



There must be something in the air. The northern Italian city of Vicenza is 38 miles west of Venice and 125 miles east of Milan. A medium-size city — 106,000 at last count — Vicenza is big in Italian hi-fi. It's home to Sonus Faber, Pathos Acoustics, and Unison Research.

It's not the air, it's the architecture.

That's what Paolo Andriolo told me. He's one of the cofounders of Pathos Acoustics, whose offices are located in a palazzo on the edge of the city center. (I think Paolo wishes he'd become an architect, like his brother.)

Vicenza was the adopted city of Italy's greatest modern architect, Andrea Palladio (1508–1580), who was born in neighboring Padua, site of Italy's second-oldest university, founded in 1222. (Bologna was first. Pisans are upstarts!) We're talking about a place where civilization was up and running when most Europeans were probably still running around in animal skins and making campfires.

Inspired by the great Roman architects, Palladio favored clean lines, simple solutions, innovative ideas, and practical approaches. In his buildings, form and function come together brilliantly, Paolo told me and showed me in a brief walking tour of the town. Most of Palladio's buildings still stand and are still in use. For instance, there's the Teatro Olimpico, finished after the architect's death and said to be the world's oldest continually functioning indoor concert hall. The acoustics? *Fantastico*.

But there was something special about Vicenza before and after Palladio. Just years after "Palladio's departure for a better world" (Paolo's words), Padua became the world center of science, grazie Galileo Galilei, who taught at Padua from 1592–1610. Galileo's spirit reinforces that of Palladio. And so, today, with much less earth-shaking hi-fi, there is that spirit of innovation. If Pathos can't innovate, why bother? That's what Paolo said — or words to that effect. (We were walking, so I couldn't take notes.) There's no point producing what everyone else is.

On another visit to Vicenza, Giovanni Sacchetti and Leopoldo Rossetto, of Unison Research, told me much the same thing. Vicentinos respect but don't just follow conventional wisdom, Sr. Sacchetti said. Also, there may be more ways to approach a problem — and a product — than first seems obvious. The obvious solution may not be the best one, Leopoldo added.

There's another common thread among Vicentino hi-fi makers: Equipment should look good. There's no excuse for ugly hi-fi.



Sonus Faber Cremona Auditors: custom stands are almost obligatory.

In a world where more and more products sound and look as if they could have been made anywhere, Italian hi-fi — which means, to a large extent, *Vicentino* hi-fi — stands out as different and distinctive: it couldn't have come from anywhere else, even in Italy.

Hard to believe that all of this has happened in the past quarter century — in the last 20 years, in fact.

### Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor loud-speaker

Sonus Faber is Vicenza's, and Italy's, best-known hi-fi firm. But, founded in 1980, it's still a relatively young company. It wasn't until 1983 that the company really got going, with its first stand-mounted monitor, the Parva. This was quickly followed, in 1984, by the Minima FM2, a speaker that stayed in production for almost 18 years. (You can find the year-by-year history of Sonus Faber on the company's website, [www.sonusfaber.com](http://www.sonusfaber.com).)

Sonus Faber established its reputation with stand-mounted monitors: the Parva, the Minima FM2, the Electa Amator, and the Guarneri Homage, introduced in 1993 and still very much in production. Cabinet colorations are less of a problem with small monitors, which can image precisely, throw a deep, wide soundstage, and almost "disappear."

By the way, you should hear the soundstage at the Teatro Olimpico. Inspiring? Vicenza's

hi-fi makers think so.

Inspiration comes also from Cremona, 80 miles to the west. There you can visit the Stradivarius Museum and see instruments by such masters as Guarneri, Amati, and Stradivari himself. And those speakers playing ever so quietly? Guarneri Homages, by Sonus Faber: \$10,000/pair with integral stands. If your purse strings allow, the Homages are definitely worth considering, especially if classical music is your favorite.

But, of course, not everyone can afford \$10,000/pair. Not everyone wants a small stand-mounted monitor. (They may need deep bass, for instance.) And some folks need speakers that are as well-suited to home theater and surround sound as to music and two-channel.

Enter the Cremona line.

