

FRANCO SERBLIN Accordo

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Lights, speakers, action!

Mister Serblin has become a legend despite he is alive and doing well. For over 30 years he had been helping to build and make famous Sonus Faber, probably the most reputable loudspeaker manufacturer in Italy. The products of Sonus Faber always encapsulated unique philosophy and heritage of violin makers not only in how they sounded but also in how they were designed. So why has Franco Serblin departed from a well running company? Well, the reality is always less romantic and in the merciless world of capitalism and business relations it is sometimes beneficial to walk your own path provided that you do not want give up your ideals.

„I have always loved small speakers, for their discreet presence, for their suitability in less critical environments, for the “magic” which they often are able to create in music reproduction. With "Accordo", I followed design patterns that are particularly dear to me. A sound, a voice capable of reaching the depths of the soul..."



I started this review with a kind of manifest of Franco Serblin that answers the question *why the Accordos*. I think it is not really necessary to comment these simple sentences, yet if you are not fully convinced, I can only encourage you to check the Accordo's website that shows the inspiration of its creator without words. The other option is browse down to the end of this review to get a flavor of the same.

The 1.1 meters tall monitors

I should rather say *minimonitors*. The price tag of 6.500€/pair including stands will not definitely prepare you for such diminutive physical appearance of their cabinets and I dare to say that they are even bigger on pictures than in reality. Still, if you are lucky enough to put your hands on the Accordos, it is clear right from beginning what you pay for. These speakers are not only for those who look for a sonic perfection but also for those who look for a perfection of form and shape.

Franco Serblin Accordo measures only 36x19x36cm which implies ease of placement and physical disappearance in a room. Should you expect that you put the speakers on a shelf or a stand to the back of the room, you are completely wrong.

First, the Accordos sport a very complicated curvature. Apart from top and bottom boards there are no two surfaces parallel and there are no two surfaces just planar – all planes are curved to a precisely defined radius to the extent that the speaker practically does not show any apparent symmetry. In dark they look like a randomly grabbed piece of wood rather than something touched by a man's hand. However, throw a little bit light on the speaker and it blooms to a unique form of art. You can simply *feel* the passion of Franco Serblin in every detail.

As said, not only is the craftsmanship attentive but it is a real work of art - a game that employs shapes and light to sculpt the unique enclosures and the unique sound. Sonus Faber speakers always tended to be much closer to a music instrument than to a sound making device and the same applies here. Seamlessness of the walnut cabinet is broken only by thin aluminum inlays that separate the cabinet's bottom and top from its walls both visually and mechanically. Note that I used the word 'walnut' rather than walnut *veneer* as there is no veneer on the Accordos – everything is solid wood. The warmth of the walnut harmonizes pretty with polished aluminum that is used for grilles that are made from nylon-like strings in the typical Sonus Faber fashion and that are *not* removable. It is nothing that should bother you as the grilles are ultra-transparent and they are accounted for in final voicing of the speaker.

The speakers are ported with felt-lined ports firing to the back. At first glance the ports look elliptical but they are not and it is just the beveled rear panel that optically misleads an observer. Apart from the ports and serial number plates there is nothing else to be seen. No speaker terminals. Wait, no speaker terminals?

Well, this is the *second reason* why the Accordos cannot be considered bookshelf speakers – there is no way to get them play *without the original stands*. The monitors are connected to the stands with the help of a Speakon terminated cable that runs through the stand and then secured via two fixing bolts. The crossover assembly of low order is hidden in the lower parts of the stands, thus saving valuable space inside main cabinets to enable the Accordos go deeper with their minimum footprint. The speaker terminals are located at floor height and are not bi-wirable. Similarly to the main speakers the stands are also high gloss polished with Mr. Serblin's engrave signature on them.

Let's sumo it up: the Franco Serblin's Accordos are rather a kind of "floorstanding monitor" than a bookshelf speaker. To excel and to breath they need a lot of room around them so do not think that you will save some space comparing to proper floorstanders. Also they require you to keep a reserve of lint-free dusters to keep their lacquer and gloss shiny and free of fingerprints.

