory and significant wealth. The last model he'd created for Sonus Faber had been the Elipsa, a scaled-down version of his top Stradivari model. Almost three years after terminating his Sonus Faber tenure Franco presented to the world his newest creation - something big and momentous yet surely connected also very directly to his previous quite revolutionary Elipsa and Stradivari achievements.

By 2010 he unveiled the first design for his new brand. By what name would this brand go? That's a rhetorical question. It simply became Franco Serblin, the first model the Ktêma. Okay, it's not that simple. Is it ever with Italian companies? Certain promotional materials make mention of Yter by association. That's an audio cable brand. Distributor invoices are issued by another company, the speakers dispatched from yet another. Let's stick with Franco Serblin.



I'd already covered it during the Warsaw Audio Show 2010 coverage where our domestic premier of these speakers took place but I ought to repeat the most important information Serblin had forwarded. As he explains it, ktêma is Greek for an eternal possession that cannot be disputed over time just as his passion for treating loudspeakers as musical instruments can't be disputed. By being decidedly broad, his Stradivari Homage had been the first Serblin model whose geometry opposed the widely accepted modern standard of narrow deep cabinets. The enclosure was quite shallow but wide and thus unlike those Franco had championed previously - narrow, deep and if possible endowed with a lute-shaped cross section.

The Ktêma is different again. Based on three arcs, the front is very narrow, the outwardly flaring concave cheeks are wider and the broad back is



convex. The front sports a twin midrange module of two 100mm mid / high cardioid radiators that reproduce a significant part of the spectrum. This relies on both proper crossover points and special slits in the cabinet which decompress the rear wave and let it pass into the room. The treble is covered by what Serblin regards as driver legend Ragnar Lian's top achievement, a special 28mm soft-dome tweeter. The back of the enclosure holds two powerful 230mm compression loaded radiators.

One of the first owners for a pair of Ktêma was Andrea Bocelli who later wrote to Franco: "I just listened to my own album and felt urged to sit at my computer and write a short letter to you to congratulate you on the performance of your speakers and thank you for the great enjoyment of listening to the music they gave me... Every recording of my voice seemed a bit warmer and more beautiful! It was a fabulous experience to feel the presence of the singer right next to me... Congratulations on your everlasting passion!"

Sound: Discs used during listening sessions - Bud Powell, Jazz Giant, Verve / Universal Music Company (Japan), UCCU-5062, CD; Pat Martino, East!, Prestige/Mobile Fidelity, UDSACD 2018, SACD/CD; Sonny Clark, Cool Struttin', Blue Note/Audio Wave, AWMXR-0003, XRCD24; Art Pepper, "...the way it was!", Contemporary Records/Mobile Fidelity, UDSACD 2034, SACD/CD; Nirvana, Nevermind, Geffen Records/Universal Music Japan, UICY-93358, CD; Tsuyoshi Yamamoto Trio, Live at the Misty, TBM/Sony Music Direct (Japan), MHCP 10038, SACD/CD; Simon & Garfunkel, Bookends, Columbia/Sony Music Japan International, SICP 1484, CD; Depeche Mode, Playing The Angel, Mute, lcdstumm260, SACD/CD + DVD; Alison Moyet, Hoodoo, Sanctuary Records/Castle Music, CMRCD796, CD; Alison Moyet, Alf, Columbia/Sony Music, 483836, CD; Kombi, 4, Polskie Nagrania Muza, PNCD 999, CD. Depeche Mode, Violator, Mute, DMCD7, Collectors Edition, SACD/CD + DVD; Youn Sun Nah, Same Girl, HUB Music/ACT Music + Vision, ACT 9024-2, CD; Suzanne Vega, Close-Up.Vol 1, Love Songs, Amanuensis Productions/Cooking Vinyl, COOKCD521, CD.



For me Serblin's loudspeakers arrived at a very opportune juncture taking their place in a line of other ambitious speakers I'd evaluated in the months prior like the German Physiks HRS120 Carbon, Isophon Berlina RC7 and Ascendo System ZF3 S.E. In this list I would also include the Avalon Ascendant; my previous Harpia Acoustics Dobermann in-house reference whose sound I remember very well; and one of the best monitors extant, the Harbeth P3ESR. I monitored this review as I always do with

Sennheiser HD800 headphones over my Leben CS-300 XS custom amplifier and my recently acquired Acrolink 8N-A2080III Evo cable. I had everything necessary in place to do justice to Franco Serblin's latest creation.

