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Franco Serblin Accordo Goldberg

Inspired by the diminutive and still current Accordo, the Goldberg variation features a larger cabinet and bass/mid driver, and integral crossover. Is bigger always better?

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Odd though this might sound, it bothers me when PM gives me a sequence of exceptional loudspeakers to review. Can there really be that many miraculous designs, one after the other – or am I growing soft? Following models from DeVore Fidelity [HFN Aug '23] and Wilson Audio [HFN Sep '23], and reborn LS3/5As, I find myself with a new Franco Serblin speaker that has rocked my world. The Accordo Goldberg could be, overall, the best yet to come out of the fertile brain of the inspirational if, sadly, late designer.

Costing £8888 plus £2798 for optional stands (a situation to be discussed below), the Goldberg is slightly dearer than the smaller Accordo *sans* suffix [HFN Jan '18]. Above it is the floorstanding Accordo Essence [HFN Jan '21], but that's another beast altogether. Moving from the Accordo to Accordo Goldberg, however, is entirely a case of dimensional differences, and re-housing the crossover, though both are standmounts of not-too-considerable sizes.

Yet the Goldberg so audibly exhibits vivid proof of size mattering that it's like moving from a 100W to a 250W amplifier. This is, however, deceptive as the Goldberg ostensibly follows the same formula as the regular Accordo, with the same asymmetrical wing-shaped design. And like the Accordo, the Goldberg is necessarily supplied in mirror-imaged pairs.

MUSIC OF THE SPHERES

Sharing minimalist crossovers, moved from stand to cabinet in the Goldberg, the latter also retains Franco Serblin's 29mm silk-dome tweeter, designed by Ragnar Lian. However, the Accordo's 150mm 'sliced paper cone' bass/mid driver is replaced here with a 180mm 'microsphere cone' with aluminium dust cap, and to

accommodate this larger woofer, and crossover PCB, the rear-ported enclosure has been upscaled from the Accordo's 36x19x36cm (hwd) to 40.5x24x43cm.

As these dimensions reveal, the speakers are far deeper than they are wide. Do

not, however, anticipate viewing a narrow frontal aspect. What you see when the speakers are positioned according to the manufacturer's instructions is a three-quarter view – the cabinets toed-in so that they cross in front of

the listener. You will need to experiment with the toe-in up to a point because the Accordo Goldberg and its siblings are speakers that deliver intense focus when it comes to imaging. In this respect, they

are not unlike Quad 57s, all Wilson Audio speakers, every line array I can think of and other types which respond audibly to even the tiniest of toe-in adjustments, unlike omni-directional, dipole designs or others which are more forgiving in this respect.

ALL-ANGLE APPEAL

Which brings us to a key aspect of the Franco Serblin experience. As he was the man who single-handedly revolutionised the way speakers look – and I will challenge anyone who disputes that – the Goldberg is simply gorgeous. So handsome is the design, from the highly polished wood

FRANCO SERBLIN

Franco Serblin launched Sonus faber in 1983 to realise his dream of creating superb speakers which looked as good as they sounded. Back then, the world was awash with dull-looking boxes but Serblin's application of Italian wood-working standards and innate style would banish the mundane forever. He started with the legendary Snail, now a collector's item. It consisted of a central enclosure for the bass units, to which were attached two 'arms' supporting the satellites. While central subs and satellites became a genre of their own, the most impactful element was the look: stunning curved-edge enclosures far removed from the unimaginative rectangular cabinets still employed by much of the audio industry.

Sonus faber would grow into a major brand, Serblin leaving it in 2006 after 33 years to pursue a more purist, if less commercial approach to design, starting with the Ktéma [HFN Sep '20], which took five years to realise. Upon his passing in 2013, Franco's son-in-law, Massimiliano Favella [see interview sidebar, p45] took over. Says Favella: 'Today I am carrying on his legacy, always trying to respect and practise what he taught me, and to secure the future of this small but precious company. I am honoured to carry on the philosophy with the same values that he passed on to me from 1995 until his death'.



