

# EQUIPMENT REPORT

## Franco Serblin Accordo Loudspeaker

Late Masterwork

Neil Gader

**F**ranco Serblin, who died in March 2013, is remembered as the founder, creative force, and *papa* behind Italy's Sonus faber. I remember him for his incisive and curious mind, and the Italian ease with which he draped a cashmere sweater over his shoulders. Serblin's earliest Sonus faber creations were compact loudspeakers like the Minima, Parva, and the famed Extrema. Growing ever more confident, he soon added the sophisticated Homage Series jewels—the Guarneri in 1993, Amati in 1998, and Stradivari in 2005—to the Sf crown. In each, he pursued a rare balance of beauty, design, and romantic musicality. When he withdrew from Sf a few years ago, many in the industry (including me) thought that he was too young and energetic for real “retirement.” Sure enough, Serblin's creative juices were still flowing, and by late 2010, after four years of development, production began on two new models, the Ktema floorstander and Accordo stand-mount, which I will consider here. The speakers are produced under license to Laboratorium, owned by Franco's son-in-law, Masssimilano Favella.

The two-way compact in a bass-reflex enclosure is where it began for Serblin, and the simplicity and purity of his designs were what ultimately put Sf on the map. Thus, Accordo is a return to familiar terrain—a Minima of sorts, but with the benefit of decades of experience.

From every angle the Accordo has the look of hand-craftsmanship, as well it should given its \$12,000-a-pair price tag. The enclosure—one of the most striking and elegant I've seen, regardless of size—is an asymmetric design with inward-curving side panels and non-parallel surfaces (save for the bottom and top panels). The cabinet narrows precipitously to a short flare at the rear, a tiny chrome-encircled port dotting its angled back. The walnut side panels are inscribed with a series of short, deeply etched, V-shaped grooves that add to the impression of a limited-edition loudspeaker. Running horizontally along the top and bottom edges of the rigid, solid-wood enclosure are aluminum-magnesium inserts that decouple abutting wood elements to control resonances. Another such insert runs vertically up the rear panel.

Other flourishes (instantly reminiscent of the Sonus faber Guarneri Homage loudspeaker, also a small two-way reflex design from a couple of decades earlier) include heavy chrome fittings etched with Serblin's signature, which support the familiar lute-string “grille.” Aficionados will note that some of the Accordo's design cues are also strikingly similar to Sonus faber's new Olympica Series, but I'll leave it to others to speculate on just who inspired whom.

The drivers, thoroughly hot-rodged to Serblin's specifications,

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include a 29mm silk-dome tweeter credited to Ragnar Lian of SEAS fame, and one of the great talents in transducer design. The mid/bass—a custom-made Scan-Speak 150mm paper cone with radial slices designed to control cone break-up—uses Serblin's symmetrical drive motor system. The crossover is an example of Serblin's trademark minimalist approach—a first-order, phase-coherent network optimized with select premium parts.

The graceful stands are standard equipment for the Accordo. Purpose-built, with a heavy chrome aluminum baseplate, a single black strut, and a top plate, each stand also houses the loudspeaker's crossover network. Using an external crossover opens up the speaker cabinet's interior, effectively increasing the usable volume and, crucially, avoiding driver-induced buffeting of delicate crossover parts. Neutrik speakON connectors link the crossover with the input in the stand of each Accordo. Finally, the Accordo's unique shape (each speaker is a mirror image of the other) means that its front baffle is automatically toed-in a few degrees when the stand it is sitting on faces squarely into the room.

Accordo means "agreement" in Italian. Or harmony. It only takes a few bars of solo piano to understand why the speaker is so named. Accordo captures vividly the many moods a pianist can summon from this instrument. The electric brilliance of a *presto* upper-octave passage like the "Ballet of the Chicks in their Shells" in Evgeny Kissin's performance of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, or the solemn and soothing weight of Bill Carrothers' *Civil War Diaries*, or the resonant bloom and sustain from the final chord struck by multiple pianos at the close of the Beatles "A Day in the Life."