The first few days with the Ktêma were less fabulous than expected however. Unlike with the Avalons this was not about finding the ideal position. The Italians integrate quite easily although there are of course some tonal balance changes contingent on boundary proximity. But these changes were not significant enough to spoil the sound. They were more of a choice between different good options – more or less bass, a somewhat wider or narrower soundstage. Here the proper qualifier was 'different' rather than 'better' or 'worse'. I simply had to make the choice that best fit me rather than being best per se. You might insist that there is only one proper tonal balance, only one proper soundstage scale and so on. Yet when you listen to loudspeakers of this caliber you appreciate that there is no objectively single best choice. And Serblin's products surely are amongst the best.

One of the primary strengths of these is resolution. Here it is absolutely outstanding. Although I know most of Serblin's Sonus Faber designs I also know how these can still take you by surprise with their resolution. I refer mostly to the Elipsa and Stradivari models but also the very special Electa Amator MkI. Except for the treble where I peg the Electa slightly superior, the resolution of Serblin's latest is simply supreme. In a peculiar way it was this extraordinary resolution which rendered the first days with the Ktêma a bit painful. I couldn't get quite used to it. I felt there was too much midrange information. Later I realized that it was a matter of a quite significant difference between the Ktêma, the Isophon which preceded it and the Chario Academy Sonnet I used for direct comparison. On the other hand I also think that when the Ktêma arrived it was not fully broken in yet and required more time to show its full potential.

Their stupendous resolution helped me identify differences between two very high-end preamplifiers, the Ayon Polaris III and the Thrax Dionysos. Both are peak performance machines. This makes it





impossible to cross-reference them with any superior product to concretise differences and strong and weak points.

It was easiest to appreciate Ktêma's resolution by analyzing the bass. Yes this is no mistake. The Ktêma's bass range is astonishing. Only once before had I encountered anything slightly superior still by way of Hansen's Prince v2. There bass had been extended even further and also had been more muscular. Yet Serblin's speakers better differentiated the upper bass to distinguish between different recordings and different double basses where the Hansen tended to homogenize this band slightly.

In general the Ktêma's bass prowess was to be expected by those two giant woofers breathing out its back through narrow vertical slots. Even so it was not predictable what their effects might be on very specific placing and boundary loading. Here it seemed that Serblin's special cabinet geometry serves a very practical purpose other than separating it from the competition (which clearly is successful too). Bass quantity can be manipulated by different in-room placement but it's a matter of only two options – a lot of bass or even more bass. If memory serves I always obtained rich bass from big speakers in this room and I never tried to fight it but always rather fancied it. It makes recordings sound more natural and endowed with verve, never lean and clinical which is often the case with currently recorded fare.

For me this tonal balance is the preferred one. Does it mean best or most realistic? It's probably not perfectly neutral in the absolute sense but to be honest, I categorically reject neutrality that does not fully serve the music. I care about musical communion, not any Pyrrhic victory of absolute neutrality. As long as it serves its purpose, neutrality is vital of course. While the Ktêma's tonal balance was simply slightly shifted downwards, I found it very attractive.