One more remark – the ritual of unpacking of new speakers is exceptionally pleasant with the Accordos as the packing material and instructions for use correspond with the artistic concept of the speaker.

Casting and the scene

The Accordo is a two-way speaker with a tweeter and a midwoofer. The dome tweeter bears Ragnar Lian's (of SEAS and ScanSpeak) signature and, despite its ordinary look, is easily among the best available today. I know only of two other tweeters that can compete, the beryllium IAL2 from French Focal and the silk Esotar2 from Danish Dynaudio. Yet, the tweeter of Ragnar Lian shares the best from both the worlds and *improves* on it, therefore being responsible for the sonic equilibrium of the Accordos.

The midwoofer comes from ScanSpeak's Revelator line with a paper cone that is



reinforced with cellulose and with spiral resin grooves that improve its dynamic behavior. It is claimed to be modified as it is for any of the numerous speakers around the globe.

It is recommended to position the Accordo so that the axes of the speakers would cross *in front* of a listener. Though a bit unusual it is not exceptional and optically quite comfortable too as due to the Accordos' slanted baffles it is just fine if you let the stands point directly to you. Naturally I had a tendency to manipulate the speakers into the positions that *I am* used to, having the tweeters fire just behind my ears. It did not work. Highs were too prominent in the mix, the balance was lost and so was the magic. I highly recommend stick to what was prescribed by the designer.

I would not say that the Accordos are overly sensitive to speaker cables. I tried few of different sets with consistent results. Sure they let you hear that a cable was swapped but I could not find any mismatch. To get the most out of the Accordo's transparency I recommend to use the best cables your budget can afford – personally I was using a pair of Crystal Cable Ultra Diamond speaker cables that were in for a review but I got a not less good result with more reasonably priced Crystal Cable Piccolos.

Franco Serblin calls the Accordo *a tuneful speaker*. Obviously the tuneful speaker needs a tuneful amplifier. The speakers are not Watt hungry, however, your amp should exhibit a certain degree of stability and musical maturity like the Luxman L-590AX that I used (among others) throughout the review. Again, if your budget allows, get M-600A/C-600f pre and power combo to elevate the experience. On the other hand Franco Serblin is said to use an Einstein amplifier so there is no preference for solid-state or tubes. Anyway, all the mentioned amps are *tuneful* amps.

The hero: Accordo



I was surprised how deep the Accordos can play despite their diminutive enclosures and their positioning far away from the room's boundaries. Otherwise than its sheer volume and mass I did not miss anything on a double-bass in *Topsy* (Dick Hyman, *From The Age of Swing*, RR-59CD) – the speed, tonality, articulation and attack was at least as good as with the best speakers I had auditioned. The Accordos provided me with extreme transparency that helped me to explore the tinniest details of the mix no matter if I listened to jazz ensembles or symphonic orchestras. Big drums take over around 2" into Saint-Saens's *Danse Macabre* (Charles Dutoit, Philharmonia Orchestra, Decca 425 021-2) and the Accordos are efficient enough to get them under your skin. Of course, the scale is different as it is with any but the biggest loudspeakers, yet all aspects of the sound are minimized with elegance and truthfulness to the original. At lower listening levels I did not miss anything, when playing loud the Accordos were a bit short of breath.

Normally you would expect a lot of compromise from speakers of *this* size as it comes to playback of bass guitars – then you'd be very pleasantly surprised by how the Accordos could render Dave Ellefson's bass in *Poison Was the Cure* (Megadeth, *Rust in Peace*, Capitol CDP 7919352). Living with four subwoofers at the time of this review let me learn how a successfully blended subwoofer can contribute to an instrument that

has no prevailing energy in bottom two octaves, yet even without a sub the Accordos could provide extremely precise and tonally rich sonic picture that could challenge the best speakers irrespective of their class.