The terminology is confusing. We caught up with the floorstanding Cremona speaker — called, simply, the Cremona — last January (Vol.26 No.1). It retails for \$7495/pair, and is complemented by the stand-mounted Cremona Auditor (\$3595/pair plus \$650 for the almost obligatory stands, or \$4245/pair), and the Cremona Center (\$3995/pair plus \$450 for stands).

When I visited the Sonus Faber factory, owner-founder Franco Serblin stressed that he'd designed the Cremona and Cremona Auditor first and foremost for music. The Auditor is no mere brand extension, he implied. He also suggested that some audiophiles might prefer the stand-mounted Auditor to the floorstanding Cremona.

Like its floorstanding sibling, the Cremona Auditor features Sonus Faber's patented lute-shaped cabinet, inspired by Giuseppe Guarneri, greatest of the Guarneri family of stringed-instrument makers. The Auditor also features the same stretched-string grille. Yes, that's patented, too.

The lute-shaped cabinet consists of 32 pieces of solid and laminated maple, with a multi-coat, medium-gloss clear finish. Or you can have the speaker in the "graphite" finish for a more high-tech look. The front baffle, hidden behind that stretched-string grille, is covered with leather to soften sound reflections off the hard wood surface. Each speaker measures 13.75" high by 7.625" wide (at its widest point) by 17.875" deep. The matching stands raise the speaker 25" from the floor and tilt it back about 15°, the exact angle being adjustable via threaded floor spikes. The speakers bolt to the stands from underneath their top plates (the speaker's underside is lined with felt) — nice, because you wouldn't want these beautiful cabinets

to land on the floor. The high-quality binding posts allow easy and secure finger-tightening—but there's only one set, which rules out biwiring.

One complaint: I found the stands a bear to assemble because the drill holes in the wooden center columns were too small. I had to take out my trusty Black & Decker and drill each hole a little wider in order to attach the top and bottom plates. If you have to do the same, be careful—you wouldn't want to over-drill or use too big a bit. Your dealer should deliver the speakers and assemble the stands. Bolting the speakers to the stands can also be a bit of a hassle, but once it's done, it's done. Your dealer should also set them up for best sound. Even more than with the Cremona floorstanders, tweaking the Auditors' positions enhanced their soundstaging in our living room.

I initially used a Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista SACD player and matching Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 300 integrated amplifier. That was lotsa power: 350Wpc into 8 ohms. Later I substituted the Pathos Logos and Pathos Classic One integrated amps, to achieve an all-Vicenza system. Along the way, I tried Conrad-Johnson's combination of Premier 16LS Series 2 preamplifier and Premier 140 tubed power amp, which I wrote about last month. Gosh, I was so busy I hardly had time for summer vacation. Speaker cable was Triangle Silver Ghost.

The Tri-Vista 300 offered more power than I needed, and showed me that the Cremona Auditor is an excellent handler of power. In some applications, it'll have to be (I'm thinking home theater). Sonus Faber rates the Auditor at 88dB/W/m, its nominal impedance at 4 ohms, and recommends powering it with 50–250Wpc. Flea-powered single-ended triode (SET) amps need not apply. Ha! But I *did* find a way to get that SET sound with the Auditors. Read on.

The drive-units are from ScanSpeak, of Denmark: a 1" ring-radiator, fabric-dome tweeter and a 5.85" doped-paper bass/midrange cone (crossover point not specified). These are similar to but not quite the same as the drivers in the Cremona floorstander. The Auditor is ported at the rear, where the sides of the cabinet almost come together.

Pasquale Maggioromo (aka Patrick Butler), of Sumiko, US distributor for Sonus Faber, lives nearby and helped tweak the setup. This time he moved the speakers only slightly in our shoebox-proportioned living room. They ended up 58" out from our narrow back wall and 31" from the sides. Did I mention that the Cremona Auditor's frequency range is specified as 46Hz–40kHz?

The Auditor's tonal balance was very similar to what I recalled from the Cremona floorstanders last winter: crisply articulated but not bright, detailed but not sterile. The speaker could play very, very loud, so I imagine they'll serve well in—and withstand—home theater applications. If your home theater system

does double duty for music, you're in luck. You can have your *Terminator* and Tchaikovsky, too. Come to think of it, I was able to play Tchaikovsky full-tilt—minus deep bass, of course.