While the sacrifices made to strike the appropriate balance in small speakers are often unmistakable, Serblin has so cannily blended tonal color, dynamic power, micro-dynamic detail, and lack of port coloration that the sense of compromise seems to all but vanish. The Accordo weaves an impeccably tailored curtain of sound, brimming with a wealth of ambient information, including height specifics and precisely focused, three-dimensional images.

Sonically, it emphasizes the midrange with a hint of added lower-midrange warmth. It's a balance that conveys a goodly amount of the flavor of the live event and underscores the dynamic vitality of instruments that play primarily in the lower mids—such as piano, cello, and some brass.

Being a two-way its overall balance is on the lighter side compared to big multiways—no major surprise here—but its mid and upper bass are more than sufficient in quantity and quality to enjoyably reproduce large-scale orchestral music or high-voltage pop or rock offerings. Response into the 50-60Hz range is easily achievable in a smaller room, and with room gain factored in further extension will be perceived. There's a hint of a midbass rise that adds warmth and weight and expertly masks the lack of true deep bass, but the Accordo avoids the dreaded upper-bass bump that results in a one-note bottom end. So, while it may not throw its weight around like a Magico Q7 or Raidho C 4.1, the Accordo establishes enough of a low-frequency foundation to achieve a fully realized performance.

As I expected from a Franco Serblin effort, soundstage and imaging are excellent. Depth is particularly well rendered although

I'm not sure it's entirely honestly earned. The upper mids have a slight dip in energy that lays vocals back just a touch and deepens the curvature of an orchestra. It's a flaw easily forgiven after a few minutes of listening but it doesn't go unnoticed.

Equally significant are the openness and sense of scale the Accordo affords. Part of this may be attributable to the enclosure and part to the good off-axis dispersion of the drivers, specifically the sweet, oversized tweeter. Whatever the reasons, the Accordo disappears as a source, and images emerge unconstrained by box or driver, attaining credibly natural scale in the room. Vocalists like Tierney Sutton and Norah Jones have genuine physical presence, rather than being reduced to the size of tiny bobble-head dolls. The dynamic thrust and weight of deep-throated male vocalists, such as bass-baritone Bryn Terfel, aren't served quite as well by the Accordo, but that's an area where most compacts simply bump up against reality.

However, that tweeter fares well on everything. It makes you thankful for great analog LPs, like the Impex reissue of *Hard Bop* by the Jazz Messengers, which plays right into the hands of the Accordo. The transient speed, transparency, and air of the tweeter create an engagement that borders on the addictive. Try "Stanley's Stiff Chickens" if you have any doubts how lively and spacious a monaural recording can sound.

Minimum recommended power for the Accordo is a modest 20 watts, but that's not to say that it has a tiny appetite. Give the Accordo a little more rein in the form of an mbl C21 or Aragon 8008, and the thoroughbred bloodline begins to show. Incredibly responsive to amplification, dynamics become bolder at the macro extremes and more finely graduated at the lowest levels. Likewise, bass response is more defined in timbre. Amplifier power tightens up pitch, and resonances vanish.

This is the first time I've been assigned a product review so proximate to the designer's death. Although Franco Serblin's passing looms large, his legacy emerges even larger. The more time I spent with the Accordo the more I came away with the impression that this was a man who had discovered another artistic level within his own creative limits. I came to believe the Accordo is not just Serblin's epitaph; it's a fitting celebration of a passion pursued and a life well lived. **tas**

### SPECS & PRICING

<b>Type:</b> Two-way, dynamic driver, bass-reflex stand-mount	multilayered hardwood
<b>Frequency response:</b> 40Hz-33kHz, in room	<b>Price:</b> \$12,995 with stands
<b>Nominal impedance:</b> 4 ohm	<b>AXISS AUDIO (U.S. Distributor)</b>
<b>Sensitivity:</b> 87dB	17800 S. Main Street, Ste 109
<b>Dimensions:</b> 14.1" x 7.4" x 14.1" (speakers only; stand height: 29.1")	Gardena, CA 90248
<b>Weight:</b> 35 lbs. (speakers), 35 lbs. (stands)	(310) 329-0187
<b>Finish:</b> Solid walnut or grey	axissaudio.com
	francoserblin.it

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