If you think that the Accordo is just another small speaker for jazz lovers just read this: I listened to double kick drum driven Megadeth's *Dawn Patrol* that transforms into a raging piece after short introduction and the Accordos were *raging* without any stress. The ability of separation of individual instruments in the mix lends a sense of order to the music, yet it never ceases to sound organic and enjoyable at the same time. It may be quite revealing for most hard rock lovers to listen how their favorite bands may sound through a system comprised of highly resolving monitors that can deliver the raw energy of a live performance. Sometimes this experience can be almost exhilarating like when I listened to *Afterglow* (INXS, *Switch*, Epic, 82876 75189 2). The soaring chorus brought me few feet from the band that sung just for me in a private performance with such moving passion that I stayed seated completely mesmerized many minutes after the track ended. There was nothing I could criticize - there was no sound anymore, just pure emotions.

The Accordos are not what you call neutral speakers. They cast a tad of warmth and comfort on how they sound. In fact the prime focus of the Accordos is to *connect* a listener to the music; the high resolution is a kind of bonus he or she gets for free. They are not exactly for group entertainment but rather for individualists – if you position them carefully and correctly then their sweet spot is really a spot and I recommend making an X-mark on it and do not move away. In principle the Accordos are not directional, yet the optimum balance, I mean outstanding balance, is achieved only in a relatively narrow listening window. There is no manual how to get the balance right – if it is right then you will simply know it as all music elements lock together and the only thing you *would not* want to do is to stop listening.

For sure Franco Serblin had not spent his time to build a speaker for Megadeth fans. He could not have presumed that I would review his speakers. Normally he would expect me to praise the fantastic silk-domed Ragnar Lian tweeter. Okay, let me declare that my jaw dropped when I listened to the tambourines in *Source of Fire* of Hossam Ramzy (ARC Music, EUCD 1305). They know how to impregnate the domes in ScanSpeak and Ragnar Lian is said to do so over weekends when the factory is silent and empty to get the best result. Texturally the tambourines were comparable only to an unamplified live performance – the individual zils were depicted very accurately and almost holographically in space and I wish you could track a hand with the instrument moving in the air like I did. Should there be a reference speaker for accenting every nuance of spatial definition, the Accordo will be it.

Vranicky's string quartets from 17th century (Stamicovo kvarteto, Panton, 81 1046-2) can also be called ethnic music in a sense, though from a totally different ethnic perspective. By now it should be no surprise if I say that the speakers that build upon violin-makers heritage can play the violins and other bowed instruments exceptionally well. Exceptionally well means with intoxicating purity and tonal fidelity. If I kept my eyes closed the members of the quartet were sitting in my room, with my eyes opened I could only see the Accordos. Looks like there is nothing that would stop the Accordos from conveying the deepest emotions to a listener but beware, there is a hook – an amplifier.



The villain: amplifier

The sonic exhibition is in the case of the Accordo conditioned by a *tuneful amplifier*, as already mentioned. I believe that we should forget the price and the size of these speakers and handle them as if they were the best speakers on the planet. What would you use to feed the best speakers on the planet? I suppose the best amps and the best cables on the planet. The Accordos deserve it.

From what is available I would bet on class A

amplification, tubes respectively, both very transparent across the whole frequency response and both proven and stable designs. Only then you will savor the fragile textures of brushed cymbals in full bloom like never before. For sure it is pretty okay to use *any* amplifier - if you like the sound then stick to it - however, if you give a try and listen to the Accordos on something that gives ideal match, there is no way back.

The Luxman L-590AX, though excellent, is not the best amp on the planet, so is not Burmester 082. The latter is a shiny chromed monster with the price tag very similar to the L-590AX. I used it as a challenger for this review.

The Burmester excels especially at the bottom end of its frequency response. Its bass fundament is well developed and improves the perception of completeness and fullness of any music played back through the Accordo. The double bass in *Topsy* went only a tad deeper than with the Luxman, yet this enhancement brought the sound closer to lifelike quality. The same happened to the piano that acquired very concrete size in the room and an even higher sense of dynamics. The Burmester was a more competent partner for the Accordos in all aspects but one: the highs exhibit higher resolution, relaxed dynamics and finesse through the L-590AX. This is natural considering the Burmester is a class AB amplifier so it induced a certain degree of compression to tambourines and tablas of Hossam Ramzy. The short term effect was very audiophile-like, however, the longer I listened the more tired my ears got. I do not think this partnership trumps the Luxman-Accordo combo, at least in my notes.