My, my, this speaker did respond to quality amplification and quality source material. The Conrad-Johnson pair exhibited its virtues. Ditto the Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 300 integrated—faster, with more power, more punch, a little less body and a tad less bloom

## Even more than with the Cremona floorstanders, tweaking the Auditors' positions enhanced their soundstaging in our living room.

than the tubed amp. As for the Pathos Acoustics amps, you'll hear in a moment.

The deepest notes were missing, of course, but I thought the Auditor delivered surprisingly strong mid- to upper bass. More important, the bass, midrange, and treble seemed seamless—rather like listening to a full-range electrostatic. Of course, the floorstanding Cremona, with its dedicated bass driver, dug deeper.

But don't assume you'll necessarily like the floorstander more. Being minimonitors, the Cremona Auditors seemed to image better, placing soloists and instruments even more precisely across and into the soundstage. Keep in mind, too, that the Auditors, even with stands, cost \$3250/pair less than the floorstanders.

If you have deep pockets, you might audition Sonus Faber's Guarneri Homage. Yes, it's been around for 10 years. Yes, its drivers are older designs. (Once he puts a speaker in production, Franco Serblin isn't one to change things.) While I'm not sure the Guarneri Homage would stand up to heavy-duty home-theater use (abuse?), it has an exquisite musicality, especially with strings and voices. You can own a pair for a mere \$10,000, with integral stands.

*That should empty your wallet.*

### Pathos Acoustics Logos integrated amplifier

This is turning into an all-Vicenza column. Maybe that's okay. If you like Italian speakers, you might like Italian amplifiers. It does seem that Sonus Faber and Pathos Acoustics breathe the same air.

"And if you like Italian hi-fi, you should like Italian fashion," says my wife, Marina, looking over my shoulder.

"Nah. Everything comes from Wal-Mart, L.L. Bean, and Eddie Bauer."

Pathos was founded by three gentlemen from Vicenza: Paolo Andriolo, who attends

to design and marketing; Giovanni Borinato, who does the engineering; and Gaetano Zanini, who helps run the business day to day and lends his golden ears. Gaetano used to run a hi-fi shop in Vicenza.

You couldn't ask for three more sharply defined personalities. Paolo is intellectual and austere. Gianni is lighthearted and fond of jokes. Gaetano is a quiet family man who loves his music and his food—my sort of Gae, actually. The three seem to work well together.

The Pathos Acoustics Logos integrated amplifier retails for \$4495, vs \$5595 for the Pathos TT (formerly the Pathos Twin Towers) with remote. Unlike the TT, the Logos doesn't use the firm's proprietary INPOL circuitry. (See my discussion of the TT in the January 1999 *Stereophile*, Vol.22 No.1.)

The TT earned a Class A rating in "Recommended Components" for its superb resolution and stunning immediacy. A single-ended design, this 35Wpc amplifier ran in pure class-A, and ran very hot. Another drawback of the TT was the INPOL circuit's inability, in single-ended mode, to deliver full power into impedances much below 8 ohms. The Pathos TT was one of my references for a while, but lacked the versatility I need in an amplifier for reviewing. With the right speakers (preferably 8 ohm, not dipping much below 6 ohms), the amp was—and is—magic.

The Logos is more of a real-world product, rated to deliver 110W into 8 ohms and 220W into 4 ohms. A fairly large amp, it measures 9" wide by 5.75" high by 19" deep, counting what ever protrudes, and weighs 60 lbs. Pathos gear is distributed in the US by VMAX Services.

Like all Pathos products, the Logos is visually stunning. A pair of Sovtek 6922 input tubes sits inside a triangular cutout sliced into the front panel. To enhance the glow, mirrors behind the tubes make it look as if there are more than two tubes. Each tube sits inside a chrome Palladian rotunda. Along the amp's sides, heatsinks spell out the Pathos logo. The sinks are hot but the look is cool. Watch out—the edges of the heatsinks are a little sharp.

A block of solid padouk is set into the front panel, inside which is a 100-step digital volume control. You don't actually turn the knob. Instead, you flick it to the right or left and watch the number change on the red LED display. A network of laser-trimmed resistors is said to provide perfect interchannel balance. This is good—the Logos lacks a balance control, which would only compromise the sound. A slim remote control, housed in matching padouk, has unmarked functions for volume up and down, mute, and input select.

