

SECOND TIME

The SP2s from Opera are the latest version of their SuperPavarotti floor-stander. Will Simon Pope find them in good voice?

"N"ot so long ago in this very fine journal, I encountered a pair of slim floostanders from the Opera stable whose compact dimensions somewhat belied their name, the SuperPavarotti. Allegedly the great (in more ways than one) man even received a pair as a small gesture. What they did have in common with their namesake, though, was a full throated sound, rich tone and an unmistakably Italian style, as demonstrated in their fine hardwood cabinets. Unlike the man himself, the SuperPavarottis have now had a bit of a re-shape and a change to the vocal chords.

The gorgeous hardwood cabinet remains (a company trademark for twelve years) but we now have an elegantly rounded back in curved boat tail, or "marine" fashion, formed from a single piece of wood which is locked to the front baffle in the hallmark of time-honoured craftsmanship - tongue and groove fashion. Although time consuming, this method has found favour with Opera due to its extra rigidity and structural integrity. In addition to the fine cabinet work, the SP2 has an all round excellent finish, with Opera's high quality 24kt gold plated solid brass (albeit single wire) connectors.

The 'speakers are attached to a base plinth (again with quality adjustable brass cones fitted) with exact spacing for the downward firing port to operate correctly. This port signifies the overall design of the SP2 - the same as in the original version - which is known as a 'double asymmetric cavity loading' configuration. For the technically challenged, this basically means their are two separate, yet interconnected chambers within the cabinet which are of differing volume. The second

(larger) of these has the downward firing port. Drivers used are high quality; two SEAS 11cm mid/bass units. These two units operate together at frequencies below 100Hz, but above this frequency the lower unit is rolled off. The upper one takes over midrange duties up to 2.5 kHz, after which a ScanSpeak 26mm tweeter takes over - a unit rightly held in high regard throughout the business, incidentally.

The crossover itself deliberately employs a minimum of components but what it does use are close tolerance for suitable matching.

Listening was carried out using a Meridian 506.24 CD player matched with Quad II-Forty valve power amps and a solid-state Meridian 557 200W power amp. Preamp duties were down to Creek's invaluable passive preamplifier, whilst Kimber and Chord Company cabling was put into action.

Take a stroll through any major (or minor) Italian city and you'll find a certain amount of Englishness in the appearance of certain individuals. It's a well known fact that continentals seem to carry off wearing traditional English attire far better than those who it was originally designed to enrobe. It seems that loudspeaker design is going this way, too. As the



likes of Tannoy and KEF aim for a wider ranging dynamic and more immediate sound, so the likes of Opera are harkening back to the days of the Leak sandwich and classic Wharfedale designs. Yes, there's perhaps more air and space here than we associate with these classic English models but the overall appeal is similar.

Knowing the general overall trademark sound of Opera I wasn't surprised to find the SP2s had a warm and smooth appeal, totally free from sterility. What this means is that you get a certain amount of coloration, but it's in the valve amp mould - pleasant as opposed to intrusive. What did surprise me though was the quality of the treble. The ScanSpeak is a change for the better when compared to the unit in the original model. What this open

THE ROUND

sounding treble does inject a bit of life into the sound, putting more space and ambience into recordings. Playing an SACD hybrid disc of a fascinating collection of Sicilian medieval songs on the Fone label brought impressive results. A good sense of perspective and depth was created, with the resonant acoustics of the recording venue superbly recreated. The raw vibrancy of the period percussion (drums in particular) and instruments was well relayed, with an impressive amount of detail in the upper frequencies and midrange. John Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme' also demonstrated that the SP2s were comfortably at home with natural and well balanced acoustic material, giving an easy, warm performance.

Knowing that it wouldn't be a marriage made in heaven I put the SP2s through the trials of Underworld's 'Push...Upstairs'. The pumping electronic bass lines proved to be a little out of sorts here. Whilst ambient and acoustic bass is good,

the dry, low rumblings of Underworld failed to materialise to their full effect - no real surprise when the slim cabinet dimensions are considered. What these slim cabinets do bring, though, is sharp imaging which is both impressive yet natural, with good depth of sound stage, too, as Paul Weller's brilliantly mixed 'Stanley Road' CD proved.

Those seeking impact above all else may not always appreciate the SP2s but they image almost perfectly and have an endearing musical quality that many manufacturers have sacrificed for sonic fireworks. The new choice of tweeter makes a big difference. Like the rest of the Opera range, and indeed Italian hi-fi in general, the SP2s aren't the type of 'speaker that will make you jump out of your seat and get you air guitaring, Spinal Tap style. Where they impress most is with the ease in which they produce music, with not a hint of edginess or scratch. Although ultimately they sacrifice a little excitement and bounce for

refinement this is no bad thing and they are consequently a good match for smooth, sweet sounding gear such as valve amps, or Meridian CD players!

As with the likes of say, an electrostatic design the attraction is in the subtle detail and imaging, as well as the sound as an organic whole, as opposed to hard-nosed dynamics. That is not to say they lack bass or drive, because they don't, especially when used in a smallish or mid-sized room, but those who require ultimate clout and depth may find the SP2s do not fit the bill. On the other hand, if you favour traditional smoothness and warmth these are well worth a listen as they are extremely easy to live with. ■ ▲

Opera SP2 £1100

UKD

23 Richings Way
Iver

Bucks SL9

Tel: 01753 652669

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

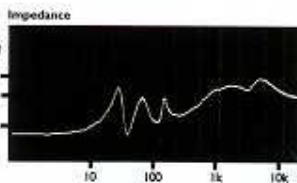
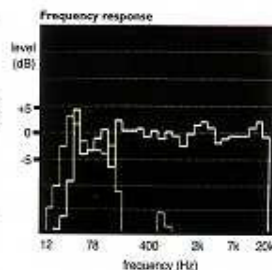
The Operas had surprisingly good vertical dispersion, meaning their drive units were well matched in terms of phase response. The result in practice is a consistent sound from a seated position to walking around the room, where the ear is much higher. It's a useful but uncommon property.

Our third-octave analysis of frequency response shows the 'speakers measured flat from 40Hz to 20kHz, fluctuations at the low end of our analysis being due to room effects. Otherwise the SP2s stay within a few dB of flatness right across the audio band, from 40Hz to 20kHz - an impressive result. However, perfect flatness points to the use of highly damped cone materials that in practice can sound a little lifeless, so there's a trade-off here. The SP2 will sound detailed though, and its port goes low, so it

should also have quite good bass too. On this topic, the impedance curve suggests the floor positioned port has a broad bass spectrum and applies effective damping to the bass cones around resonance. This gives the 'speakers a flat-ish impedance curve that rises steadily from 4ohms up to 10ohms, giving an overall figure of 6ohms under measurement. There's virtually no reactance in the load, except around bass resonance, so the SP2 is an easy load. Sensitivity was mediocre, measuring 85dB SPL from one nominal watt of input. The Castles in this issue managed 89dB by way of comparison, with higher impedance, so were more efficient.

The Opera SP2s are well engineered. They will be easy enough as an amplifier load, although 60W or more is needed. They are likely to

sound detailed and accurate, with good bass, but also a bit less lively than the best current designs. **NK**



World Verdict



An open, easy going sound make these a well balanced and user-friendly loudspeaker. Not the fastest or lowest bass around but the midrange and treble is excellent. Headbangers, stay clear.