



## Sonus faber Principia 7

**S**onus faber has always been one of those hallowed loudspeaker brands, steeped in a tradition of craftsmanship and musicality, and renowned for a range of products executed with the kind of individual care that mass-market products simply cannot emulate.

These days, Sonus faber is part of the Fine Sounds group that also includes other top-end audio brands, notably Wadia, Audio Research, Sumiko and McIntosh Labs. There's been a steady expansion of the Sonus faber product line-up, with the likes of the Venere and the new-generation Chameleon making the marque accessible to a broader audience.

The new Principia line-up continues that strategy with a range of loudspeakers that promises to retain the Sonus faber sonic pedigree, while adding a welcome slice of affordability to the formula.

Of course, it raises the question whether that affordability has been achieved at the cost of sonic or construction quality – or whether it's more a case of economies of scale being applied to the benefit of the Principia range.

Only one way to find out ... I unpacked the big Principia 7s, flagships of the new range, revealing a tall, robust three-way tower speaker with more than a passing resemblance to the Chameleon T.

The Principia 7 is finished in a smart black, with tapered top and bottom panels that allow the floorstander to lean back slightly in the interests of time alignment. It is located on a substantial plinth that screws into the base of the main cabinet, and is fitted with perfectly machined, adjustable coupling spikes.

It may not have the exchangeable colour panels or the sumptuous leather cladding of the Chameleon, but the Principia is still a handsome and meticulously executed floorstander. And that goes for its proprietary driver complement, too.

The four-driver array starts off with a 29 mm pre-coated fabric dome tweeter that's identical to the HF unit used in the Chameleon range. It's mounted very close to the 150 mm midrange driver, which features a thermo-moulded polypropylene cone.



Dual 180 mm woofers, featuring the same polypropylene cone material, take care of the low frequencies, while a generous bass reflex port occupies the lower part of the cabinet. The mid and bass drivers are similar to those in the Chameleon, but unique to the Principia.

Aluminium trim rings around the four drivers add visual appeal but also facilitate unencumbered sound wave dispersion. Magnetically located cloth grilles are supplied, but frankly, the 7s look great with their drivers exposed. Dual binding posts on the rear panel facilitate bi-wiring.

With a sensitivity of 90 dB SPL, the Principia 7s are more than efficient enough, although their nominal 4 ohm impedance suggests that they'll benefit from slightly beefier amplification able to cope with a load that is likely to dip below 3 ohms on occasion – Sonus faber suggests 40 watts RMS as a minimum.

Crossover points are at 250 Hz and 2,5 kHz, and the 7s are credited with a frequency response of 38 Hz to 25 kHz.

I ran the Sonus fabers in the company of our Primare PRE32/Parasound Halo A21 combo, with the source signal provided by a variety of components – from our trusty Oppo BDP-95EU to Yamaha's magnificent CD-S2100 reviewed last month.

I enjoy using the *Uncompressed World* series of CDs produced by Accoustic Arts, because they feature material that's perfectly produced, yet entertaining to listen to. On Volume 1. 'Feathers And Flames' by Matthias Frey sounded muscular and generously scaled.

The piano was bright and articulate, but presented with ample body and presence against a wide, airy soundstage. Its liquid delivery was allowed to flow unencumbered, while also capturing the performance's delicate dynamic swings and thoughtful intonation.

Staging and dimensionality were impressive: the Sonus fabers drew a wide and deep sound picture, opening up plenty of room for the music and its performers. The intricate percussion was cleanly, precisely rendered in both sonic and spatial terms, while the acoustic guitar was presented with a wholesome integrity that added to

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the overall believability and engagement of the performance.

The speakers' examination of the music was close enough to hear the zing and pluck of the guitar's strings, and to almost feel the full, resonant presence of the piano. Indeed, there was an overall fullness and integrity to the delivery that benefited involvement and engagement with the music.

But perhaps the most surprising aspect of the sound was the transparency of the Principias, something I also remember from the Chameleon Ts. For all their substantial stature, their role as point sources was well disguised on the soundstage, allowing a sense of flow and freedom that benefited both the expression of the music and the interface between listener and system.