The input selector uses miniaturized relays that were originally developed for telecommunications operations. There are two balanced XLR inputs and five unbalanced RCA inputs, all line-level. There is a pair of fixed-level RCA tape outputs, but no variable-level preamp out—a possible con-

cern for those who use powered subwoofers. The Logos features a single pair of high-quality speaker binding posts.

According to Gianni Borinato, the Logos runs about 18W into pure class-A before switching to class-AB. The amp runs fairly warm—though not as hot as the TT—and needs plenty of ventilation. At any rate, you'd never want to hide such a work of art in a cabinet. There are three pairs of MOSFET output transistors per channel, which means the amp can deliver the current without any sweat.

On their website, Pathos states that part of their philosophy is to avoid negative feedback. "What we avoid is global feedback," Gianni explained. "Some local feedback is needed to stabilize the circuits." Solid-state amps really can't work without some local feedback.

"Global feedback reduces THD [total harmonic distortion] and lowers output impedance," Gianni continued. "You get excellent test-bench measurements. But the human ear is much more sophisticated than test gear and can detect the lack of naturalness that comes with global feedback. Listening fatigue soon sets in.

"The amplifier's preamp stage is fully balanced from the input to the output of the preamp," he continued. "That is, up to the power-amp stage." The 6922 tubes are double triodes. They provide the gain, and the preamp stage operates in pure class-A.

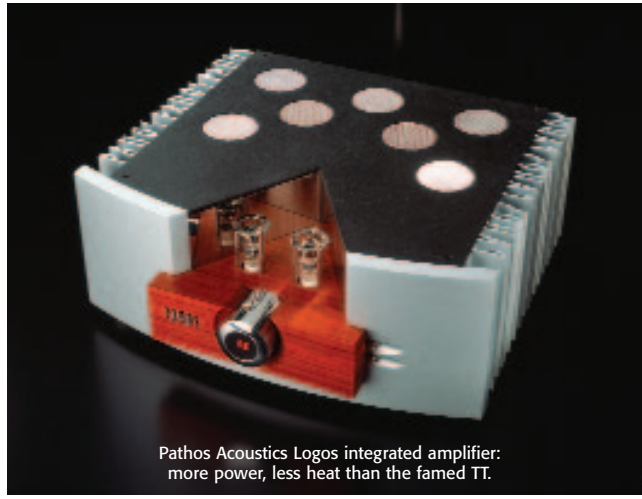
"It's not a matter of following fashion," said Gianni. "Tubes are still the best device for amplifying voltage. Period. The advantage is evident in the harmonic presentation. Meanwhile, solid-state devices, not tubes, are what you need to amplify current. Speakers desperately need high current at very low impedance. Tubes deliver the opposite: low current at very high impedance.

"There are advantages to having a balanced preamp stage," Gianni continued. "You minimize common-mode noise picked up by your interconnects. The noise is the same, coming and going, plus and minus. It gets canceled in a balanced system. You can hear cleaner, more natural sound, with more detail and precision. It's like lifting a curtain."

Or removing a *whale*, as my late friend Lars liked to say.

"Beware of amplifiers on the market that claim to be balanced when they're really not," Gianni advised. "These amps take a balanced signal from their XLR inputs and convert it into an unbalanced signal through a chip. The result is not the same as balanced."

Unfortunately, Musical Fidelity's Tri-Vista SACD player lacks balanced outputs; but I could run balanced using my McIntosh MCD205 CD changer. While I preferred the sound running balanced, a single-ended



Pathos Acoustics Logos integrated amplifier: more power, less heat than the famed TT.

## Like all Pathos products, the Logos is visually stunning.

run didn't spoil the performance. As for noise, there wasn't any. Either way. The Logos was astonishingly quiet.

I received the Logos some months ago and so had the chance to try it with several different speakers, including the Triangle Magellan, for which the Logos was a very fine match. I also had the chance to briefly use the Logos with the floorstanding Cremonas before they went back. For the most part, though, I did my serious listening with the Cremona Auditors.

