

Opera Seconda Loudspeakers

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Sometimes good things appear in big packages. So it was when Federal Express arrived at my door with two huge boxes that happen to house one Opera Seconda loudspeaker each. Opera manufactures its loudspeakers in Italy and is sister company to Unison Research, whose two brilliant tubed CD players, the glorious [Unico CDE](#) and [CDPrimo](#), I reviewed -- I was taken both by the beautiful build quality and gorgeous sound of both units, *especially* the CDE.

Like the Unison Research line of products, Opera speakers offer plenty of choices, and are all made in the Treviso, Italy factory. Also, like Unison, Opera covers most price points, offering unique products at even at the entry level. After my extremely positive experience with the Unison CD players and one of their hybrid integrated amps, I was quite excited to hear an Opera speaker for the first time in my home setup.

The Opera Seconda, a sealed two-and-a-half-way floorstanding speaker, has been in the Opera line up for many years, but was extensively updated in 2011. It is equipped with a 1" silk dome ScanSpeak tweeter, and two 7" custom ScanSpeak aluminum cone woofers. Interestingly, this woofer is used as a midrange driver in the Quinta, which is one model up from the Seconda. The front baffle is relatively wide, at approximately 10 inches, and pretty deep, at 17 inches. They are heavy, as I can tell you from carrying up a several flights of stairs myself, weighing in at 80 pounds each. On the electrical side, sensitivity is rated at 89 dB, and a nominal impedance of 4 ohms. Bass is said to go down to 30 Hz.

Set Up

Setting up the Secondas was relatively straight forward, with a few considerations. Before installing them, I attached the supplied spikes and support footing. I placed in them in almost the exact location where my current reference, the Thiel CS2.4, normally stand. Toe in was around 20 degrees, and they were about three feet away from walls and corners. Since the Secondas come with two sets of high quality binding posts for bi-wiring, which I did not do, there are supplied jumper links. My experience is you are all almost always better off replacing the stock links with high quality aftermarket links, which I did. I used a pair of spade terminated Anti Cable links, which are an amazing value for the money.

The rest was routine; Transparent Super MM2 speaker cable into the 4-ohm tap of the KT120 outfitted Audio Research VS55 tube amp. Later, I also used a powerful solid-state integrated amp. After getting the mundane stuff out of the way, I realized how stunning the Secondas were in appearance. Their white gloss finish and black leather front baffle project Italian luxury. Finally, I ditched the attractive protecting grilles for listening at the suggestion of Marc Phillips, of Opera importer [Colleen Cardas Imports](#) (*see my interview with Marc after this review*).

Listening

I started off listening to a lot of instrumental music, for no other reason than mood. I cued up classic McCoy Tyner, Tony Williams Lifetime, and some recent stuff by Brian Blade. The Secondas loved acoustic music. Horns, piano, acoustic bass, and drums had tons of lifelike verve and literally jumped out the speakers. Complicated, harmonized horn lines were easy to follow and sounded amazingly “live” (*when well recorded). And tonal accuracy? There in spades.

I then ventured into more diverse material, including a lot of classic rock. Janis Joplin’s *Pearl* sounded as good as I have ever heard it. Her final album is filled with such rocking, soulful numbers such as “Move Over”, and the definitive version of Kris Kristofferson’s “Me and Bobby McGee”. The Secondas really did a great job letting the gritty vibe of these recordings shine through. I also was quite pleased with how tracks from *I Got Dem Ol’ Kozmic Blues Again, Mama!* sounded. Blues soul power houses like “Little Girl Blue” and “Work Me, Lord” were utterly thrilling. The same applied to Neil Young’s *Greatest Hits* collection. These analog era recordings sounded wonderful through the Opera’s. Young’s acoustic guitar and voice sounded authentic and engaging.

On the quieter side of the spectrum I called up one of my all time favorite records, Nick Drake’s *Bryter Layter*. “Northern Sky” literally gave me goosebumps. Legendary producer Joe Boyd’s expansive production and string arrangements beautifully support Drake’s distinct voice and nylon string guitar. The Secondas transported me to a place where it was impossible not to pay close attention to the music.