'Franco Serblin single-handedly revolutionised the way speakers look'

LOUDSPEAKER

LEFT: The Accordo Goldberg's detachable 'grille' is composed of elastic strands stretched between chromed arcs at the top and bottom of the cabinet. These are in tension, so care is needed during removal

surfaces to the magnesium alloy 'decoupling' plates, chrome accents and elastic string grilles, that even when toed-in quite severely these speakers inspire admiration rather than consternation. They look right from every angle. Then we come to the matter of the stands and the oddity of their separate pricing.

Because of the unusual shape of the Accordo Goldberg, it is – like its smaller sibling – almost impossible to fit onto other, conventional stands, even if you have a pair of the same 74cm height. Too deep and too narrow to rest on a support with a small enough plate to fit within the 24cm width, the speakers must be tightly secured to the stands, and are supplied with dedicated, chromed hardware for the purpose – the fitments are just visible under the top plate of the stand in our pictures.

COME TOGETHER

The Accordo is priced with its stands at £7498 because they contain the crossover, while the Goldberg's supports, with their swan-neck pillar and polished chrome top/bottom plates flared for optimum stability, are listed separately despite being absolutely mandatory. You must dismiss any notion that these speakers could be shelf-mounted just because they are small-ish two-ways. Shelf-mounting is not just inadvisable, it's all-but-impossible because the Goldbergs are rear-ported and the instructions emphatically state they should be located at least 100cm from side and rear walls. The point of this is to tell you to treat the Accordo Goldberg not as costing £8888 per pair, but as £11,686 per pair. And they are still worth every penny.

Once you've dealt with the assembly of the stands and the positioning, you can also be reassured that this enlarged Accordo does not quite gobble up wattage the same way Serblin's hungriest models, like the original Extrema [*HFN* Oct '91],

RIGHT: The asymmetric wooden cabinets are 'hand crafted by master artisans' and further braced with aluminium/magnesium alloy sheets. The 29mm Ragnar Lian silk-dome tweeter is joined by a 180mm 'microsphere' bass/mid cone with alloy dust cap

did back in his Sonus faber days [see PM's Lab Report, p47]. Serblin recommends a minimum 40W amplifier power which is far from an unlikely match at this price point.

SETTING THE STAGE

Named after the Bach composition rather than the WWE wrestler or the TV show, the Accordo Goldberg is so revealing that I was concerned it might deliver too forensic a sound. The deception continued: more than any speaker I have heard in the past few years, its sound adheres to a premise I first learned of back in the 1980s. As with designs from DeVore, D'Agostino,

SoundSmith, de Paravicini and others conceived by auteurs, the Goldberg is the embodiment of Franco Serblin's philosophy.

First and foremost, as evinced by the almost tyrannical strictures regarding placement,

soundstage reproduction is arguably the primary concern. I recall Franco Serblin explaining to me his admiration for the concept of the proscenium, as one would expect of a designer almost exclusively concerned with live classical performances. Every loudspeaker he designed explored this aspect, echoing what I was also told by Infinity's co-founder Arnie Nudell – if the soundstage is right, so is the rest.

'There was just the right balance of rasp and honk'

MASSIMILIANO FAVELLA

The Accordo Goldberg isn't the first speaker named after a musician, composer or musical work, and it won't be the last, but its story will resonate with those who appreciate both the mindset of the late Franco Serblin and how the company which bears his name remains a family affair. At the time of Franco's passing, he left enough designs and concepts to keep the brand fuelled for years – not difficult when you consider how rarely new models are introduced. This is a brand that takes its time.

As Franco's son-in-law Massimiliano Favella explains, 'The Accordo Goldberg, like the other speakers I have developed in the last few years – Ligneia and Accordo Essence – took a few years to come to fruition'. Like Franco, Massimiliano does not rush his projects. 'I was struck by the perfection of JS Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, and why this work came to light.' Not least, it resonated specifically with the company, rather than simply being a piece which appealed in general.

