



Sonus faber Principia Five, Three and Center

A few issues back, we reviewed the senior member of Sonus faber's so-called entry-level Principia range. I say so-called, because there was nothing entry-level about the Principia 7's performance.

Instead, the handsome if somewhat understated floorstander delivered a sound that was bold and entertaining, while still achieving the levels of clarity and musicality we've come to expect of the Italian speaker maker.

If you read that review, you'll know that the Principia 7 is a close relative of the more expensive, and more colourful, Chameleon T, and that the Principia range consists of two floorstanders, two stand-mount speakers, and a centre channel speaker.

The form factor of the Chameleon T, Chameleon B and Chameleon Center closely approximate those of the Principia 7, Principia 3 and Principia Center.

The Principias don't get the Chameleons' exchangeable colour panels, nor the leather cladding. The dark finish is a black vinyl veneer, rather than real wood, but the overall effect is smart in an unobtrusive kind of way.

All the Principia models employ the same 29 mm coated fabric dome tweeter as the Chameleons, and also boast the same painstaking build quality and attention to design detail, epitomised by the eye-catching brushed alloy surrounds around the drive units.

The floorstanding Principia 5 gets a separate plinth that's screwed to the base of the speaker itself, and is fitted with adjustable coupling spikes. The top and bottom panels are tapered, angling the front baffle back at an angle in the interests of time alignment, while also combating standing waves.

The 5 is a two-way design, combining the familiar treated fabric dome tweeter with a pair of identical, 150 mm thermoformed polypropylene cone mid/bass drivers. The latter feature a free-compression basket design in the interests of linearity



VITAL STATS

and dynamic range.

All three drive units are mounted quite high up on the baffle, with the tweeter and the first of the two mid/bass units actually intersecting – perhaps in an effort to benefit focus and imaging.

The front-firing bass reflex port boasts a large diameter to prevent turbulence while boosting low-frequency response. Two sets of low-mounted binding posts on the rear panel allow for bi-wiring. The crossover point is at 2,5 kHz.

The Principia 3 is the larger of the two stand-mounted models in the range, and it actually employs a larger, 180 mm version of the polypropylene-coned mid/bass unit used by the 5 and the Center.

Cleverly, the port fires downwards from the base of the enclosure, which is raised by a rubber moulding to allow air to exit from the port. Dual binding post sets again allow the option of bi-wiring. In this instance, the extra investment in speaker cable is well worth it.

Not surprisingly, the Principia Center is the perfect partner for the 5 and 3. Horizontally configured, it places the same 29 mm tweeter in the centre of the baffle, with the equally familiar 150 mm mid/bass driver on the one side, and an identically proportioned and coned passive radiator on the other. The enclosure is sealed.

The Principias were set up in a 5.1 configuration, with the 5s in the main front role, and the 3s as surrounds. I also briefly tried both the 3s and the 5s in a stereo role – mainly because I'm quite sure both the 3s and the 5s (as well as the even smaller Principia 1, and the flagship 7) will also appeal to stereo system users.

The latest-generation Marantz SR-5011 AV receiver reviewed elsewhere in this issue was used to drive the Principias, while our regular Oppo BDP-95EU universal deck provided the source signal. Low frequencies were delivered via a monster SVS SB13 Ultra also on review at the time.

Once the channel levels and delays had been calibrated, and all equalisation had been switched off, it was time to settle in

Principia 5

Enclosure type	Floorstanding, bass-reflex
Drive units	1x 29 mm coated fabric dome tweeter 2x 150 mm polypropylene cone mid/bass driver
Bi-wiring	Yes
Impedance	4 ohms
Sensitivity	90 dB SPL
Frequency response	40 Hz – 25 kHz
Recommended power	40 – 250 watts
Dimensions (HxWxD)	1000 x 250 x 280 mm
Weight	13,2 kg each

Principia 3

Enclosure type	Stand-mount, bass-reflex
Drive units	1x 29 mm coated fabric dome tweeter 1x 180 mm polypropylene cone mid/bass driver
Bi-wiring	Yes
Impedance	4 ohms
Sensitivity	88 dB SPL
Frequency response	45 Hz – 25 kHz
Recommended power	50 – 200 watts
Dimensions (HxWxD)	335 x 197 x 292 mm
Weight	6,1 kg each

Principia Center

Enclosure type	Stand-mount, bass-reflex
Drive units	1x 29 mm coated fabric dome tweeter 1x 150 mm polypropylene cone mid/bass driver 1x 150 mm polypropylene cone passive radiator
Bi-wiring	Yes
Impedance	4 ohms
Sensitivity	87 dB SPL
Frequency response	50 Hz – 25 kHz
Recommended power	50 – 150 watts
Dimensions (HxWxD)	190 x 520 x 230 mm
Weight	6,6 kg

Price

.....	Principia 5 R24 990 per pair
.....	Principia 3 R3 490 per pair
.....	Principia Centre R7 290

Verdict

Musical, smooth operators that gel exceptionally well as a surround sound system. A full tonal range linked to agile responses and a penchant for open staging ensures an immersive listening experience.