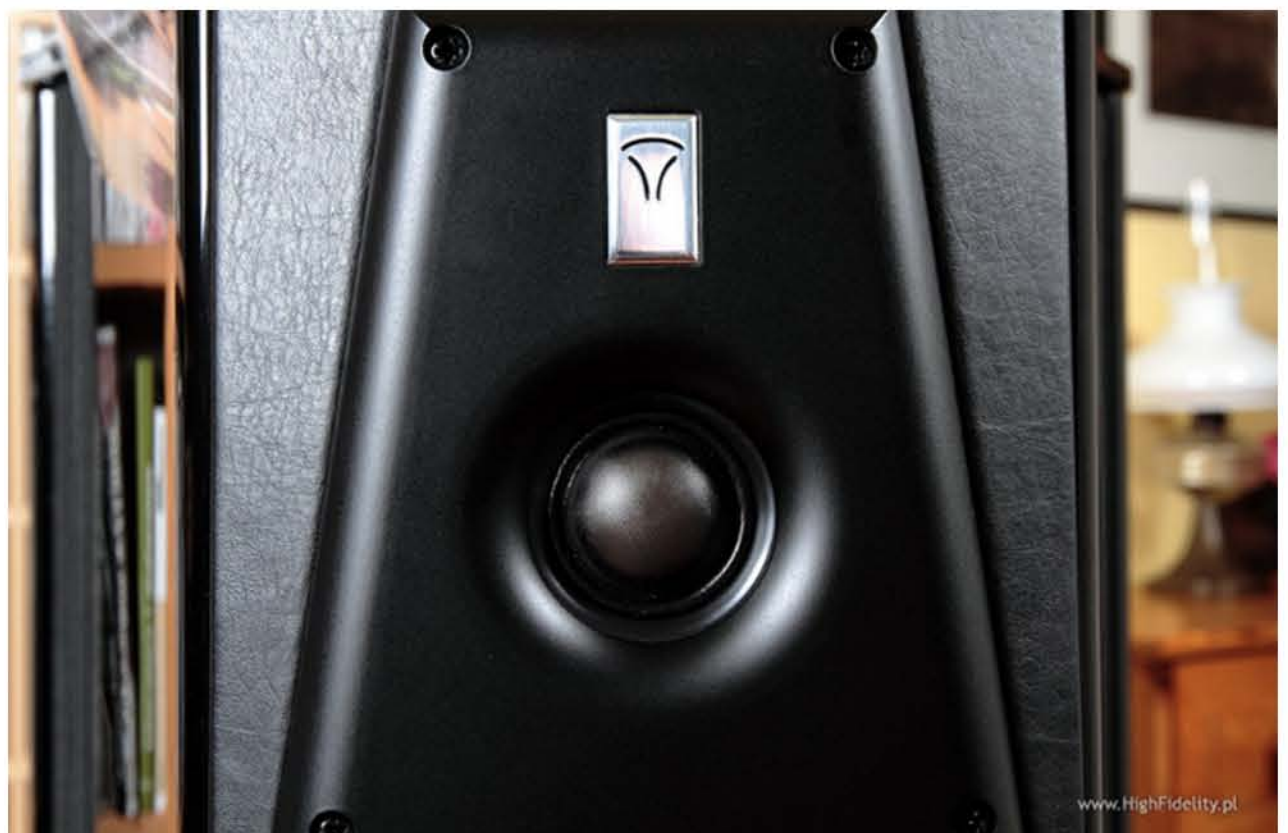
My impressions were quite similar when I listening to electronica or electric bass guitar. This time it wasn't about replacing one speaker with a bass guitar since that's usually recorded in both channels. Here it was more about a very powerful rich quality regardless of which recording I played. Even with less 'heavy' recordings like Nirvana's Nevermind - technically far from perfect - or the similarly compromised Playing The Angel by Depeche Mode, I didn't lack anything which happens far too often with other speakers. That's one of the Ktêma's key features. It somehow realizes the music even if it means doing so with certain concessions to neutrality.

Even so the speaker will precisely administer whether an instrument played very subdued or whether the mastering engineer mixed it lower instead. Again the bass is very extended and powerful yet not in any way exaggerated. It's too well differentiated to sound the same at all times. Proof thereof came from Bud Powell's Jazz Giant which includes takes from 1949 and 1950. These are quite uncomplicated cuts. It's easy to appreciate that for the recording engineer

the piano was most important. The bass existed only to support it. Clearly these two instruments were not treated equally and the bass played a subservient role on both sides (Ray Brown played bass on side A, Curly Russell on B). Serblin's speakers delivered it exactly according to these intentions.

In my characterization so far I've focused mostly on the bass range. In conjunction with terrific overall resolution it makes the Ktêma into what it is. The sound is big, rich in the midband (perhaps overly so) and pretty distinctive in the treble. In matters of tonal balance, this presentation reminded me more of the Harpia and German Physics than Hansen and Avalon. Both the latter are creamier and perhaps slightly rolled off. Likely their resolution is not as advanced and their differentiation / separation inferior.

The Ktêma's soundstaging was spectacular if different from the omnipolar bending wave driver of the German Physiks which are unquestioned champs when it comes to sheer soundstage size. The Hansen and Avalon stage creamier where the Italian is more raw – like equivalent steak over well done. The instruments are presented quite close to the listener but their placement on the stage is very precise. It's easy to discern





the sound engineers' interventions or decisions in the studio. For many people it might come as a surprise to realize just how quietly the voices are mixed into most pop and rock pressings. Take for example Depeche Mode's *Violator* or Alison Moyet's debut solo effort. It is very difficult to present such recordings in a way that leaves clear how this was a premeditated sound engineer's choice rather than flaw of the recording or our system. On some albums like Suzanne Vegas' *Close-up, Vol. 1* or Moyet's *Hoodoo* it clearly becomes a flaw but it doubtlessly is one the mastering engineer made, not our system or the pressing itself.