Says Massimiliano: 'In the last year of his life, Franco repeatedly listened to this work. In time, I researched it and understood why Franco listened to it with such pleasure'. Just as Franco had honoured the great violin makers when he owned Sonus faber, so was Massimiliano moved to celebrate the music itself.

Will we see similarly named speakers in the future? 'I don't like to make predictions about what the brand will look like in the coming years', says Massimiliano. 'But I love to develop new speaker products, to provide answers for all lovers of good music reproduction.'



Categorically, the Accordo Goldberg deftly places the performers – whether a group or solo – in the space created by the triangle formed by the speakers' siting. At first it was disconcerting, because I have grown used to sounds outside of the speakers' edges, but I soon adapted to the notion of a tightly defined space between them. This area's dimensions could be 'dialed in' according to the size of the room, with the benefit of opening up even the artificial soundstage of a studio-assembled recording.

It was The Who's live version, though, of 'Baba O'Riley' [*Who's Next/Life House*; Polydor 3585826 CD] that conveyed to me the success of the Accordo Goldberg in adhering to Franco's mission statement. As much as all classical orchestral devotees like to remind philistines such as I that live music is the only arbiter of accurate reproduction, the reality is that grand orchestras in massive halls are far more amorphous than small works fashioned in studios, however artificial the instrument placement. And what can better a lone voice or instrument for testing a system's veracity and accuracy?

LOST IN MUSIC

I never bought into that talk about hearing 'the fourth violin from the left', so The Who's 'wall of sound' as presented by this recording is no less valid than a five-star Deutsche Grammophon album. But through the Goldbergs, within the confines established by the way they were positioned, I heard a perfectly formed diorama with image height and soundstage depth that rendered me nearly stupefied.

It was, as Franco always wanted to proffer, a path to losing one's self in the music. Listening to The Who's audience, despite it being in two-channel rather than surround, produced a clue to the Serblin formula – it was all-embracing. And that, it turns out, is the primary nature of the Accordo Goldberg. The miracle is that this sensation is not a product of the speaker being too soft or forgiving. ➞

LEFT: Although 'optional' the Accordo Goldberg stands, with their angled black column and chromed top and bottom plates, are *de rigueur* – the speakers bolt into position from below via custom hardware that mirrors the spikes fitted to the flared baseplate

LOUDSPEAKER



LEFT: The larger Goldberg cabinet houses a two-way crossover, WBT binding posts and large reflex port. Each handed pair is individually numbered

Throughout all my listening, there was a silkiness to the Accordo Goldberg's performance, a non-aggressive way with detail that had me scratching my head. How could there be this much detail without it sounding hyper-etched? The better tracks from the remastered 2023 edition of The Beatles' 'Red' collection, 1962-1966 [Apple 0602455920768] were even more revelatory than when I first played

them, having grown accustomed to the remastering. The Goldberg is transparent enough to satisfy the forensically inclined who want to hear the differences.

DELICIOUS BEATS

As cultured and refined as was Franco Serblin, the Accordo Goldberg standmounts sounded better the *louder* they were played. It reminded me, too, of another conversation with Franco, who was no head-banger. He posited that every CD, LP or tape has an optimum playback level, clipping, breakup or distortion notwithstanding. Listening to harmonica so life-like that the SPLs seemed merely incidental, I understood what he meant, grabbing a harmonica of my own to hear the reeds and the levels.

Steely Dan's *Can't Buy A Thrill* [Analogue Productions CAPP134SA SACD] turned the clock back to the first time I heard the saxophone break in 'Dirty Work', with just the right balance of rasp and honk. Likewise, pace/rhythm/timing junkies would revel in the opening bongo patterns of the same album's 'Do It Again', delicious beats with the sounds of the heads almost shimmering. As for the vocals, I started imagining what an LS3/5A would sound like with a couple of octaves extending the bottom, and another 10dB added to the levels.

