

SERBLIN ACCORDO ESSENCE LOUDSPEAKER REVIEW

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Rafael Todes enjoys the seductive, opulent sound of this compact high-end floorstander...

Franco Serblin Accordo Essence

Floorstanding Loudspeaker

£12,998

What do you do if you've founded Sonus faber, built it up into one of the world's great premium loudspeaker brands and made yourself a high-end hi-fi legend in the process? Do it all again, I suppose! That certainly seemed to be **Franco Serblin's** logic when he founded the company bearing his name in 2006. He left his own illustrious speaker marque to make his mark one more time, you might say.

Sadly Franco passed away in 2013, but his influence on his company has been profound. The magnificent use of wood, a hallmark of Sonus faber, of course, is no less apparent in Serblin speakers – conferring upon them an exotic aesthetic quality the like of which is extremely rare in the high-end hi-fi world. It not only gives the Accordo Essence a startling aura when installed in your home but also has beneficial acoustic properties too. By way of example, any of the latest superbly built Bowers & Wilkins 800 Series speakers look positively plain stood next to this.



The Accordo Essence floorstander reviewed here was designed by **Massimiliano Favella**, and with its solid walnut cabinetry and chromium accents, is a thing of flawless beauty. It sits on adjustable chrome spikes, which come with small cups which rest on the floor, should you not have carpets. Each speaker is handed – which is to say there are separate left and right versions, rather than just two identical boxes supplied to make a pair.

Each (1,100x230x430mm, 30kg) arch-shaped rhomboid cabinet has aluminium and magnesium internal bracing, with rear reflex ports for both bass and midrange drivers. Around the back is a pair of binding posts which have an exquisite look and feel, with an almost jewellery-like quality. The tensioned 'rubber string' grille has echoes of Sonus faber – or is it the other way round? This has a strange floating effect but doesn't seem to impinge on the sound one way or the other.

The drive unit complement of this three-way design comprises a custom-designed 180mm woofer with an aluminium dust

cap, a 150mm microsphere coned midrange driver and a 29mm silk dome tweeter which is said to have been designed by Scanspeak founder **Ragnar Lian** – that's quite some provenance there. The company quotes a frequency response of 35Hz to 22kHz but doesn't provide roll-off points for this, plus a sensitivity of 88dB. The latter is only an average figure for a reflex-loaded speaker of this size and is further diminished by the 4 ohms claimed nominal impedance.

That means the Accordo Essence could be quite a handful to drive, especially in a larger room and/or with a low powered amplifier; the company specifies a minimum amp power of 20W per channel. My review system comprises 200W RMS VAC Phi tube monoblocks, which experienced no difficulty driving this speaker whatsoever – as you might expect. My source is a dCS Bartok DAC/streamer feeding a Townshend Allegri Reference preamp.

THE LISTENING

The most striking feature of this speaker is its opulent, rich and sweet sound – the sort of thing a Stradivarius violin produces, in fact! It is vibrant; it glows and has inner life to it. Although not absolutely class-leading, spatiality is good; it provides a decent snapshot of the three-dimensionality of an orchestra, for example. There's also satisfying levels of bass wallop and thump, with a real sense of presence to lower range instruments.

Above all, perhaps, this speaker is a real music maker. I was impressed by the timing of the bass by listening to a new recording of **Brahms' Second Symphony** conducted by **Herbert Blomstedt** with the **Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra**. This speaker lined up beautifully with the Brahmsian melodies as if the bass was driving the orchestra. The woodwind sounded lifelike, sweet and present, and I can see why these speakers – and indeed earlier Sonus fabers – have been so popular with classical music lovers. Dynamics are excellent, too. This speaker had amazing authority and slam when the orchestra was at full throttle. Indeed when the musical argument reached its climax, I couldn't detect any sense of compression.