The Logos gave me a very clean, clear sound, with excellent bass control and a smooth, grain-free treble. The harmonic integrity of tubes? I guess so. Sibilants were handled especially well, without splash or sizzle. What the Logos lacked in some of the TT's stunning single-ended immediacy it made up in more power and more current delivery into low-impedance loads. The Logos carries a lower price than the TT, too. I noted excellent control of the bass drivers on both the floorstanding Cremonas and the Magellans.

The Logos struck me as a great-looking, fine-sounding, well-engineered product. Even with unbalanced sources, I noticed no hum, no noise, and an extremely quiet background—indeed, no background at all.

I highly recommend the Logos, especially if you need the power and authority of a fairly beefy integrated amp and don't want to put up with the squalid looks of most amplifiers made in North America. You pay a premium for the design and cosmetics, of course, but not such a great one—a buttugly integrated with 100hp or more is likely to set you back \$3000. And then you'll have to *look* at it.

The Logos is an excellent choice for those who need high power, high current, want a refined and delicate sound, and value

European—no, make that Italian—design at its best. Most people can't imagine that such stuff even exists. These days, almost everyone is in the dark about great hi-fi.

### Pathos Acoustics Classic One integrated amplifier

I was talking to the Chief (aka John Atkinson) the other day about the new version of the Pathos Classic One integrated—a Classic if there ever was One. I told The Chief that I was trying to restrain my enthusiasm

lest I be perceived as going over the top.

"You *like* to go over the top," said JA.

"Yeah, that's what Marina says. But Chief, this is one of the finest amps I have heard of any kind, from anywhere, at any price. It retails for \$2195. What do I tell readers who have invested tens of thousands of dollars in North American muscle amps?"

"You tell them how you feel," said the Chief.

I laughed my evil laugh.

The Classic One is supposed to be Pathos's entry-level integrated amp. But you might end up making it your *exit*-level integrated—once you hear it, you probably won't want anything else. This is assuming the Classic One delivers enough power for your speakers and room. It's not exactly a wimp, pushing out a rated 70Wpc into 8 ohms and 135Wpc into 4 ohms, using a single pair of MOSFET output devices per channel. According to Gianni Borinato, it delivers about 12Wpc of pure class-A. It runs warm, but not excessively hot.

While I loved the looks of the original Classic One (we can call it the One/One and this the One/Two), I didn't much care for the sound, which I thought lacked clarity and focus. Rather like me. Too many curtains. Too many *whales*. (Of course, Lars meant *veils*.)

I wish I could have taken the Classic One/Two (okay, it's the Classic One) over to Lars's lair and put it against whatever \$10,000, \$20,000, or \$30,000 amp was his current favorite. I suspect that the Classic One might have won out, giving the Swede quite a yolt. Come to think of it, I would have loved to take the Classic One over to Harvey "Gizmo" Rosenberg's. He would have wanted to modify it, of course.

You can identify the new version of the Classic One because it has the 100-step digital volume control (same as the Logos) and the On/Off toggle switch on the right. It also has the walnut remote. The Classic One is smaller than the Logos and weighs 26.4 lbs *vs* the Logos' 60 lbs. It's an unusual shape: deep and narrow. The dimensions are a mere 9" wide by 5.75" high by 19" deep.

The Classic One's open architecture

reminds me of a classic block-style tube amp—even the power-supply transformer at the rear looks like a tube amp's output transformer, chrome cap and all. Two Sovtek 6922 input tubes reside in chrome Palladian rotundas, as in the Logos. A small chunk of solid walnut is set inside the amp's front (you can hardly call it a "faceplate"). The top is black Plexiglas.

The Classic One is one of the most beautiful hi-fi products ever made. It's exquisite. And the build quality is very, very high. North American and British manufacturers should look at this amp and feel ashamed for foisting off on us such squalid ugliness as they do. No wonder women, for instance, don't want to buy their products. Who wants to look at them? Even I don't, and I wear clothes from Wal-Mart.

The Pathos Classic One has a single pair of balanced XLR inputs (the preamp stage is balanced, as on the Logos), and four unbalanced RCA inputs. There's also a tape output, but no variable-level preamp output—a bummer, perhaps, for subwoofers. The digital volume control, source selector, and walnut remote control are exactly the same as those used on the Logos.