The Ktêma presents those subtle differences very distinctly so you have no doubts which faults they are for each recording – recording, system or sound engineer. Speaking about vocals, the Italian speakers maintain proper scale of voices at least assuming their perspective was properly captured on the albums. There is always a perfect balance between voice and instruments. If the mastering engineer wanted a big voice for Vega fronting her band you get just that. If he planned to place the vocal far away from the listener somewhere between and behind the instruments as is usually the case for Depeche Mode, you get that. Key is that it's always part of a bigger picture and not just about exposing the midrange even though voices usually are treated somewhat privileged.

After I thought about this for a while I concluded that these were extremely transparent lucid speakers. It's why every vocal carried aloft on such clarity and resolution felt very natural and real. That's why it attracted more attention than it usually does. At the same time the Italian speakers were not ruthless. I've stated it many times before that the better a device - loudspeakers, cables, preamp - the less we are bothered by minor recorded flaws and the more we focus on the music itself. There is no dissonance. It's nothing but urban myth that ultra resolution answers everything. Certainly it is necessary but more as a scaffolding whereby to build up the sound. I hope you understand the distinction. Serblin's speakers clearly showed the difference between reproduced sound and creating sound. Of course they can only reproduce it but they do it such that you can't tell for sure. They actually become sound makers.

I hinted at earlier that certain aspects of this presentation can be bettered by other speakers around €25.000/pr. I believe for example that the Esotar tweeter in the Electa Amator is a better transducer than the one in the Ktêma but it doesn't make the latter less amazing. A metal SEAS driver as used in my older Dobermann offered similar performance. The Scan-Speak soft dome is very good but the Seas or ceramic unit in the Isophon were capable of more firmness.



Today's review loaners tended to accentuate specific elements not via higher precision but rather slower decays. The second small nit was a subtle dryness in the midrange. I'm certain everybody can happily live with what the Ktêma delivers in this regard but I remember how the Hansen and Avalon delivered it a bit more creamier without even the slightest veiling so I know there is a way to go even farther. That's exactly why the soundstage is not so as dense as delivered by Hansen. It is also the truth that the Prince v2 to date was the only loudspeaker that I know to be better in this particular regard.

Apart from these two mild qualifiers I don't see any flaws or issues. These are world-class hellaciously expensive speakers finished perfectly which deliver absolute top-shelf performance. They are also made by a legendary designer with limited availability to become the type of exclusive



product certain watches are.

Description: The Ktêma is large and weighs over 50kg each though the triple arch-shaped structure makes it look less massive. It was one of the very few hifi designs all members of my family appreciated aesthetically. Everything about them seems well thought through and perfectly implemented and finished even though personally I would favor another solution for the top and bottom as I'm not a fan of glossy chrome-type metal.

Serblin's newest speaker is a four-way five-drivers design with two 230mm modified Scan-Speak woofers. These hidden drivers fire against the rigid rear baffle and deflect their emissions through vertical slots. The cabinet otherwise is sealed and not ported. There are similar breathing slots close to the sides of the two 100mm coated paper



mid/woofers with metal phase plugs which release the internal air pressure. These paralleled mids loaded into a separate chamber are equipped with rigid moulded baskets and large motors. The tweeter is a coated Scan-Speak D2905 silk dome which Serblin views as the best transducer Ragnar Lian has designed who counts as one of the most famous driver designers alive. This tweeter is equipped with a non-resonant rear chamber.

The enclosure is crafted of MDF panels strengthened with steel panels at the bottom and on top. The aluminum front with black leather skin serves as rigid support for the drivers mounted to it. The speakers are equipped with four large spikes and Serblin's signature string grill which should already be familiar to you from earlier Sonus Faber models (this can and should be taken off during listening sessions). At the back there are single WBT 0730 binding posts. The internal cabling was designed by Serblin's son-in-law Massimiliano Favella and is branded Yter. These cables are flat quite narrow ribbons made of a silver-palladium alloy. The sensitivity of the Ktêma is quite high at 92dB but impedance drops to 3.2Ω at 70Hz to demand a



stout amplifier. The Ktêma is a limited edition release with Serblin's signature engraved in the top panel.

Technical data (according to manufacturer):

Frequency response: 26Hz - 33kHz in room  
Nominal impedance: 4 ohm (minimum 3.2 ohm at 70Hz)

Sensitivity: 92dB/W/m

Minimum amplifier power: 20wpc

Dimensions: 42.5 x 46 x 111cm  
unpacked

Weight: 110kg/pair unpacked,  
127kg/pair packed

Finish: High gloss piano black  
or  
satin Sycamore with  
hand-polished  
aluminum top and  
bottom.



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