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OUR RATING: 84 / 100





Software

Pearl Harbour – (Blu-ray)
Star Wars: The Force Awakens – (Blu-ray)
Various – *Crossroads Guitar Festival 2013* (Blu-ray)
Roger Waters – *Amused To Death* (Columbia CD)

Associated Equipment

Marantz SR-5011 AV receiver
Oppe BDP-95EU universal deck
SVS SB13 Ultra subwoofer
KEF R500 loudspeakers
KEF LS50 loudspeakers

for some concerted multichannel listening.

From the very outset, it became apparent that the Principias delivered a sound that was full and wholesome – not rich in the oversaturated sense of the word, but bold and organic, with an almost palpable quality that really brought the sound to life.

In the home theatre context, that allowed the Principia system to blow real life and soul into the sonic action, adding texture and substance to the sound, with heightened realism and impact the overall result.

That said, the sound was never allowed to become thick or viscous – the tweeter's inherent penchant for clarity and resolution ensured an ample harvest of detail, which was ably applied to provide both directional cues and a certain sonic finesse. It also meant that dialogue was projected with clarity and purpose, regardless of the density and intensity of the special effects.

Equally admirable was the way the common voicing of the fronts, centre and surrounds allowed the sound to closely mesh, resulting in a truly seamless surround sound image. It presented an all-encompassing canvas on which the AVR was able to accurately place and manipulate the full spectrum of a movie's soundtrack content.

As a result, the Principias had a compelling ability to extract and present the full impact and drama of the soundtrack, greatly enhancing the overall home cinema experience.

It's been a while since I watched *Pearl Harbour*, and I can't remember the often complex layers of effects and dialogue being as succinctly portrayed as by the Principias. Their combination of sonic heft and lucidity did both impact and detail justice, with thoroughly engrossing viewing the ultimate result.

The main battle scene can often degenerate in sonic blur of explosion-blitzed noise, but here, the inherent pace and control of the speakers, and their ability to closely track the directionally rendered effects, always left enough space for every machine gun stutter, every torpedo strike, every aircraft flypast to be reproduced with thrilling precision.

And even though I was only listening to the soundtrack in a 5.1 system, the three-dimensionality was vivid enough to allow the sound to be rendered in both vertical and horizontal layers – which says a lot for both the resolution of the speakers and the AVR's surround decoding talents.

The latest Star Wars epic, *The Force Awakens* may fall a little short in the originality stakes, but who cares when the action is as thrilling, the effects are as spectacular – and the soundtrack is as meticulously rendered?

To their credit, the Principias easily kept up with sheer pace and scope of the soundtrack, ranging from sprawling battle scenes to intimate conversations, and everything in between. However, it was the pervasive sense of dimension, of experiencing a space apparently unrestricted by the studio's actual boundaries, that left the most lasting impression.

Effects steering was truly omnidirectional, affording a convincing sense of sonic immersion, while the Principias also managed to distinguish between the layers of effects, music and dialogue in a way that retained the integrity of the individual elements, while also expressing the combined impact of the broader sonic picture.

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finesse of the Principias: their talents extended well beyond dynamic range, impressive impetus and outright authority. Fine details, elusive nuances and ambient detail were woven into a performance that was always believable and engaging.

Those capabilities were even more apparent when I ran first the 3s and then the 5s in a stereo role. Powered by our Electrocompaniet PI-2D integrated, and unfettered by LFE management, the 3s sounded generous and incisive, with more bottom-end punch than expected. A finely focused sound picture was made all the more enjoyable by the stand-mounters' penchant for transparency and generous staging.

The 5s took those traits a step further in tonal terms, with plenty of bottom-end authority creating a solid foundation for the rest of the musical harvest. That extra tonal depth, so vital to their AV performance, also made the 5s sound smooth and even organic in stereo mode, while coming close to the lucid 3s in transparency terms, too.

Our exchange rate and import duties make it difficult to describe the Principias as budget beaters. Even then, they represent an exceptional price/performance ratio. Most of all, they truly deserve to wear the Sonus faber badge.

Deon Schoeman

Principia 3



Principia 5



Principia Centre