Tonally, the Principias sounded full and plummy, with a chest-whacking bass that demands ample air – these are not speakers for small rooms. That said, it's not a bottom

VITAL STATS

Design .....	Three-way floorstander, bass reflex
Drive units .....	1x 29 mm coated fabric dome tweeter 1x 150 mm polypropylene cone midrange 2x 180 mm polypropylene cone woofers
Bi-wiring .....	Yes
Impedance .....	4 ohms nominal
Sensitivity .....	90 dB SPL
Frequency response .....	38 Hz – 25 kHz
Power handling .....	Up to 300 watts
Dimensions (HxWxD) .....	1 060 x 270 x 355 mm
Weight .....	18,9 kg (each)

Price ..... R30 990

Verdict

Bold and engaging loudspeakers that entertain with their impetus, clarity and inherent musicality. Built to Sonus faber standards, too – and priced for value.

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OUR RATING: 81 / 100





end that dominates or overwhelms, but rather adds substance and authority, with ample energy and pace to ensure a succinctly constructed low-frequency platform.

The midrange progressed smoothly and seamlessly from those lower registers, and displayed an eloquence that expressed the full impact of vocals and instruments, but never sounded too rich or oversaturated.

Yes, there was a slightly warm glow that added to the overall accessibility and appeal of the sound, but never to the extent of sounding rolled off. The trebles provided a clean, refreshing counterpoint, with ample lucidity to capture and project often elusive high-frequency details.

Claire Martin's hugely entertaining *Time And Place* is another fine recording, allowing full access to the British jazz singer's vocal charms. The Principias made the most of the sonic quality on offer, delivering their musical wares with a strong sense of transparency, so that the sound became walk-in real.

The speakers masterfully captured the intimacy of 'She's Leaving Home' – the piano sounded liquid and effortless, while Martin's vocals were arresting in their intensity. The recording tracked every inflection and each intake of breath, and the 7s revealed that information faithfully



and believably.

Again, the big floorstanders closely examined every aspect of the music, but retained the integrity and intent of the performance. That sense of cohesion was particularly prevalent on 'Early To Bed', featuring a beautifully expressive double bass presented with riveting power and

focus, but still perfectly balanced with Martin's swinging vocals and the piano of Gareth Williams.

Danish vocalist Jette Torp's evocative ballads on *Here I Am* aren't just a pleasure to listen to – the album is also superbly recorded. On 'Only A Woman's Heart', the sheer scale of the soundstage allowed for an utterly immersive listening experience.

The sound picture was huge and atmospheric, allowing Torp's vocals to soar above the combination of articulate acoustic guitar, powerful bass, delicate percussion and shimmering rhythm guitar.

Again it was that deep, dark bass that underscored the music, benefiting substance and momentum without dominating the sonic proceedings.

Talking of which, I swapped Torp for Supertramp's *Some Things Never Change*, which features the kind of bass that can intimidate even the biggest, baddest woofers. But not here: on the title track, the Principias easily retained their composure, even when I cranked up the volume.

Not only that, but there was ample space on the soundstage for the gentle flute to engage in dialogue with the searing licks of the lead guitar, while Rick Davies' voice still commanded the Supertramp ship.

This may not be the reformed band's finest creative hour, but the recording is superb, and the tunes catchy enough. The Sonus fabers easily picked their way through the sometimes dense arrangements, and always allowed the impetus and the energy of the music to shine through, while extracting and presenting a full harvest of detail.

So, here's the million dollar question: do the Principia 7s live up to the expectation created by their Sonus faber identity?

Well, if you were expecting them to sound like the flagship Carmens for a fraction of the price, then no.

But if it's a well-crafted pair of floor-standing speakers with impressive tonal range, surprising transparency and loads of musical charm you're after, then the Principia 7s will certainly do the trick – and at a value-added price point.

Deon Schoeman

## Software

Various – *Uncompressed World Vol 1 (Accoustic Arts CD)*  
 Claire Martin – *Time And Place (Linn 96/24 FLAC)*  
 Jette Torp – *Here I Am (Universal 44.1/16 WAV)*  
 Supertramp – *Some Things Never Change (EMI 44.1/16 WAV)*

## Associated Equipment

Oppo BDP-95EU universal deck  
 Bryston BDA-3 D/A converter  
 Yamaha CD-S2100 CD/SACD deck  
 Primare PRE32 pre-amp  
 Parasound Halo A21 power amp  
 KEF R500 loudspeakers  
 TelluriumQ Blue speaker cable