Well, I hear you asking what if I have *just a decent* amp at home, can I use the Accordos? I had all new Cambridge Audio Azur 851A (less than 1800€) on hand and I have to say that it is a decent amplifier. Cambridge Audio improved on the successful Azur range with this beast that is heavy like a concrete block.

The comparison with the Luxman or the Burmester was not straightforward as first I needed to acclimate to a different altitude. After ten minutes, when my ears erased their memory and got accustomed to the CA's sound, I found myself writing in my notes that "*it actually sounds good*". The Azur 851A provided the Accordos with all the information it could and for it was also a very disciplined amplifier I did not suffer at all. I dare to say that the Azur was even a bit more coherent across its spectrum than the Burmester 082. It does not mean that it was *better* than the 082, it was better balanced however. There are many facets of sound in high fidelity and depending on your point of view you may prefer this or that philosophy. I assume that the most important conclusion from my exercise with the amplifiers is that the Accordo did not fail to communicate the music in any set up. Vice versa, if the Accordos fail in your audio chain, check the other components for their capabilities as the Accordos are tunefully truthful speakers.

The Accordo in oppression

So far this review looks like a celebration of the small champions. The absolutely coherent sound, the ability to dissolve and disappear in the sound field, and the ability to get out of the way of sound are all exceptional. Are there any trade-offs? Yes, there are. As mentioned, the Accordo's physical dimensions cannot exploit the full harmonic envelopes of instruments that operate in the low end of the frequency spectrum. A double bass provides a deep and exciting journey into techniques of plucking, depicts how resonances of strings rise and decay, yet you do not feel the body of the instrument. Similarly a Steinway is a downsized version of the instrument and a symphonic orchestra is rendered in a zoomed out perspective. I missed the flesh, the mass, the scale. This is not a criticism of the Accordo, rather the criticism of any stand mount speakers.

Microdynamically the Franco Serblin Accordo is a perfect speaker that will find only a few challengers irrespective of their price tag. If you like to listen to your music at night, if your room size is modest or if you cherish your 20W amplifiers, then the Accordos may be your destination. At the average levels below 50-60dB they truly excelled, from pianissimos to fortissimos. With increasing loudness the midwoofer slowly gets out of its comfort zone and orchestral climaxes are restricted in their size and impact. Like with a very quiet listening our hearing and brain can successfully compensate for it, yet if

you want to occasionally get the feeling of concert sound pressure, you cannot. I assume that the goal of a really full range system is achievable with the Accordos combined with a superb subwoofer – I have recently lived with Bowers & Wilkins DB-1 subwoofer that can be blended seamlessly with any speakers in world thanks to its DSP-powered capabilities and on top of that it sports the tightest and the most tuneful bass I have ever heard from a subwoofer (wait for a review).

Sonic exhibition

The floor-standing monitors of Franco Serblin offer one of the most balanced performances I have ever experienced in any room. Actually, they are so cleverly designed that they represent state-of-the-art of technological possibilities in smaller than small speakers. The ears and hands that have built them drew inspiration from many years of experience as well as from the most powerfull source – human emotions. If the following pictures do not say anything to you then do not buy the Accordos and look elsewhere.



The Franco Serblin Accordos are sweet as a candy and they can be razor sharp at the same time. They can soothe you by sways of strings and they can rock your house if asked. They were built for music connoisseurs, for those who savor delicacy, colors and timbres. If you do not push them too hard they are closer to a one-point sound source than anything else. Not only was I unable to distinguish whether the sound came from the tweeters or the midwoofers, but I was unable to localize the speakers in the room at all. Add the unique craftsmanship and here they are – the Accordo floor-standing monitors that exhibit the sonic delight that our world longed for. They deserve our **100% Reference** label beyond all doubt.



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