Moving to the present day, legendary Canadian band Rush has released a later career masterwork called *Clockwork Angels*. I purchased the 96 Khz, 24 bit download and it has been on heavy rotation. The Secondas provided all the necessary slam, dynamics, and crunch to enjoy this album even very high volume levels. So the Secondas could swing, groove, and rawk out.

The album that really crystallized what the Secondas could do was *Tchamantche* by Malian chanteuse Rokia Traoré. It is a stunning recording, with Traoré’s velvety voice surrounded by traditional Malian instruments, electric guitar, bass, and percussion. The Secondas were very sympathetic to Traore’s close mic’d vocals, and the arrangements seemed to float untethered on a cloud. Comparing Secondas to my Thiel CS2.4s was interesting. I would say the CS2.4s are balanced a bit more evenly, while the Opera are a bit slanted towards mid bass. The Secondas were superior in dynamics, meaning cymbal splashes and horn blasts seemed to burst out of the speaker. They were also has more

bass weight, with super articulate low frequency reproduction. The Thiels, on the other hand, offered a smidgen more resolution in the midrange, and a bit more high frequency detail. In the end, the two speakers were not too far apart in overall presentation. The Operas would probably benefit from being matched with electronics that do not veer to the overly warm side, while the Thiels don't do as well with overly analytical amplification. The Thiel is approximately \$1500 more than the Opera. Both speakers benefit from being matched with high quality amplification.



Conclusion

Like products from their sister company, Unison Research, Opera loudspeakers are made with great care, in a dedicated factory in Italy, and are designed by a team of music lovers and engineers who have a passion for the art of home audio. The Opera line includes two monitors and multi-way floorstanders, at reasonable price point too. The Secondas are joined in the Classica series, by the Quinta (\$5495), Grand Mezza (\$2795) and Mezza (\$1495), and at \$3995 are very fairly priced based on sound quality, build, and comparisons to more expensive speakers.

The fact that they exude Italian artistry in appearance, are fairly easy to drive, and are bi-wirable, make them an easy recommendation for an audition if you value musical beauty. It bears repeating these speakers have soul. *Un altro lavoro ben fatto!*

Interview with Marc Phillips, of Collen Cardas Imports

Avrev: Can you tell us a bit about the Opera loudspeaker design team and if there is a any overlap with the Unison Research engineering group?

Marc Phillips: *The two companies are both owned by the same family and parent company, A.R.I.A., but*

each maintain independence in the design and engineering aspects. Unison products are designed primarily by Giovanni Sacchetti, who is one of the founders of A.R.I.A., and Opera has a separate design and engineering team.

Avrev: The Seconda seems to be modeled by ears that listen to a lot of live music. Can you comment on that?

Marc Phillips: *Well of course...they're Italian ears! I mentioned this question to the Opera design team, and they laughed and said "Yes, we have a string quartet playing right on the factory floor as we build the speakers!" But seriously, Opera Loudspeakers were designed by people who enjoy the finer things in life...great food, great drink (the family owns a brewery a maintains a world-class wine cellar) and of course plenty of great music. This love of the finer things in life really comes through when you're listening to these products.*

Avrev: The Seconda worked fabulously with both the tube and solid state amps I had on hand. However, can one assume that Unison electronics and Opera speakers would be a symbiotic match?

Marc Phillips: *As I said, the two companies maintain a separate identity, but they are of course voiced together. For instance, the new Opera Mezza (\$1495/pair) and Grand Mezza (\$2795/pair) speakers are just starting to arrive in the US. They were delayed a few months because the Opera design team realized that they wanted the two speakers to be a more perfect match with the new 12wpc Unison Research Simply Italy integrated amplifier. So they redesigned the drivers, and made the entire design more efficient. Now it's an amazing yet affordable combination, one that we're showing at this year's Rocky Mountain Audio Fest.*

That said, the Unison Research line of amplifiers are extremely varied. You have everything from 12wpc single-ended tube amps to 180wpc hybrid amplifiers. I've used close to 20 different combinations of Unison amplifiers and Opera speakers in the last year, and have yet to hear a match that was anything short of spectacular. In my own reference system I use the Opera Grand Callas, which are 4-Ohm, 89 dB speakers, with the 27wpc Unison Sinfonia integrated. I have all the dynamic power and authority I need with an amazing sense of warmth and delicacy. So the answer is yes, Unison and Opera are a very synergistic match.