*Mama mia!* The new Classic One took me completely by surprise, especially since I was expecting it to be only a tad better than the old. It wasn't. It was a whole order of magnitude better than the ho-hum original.

Excuse me while I wipe the foam from my lips. Raving will do that.

Pathos has achieved something phenomenal here—and in their entry-level integrated. Again, I expect it will be exit-level for most, because where could you go from here? Well, you could get more power. But, you know, audiophiles are often greedy little pigs. Gotta have that power. They pay with inferior sound quality.

JA told me not to constipate myself, so here goes. The Pathos Acoustics Classic One is one of the finest-sounding amps I have ever heard, of any era, from anywhere—including amps costing \$20,000 and more. Those megabuck models of course offer more power, but power limitations aside, I know of nothing on the market—certainly nothing I've heard—that surpasses the Classic One where it counts (for me, that is): in harmonic accuracy, resolution, and illumination—immediacy, if you will.

I marveled at the magic even before the Classic One broke in and warmed up. It infused the Sonus Faber Cremona Auditor speakers with light and life—the way the finest, flea-powered SET amps do. The Classic

One didn't just emulate or approach the sound of SETs—it rivaled, if not surpassed, the sound of flea-powered SETs I have known.

On all recordings, particularly great classical ones (and that often means older rather than newer), the Classic One had a way of illuminating the music from within and breathing air into the soundstage and the performance. Everything and everyone sounded more natural—instruments, voices, the recording venue. The music just flowed naturally. The harmonic presentation was exquisite. The treble seemed effortlessly and

bloat around. Most amps do.

If 70Wpc (into 8 ohms) isn't enough for you, you can double your wattage by buying two Classic Ones and bridging them into mono for fully balanced operation: balanced power-amp stage *and* balanced line stage. The dealer can make the modification, but you can't. Paolo will spank you if you try.

But I'm not sure more power is the way to go. Some of the magic may come from using this single pair of MOSFETs per channel.

Curiosity got to the cat. I removed the Cremona Auditors from their stands and used the stands instead for my Sonus Faber Minima FM2s. I couldn't bolt the Minimas to the stands, so I used a generous dollop of sticky-tack to secure them. Otherwise, the Auditor stands were *perfetto*.

The Minima FM2 is a classic minimonitor from the 1980s. Like many other minimonitors of the era, it's relatively insensitive (84dB) and perhaps more friendly to solid-state amps than to tubes. Powered by the Pathos Classic One, the Minima FM2s offered up sheer magic: superb tonality, spectacular soundstaging. Rather like the soundstage I heard—you guessed it—at Vicenza's Teatro Olimpico. (The hall is very wide. It's an indoor amphitheater.)

Speaking of tonality, the sound of the Classic One was not subdued—brass instruments had real brassiness, strings could have that wiry edge when required. (Not all classical music is beautiful; some is meant to be jarring, unsettling.)



Pathos Acoustics Classic One: this could be your "exit level" integrated amplifier.

**Pathos has achieved something phenomenal here—and in their entry-level integrated.**

endlessly extended. With good recordings, the sense of recorded space was...well, spacious. Not spacious.

While the bass was not so authoritative and weighty as what I heard from the Logos, the bass was exceptionally well-defined, as it is with flea-powered SETs (until you push a SET's volume, of course). But I didn't have to put up with the severe power limitations of SETs. I could use the Classic One to get SET-like sound from the Sonus Faber Cremona Auditors. The amp would have worked well with the floorstanding Cremonas too, I'm sure.

At first, I thought the bass with the Classic One might be a little lightweight. When you audition this amp—and you must—don't get tricked. I found the bottom end superbly controlled, exquisitely defined. It just didn't

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Meanwhile, be sure to audition the Pathos Acoustics Classic One. This is an ideal amplifier for a small two-channel system in a library, office, or den. The Classic One worked like a charm in our living room, too. If you need more muscle, there's always the Logos; maybe the thing to do, while you're at your Pathos dealer, is audition them both.

If your pockets are deep, here's a thought: Try to get a Classic One together with a pair of Guarneri Homage speakers. This would be rather like a poor man, say from the Italian south, marrying a rich woman from the Italian north — but I'll bet the combination clicks.

In Vicenza, there is indeed something in the air. ☒