Tonally, the Accordo Essence has a slightly romantic quality. There's just the slightest hint of sepia tint, which makes everything sound very nice indeed – although I wouldn't necessarily want to use it as reference monitors for mixing my recordings with the **Allegri String Quartet**. I would liken it to my experience of playing at London's Wigmore Hall, where the acoustics make every group sound like they are playing on Strads! There's a strong personality to the acoustic of this hall, it is not a blank slate, but rather a transformer of sound, in the nicest possible way.

Indeed, on the great continuum between studio monitors – which are supposed to be accurate enough to give the sound engineer an uncoloured view on how to master a recording – and domestic speakers built to enable the listener to get the maximum enjoyment out of listening, I would say this speaker is quite far towards the latter category. Of course, there's nothing wrong with that, and it makes for a highly pleasurable listening experience. You could say the glass is definitely half full and not half empty. In absolute terms, I sensed a little restraint on the top transients, possibly caused by that silk dome tweeter, sitting on those massive swings in dynamics. It certainly took the edge off a typically well lit digital sound, so you shouldn't really mix the Accordo Essence with a soft and plump sounding amplifier.

It turned in a wholly pleasurable rendition of the 24-bit/48kHz remastered version of **Kraftwerk's Autobahn**. This track is a challenge to any loudspeaker, with its marriage of acoustic and electronic music. I always find the opening sound effects of this song to be most telling; the sound of the engine revving up and the door slamming didn't quite have the bite and incision that I've heard elsewhere. Yet other aspects of the mix really impressed; those early nineteen seventies analogue synthesisers really did sing and were well located spatially. There was a fine sense of scale and presence, too. Bass was well extended and gutsy, especially considering its modest size at this price point.





Madeleine Peyroux's *Careless Love* starts with **Leonard Cohen's** *Dance Me to the End of Love* – beautifully recorded and arranged here. Her voice came across fabulously, sounding rich, textured and very present. The weight of the double bass and pizzicati had real force, as did the incidental instruments used in this colourful arrangement – each spotlighted on the recordings and faithfully reproduced by the Accordo Essence. I wouldn't have minded some more high harmonics on the piano when it has its moment, though. It's a complex instrument to reproduce and seemed just a tad rolled off, yet overall the track was highly lyrical and rhythmically engaging.



This speaker was also totally on-point with the marvellously recorded **Antonio Forcione's** *Tears of Joy* album, including the first eponymous track. It had compelling energy, tautness and rhythm, with the twang of the guitar very well captured, and along with the amazing variety of percussion effects. The wooden block's thwack was really vivid, and the cello work played a prominent, almost vital role without dominating the overall sound.

I assume the various instruments on this track are located by panning at a desk rather than by a pair of microphones in the live room. Indeed, the Accordo Essence excelled at 'mapping' out the recorded acoustic here – better even than the orchestra in my **Brahms** example, which probably had stereo pair set-up and is locating instruments in space by the time delays of sound arriving at the mics. This speaker proved utterly in its element in terms of scale,

texture, and sympathy with the music. Lush, sonically rich and very enjoyable to listen to – what was not to like?

Whilst its bass was highly capable – albeit not the most extended you can get at this price – and treble very good if not stellar in its atmosphere and space, the midband is masterful. This was perfectly demonstrated by **Frank Sinatra's** *In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning*; the hi-res remaster allowed this speaker to excel in its handling of male vocals. I don't know which was Sinatra's preferred mic, but every ounce of detail in his voice was captured and displayed with the Serblin – it certainly has a natural affinity for reproducing the sound of the human voice. The syrupy orchestral backing seemed to suit this speaker too, coming across as an old-fashioned wall of sound. I guess the rose-tinted, romantic sound of this legendary crooner is another fantastic fit for this Italian master loudspeaker!

THE VERDICT

In a word, lovely. Franco Serblin's Accordo Essence is a distinctively designed loudspeaker that's obviously been targeted at reproducing the timbre of the human voice – and other natural instruments across the midband – in an almost supernatural way. Yet it's also an excellent all-round loudspeaker that does way better than its relatively modest dimensions would suggest. It's expensive, but as soon as you set ears on a pair, you'll understand why.