YOUR MAJESTY

Ultimately, I was wooed by something so uncharacteristic that I have to nod to the Goldbergs for rendering fascinating a genre I usually ignore – stadium rock. Whitesnake's 'Here I Go Again' from *Greatest Hits* [Rhino R1 680917] afforded one more discovery, and it's that the Accordo Goldberg sounds as massive and majestic as even the larger Essence. Franco: your company is in good hands. 🎧

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Immediacy plays no role with this speaker. It must be learned, savoured like fine wine, in order to appreciate what it can do. The Accordo Goldberg handles the delicacy of acoustic guitar and ear-busting thrash, a *cappella* vocals and orchestral. Were I of a metaphysical bent, I would swear I sensed the spirit of Franco Serblin in my room. This is, like his first designs of 40 years ago, a sonic masterpiece.

Sound Quality: 89%

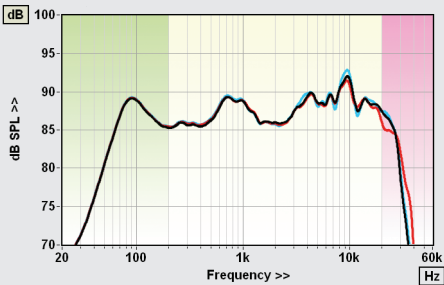


LAB REPORT

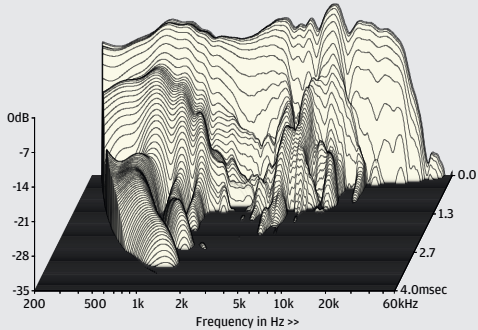
FRANCO SERBLIN ACCORDO GOLD.

The latest Accordo's increased cabinet volume and a larger 180mm bass/mid driver bring with it performance dividends over the smaller model [HFN Jan '18]. Although both Accordos are rated at the same 87dB/1m/2.83V, the Goldberg is markedly more sensitive, not least because the uplift in response from 600Hz-1.2kHz [see Graph 1, below] boosts the 1kHz figure to a generous 88.8dB. The gentle dip in upper midrange reduces the averaged (500Hz-8kHz) figure to 87.8dB but this still bests the brand's conservative spec. The response recovers above 4kHz but a peak at 9kHz and dip at 300Hz both contribute to slightly high ± 4.1 dB and ± 3.8 dB response errors, respectively, though pair matching is tight at 0.6dB over the same 200Hz-20kHz. The elastic grille is not entirely invisible, exaggerating the peaks from 6-10kHz [blue trace, Graph 1] but offers no further attenuation of the soft-dome's gentle 25kHz HF roll-off (-6dB re. 10kHz).

A driver mode is seen on the CSD waterfall at ~5kHz [Graph 2] but THD is low enough at 0.2-0.5% from 400Hz-10kHz at 90dB/1m – the increase to ~1.5% at much lower frequencies not unexpected for the enclosure/driver size. The latter has a slightly peaky reflex alignment at 96Hz but operates over a wide 66Hz-1.3kHz bandwidth, extending to a diffraction-corrected 47Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz) courtesy of the broad 15-120Hz port output (also -6dB). Serblin's specified 3.9ohm/5.5kHz impedance minimum is met at 3.9ohm/5.5kHz while never dropping below 6ohm from 20Hz-3kHz. As a result the sub-100Hz +45°/-57° phase angles only squeeze the EPDR down to an 'easy' 2.7ohm/110Hz with the true minimum appearing at 1.8ohm/3.4kHz. PM



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed driver/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left, black; right, red; w. grille, blue



ABOVE: The cabinet is well damped but a bass/mid-driver mode is seen at ~5kHz prior to the 10kHz peak

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	88.8dB / 87.8dB / 85.7dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	3.9ohm @ 5.5kHz 48ohm @ 80Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	-57° @ 88Hz +45° @ 72Hz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz–20kHz)	0.6dB / ± 4.1 dB/ ± 3.8 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	47Hz / 25.3kHz/24.3kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.5% / 0.35% / 0.5%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	405x240x430mm / 12.5kg