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Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

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BELLISSIMO!

A standing ovation for Opera's Classica Prima v2 standmount

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DREAM MACHINE



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The Italian job

...But not quite as we know it. **David Vivian** comes to terms with an Italian classic that's had a character-changing sonic reboot

Sister brand to purveyor of achingly gorgeous tubular electronics Unison Research, Opera Loudspeakers knows all about feel-good Italian. Sure, the tropes are arguably hi-fi's clunkiest *cliché*, but it's hard to resist the woody, leathery, conspicuously crafted charms of speakers that make the rest of your furniture look shabby.

Then there's the sound. Just as audiophiles recognise the neat, tucked and neutral sonics often assigned to British speakers (especially those espousing time-honoured BBC tenets), so the notional 'Italian sound' is wrapped so snugly in the idea of rich, romantic, valve-like warmth and smoothness – indeed, Opera speakers are voiced to sound their best with Unison's valve amps – strong preconceptions are almost impossible to avoid and, more often than not, roundly confirmed.

Quick recap. Opera Loudspeakers was founded by Giovanni Nasta in 1989. The Nasta family later acquired and grew Unison Research. Today, the two brands operate together out of the Treviso region of Northern Italy under common family ownership, Opera taking care of speaker business, Unison tube and hybrid amps plus the odd CD player.

Well, here's the swerve. Opera's new, updated Classica Prima v2 standmount, sumptuously lovely as it is to look at, seems to have given the traditional Italian sonic template a canny take-two. In short, it's the least Italian-sounding speaker I've ever reviewed. But I hasten to point out, this isn't to say the necessary beauty has left the building.

All right, the look is spotlessly Italianate. The Prima v2 sports meaty, luxuriously tactile timber-effect cheeks mildly tapered inwards towards the back. The book-end

eco-leather cladding wraps round from the front baffle to the rear panel with its substantially engineered single binding posts and bass reflex port. Under the lush exterior, however, much has happened to remodel the Prima's sonic profile. There are new drivers, a revised crossover network and standing wave-quelling cabinet modifications, all with the aim, as Opera puts it, to improve on the outgoing model and create a speaker that sounds more natural, coherent and emotionally engaging.

Let's start with the cabinet. Contributing to an overall weight of 14kg, it clearly conforms to the mass and damping school of design, seeking to render the construction as inert as possible. Chasing that objective, the previous Prima's proportions have been remodelled (a critical change to the ratio of the cabinet dimensions, says Opera) with the intention of reducing resonances and the amplitude of undesirable modes over a larger frequency range. Additionally, beefed-up internal damping, using a high-density polyurethane material, is said to have reduced internal resonance by an order of magnitude.

Despite this, in re-engineering the cabinet, a lighter hand sometimes proves more effective. Opera has developed a technique to measure the changes in acceleration of the side

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Opera
Loudspeakers
Classica Prima v2

ORIGIN
Italy

TYPE
2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
14kg each

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
237 x 428 x 390mm

FEATURES
• 26mm soft
dome tweeter
• 180mm aluminium
mid/bass driver
• Quoted sensitivity:
90dB/1W/1m (6ohm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Karma AV

WEBSITE
operaloudspeakers.
com/en
karma-av.co.uk

walls and the resulting pressures emitted. This led to subtler reinforcement than used in the original Prima at the points of greatest stress, actually reducing cabinet colouration rather than promoting more.

Like the 26mm soft dome tweeter, the 180mm mid/bass driver has been developed in league with Danish specialist Scan-Speak. Opera claims that masses have been carefully calibrated to achieve excellent surface damping and low mass, thanks to the choice of materials. Measured against the drivers in the original Prima, the ratio of mass to compliance has been modified, along with the design of the magnetic assembly, the aim being to achieve 'lightning-fast acceleration' in

A highly engaging, musically supple speaker with a real spring in its step

the mid/bass and midrange. To build on this, the unit's generous excursion is said to ensure excellent dynamic linearity, thanks in part to the special design of the polar terminations (the geometry and shaping of the magnetic pole pieces in the driver's motor assembly). Horizontal dispersion has been evaluated based on inroom listening – an absolute must for its designs, says Opera. Just as much attention to detail has been afforded the crossover network design, which employs premium components from



If you're happy to push the budget, the achingly Italian Chario Aviator Ghibli (HFC 522) bestrides the line between art and science with assurance. Fans of hard rock and associated genres may feel the revised Prima v2 is the better bet, but otherwise the baby Chario Aviator sounds sweet, natural and very, very Italian. Pricier still, OePhi's Transcendence 2 (HFC 514) majors on transparency, timing and thrills while Audio Physic's Spark 6 and Fyne Audio's F1-8 (HFC 496 and 473 respectively) also plough their own paths technically and stylistically, while their ability to blend standmount and floorstander strengths is rare.

Mundorf and what the company calls 'phase-conscious' integration between the drivers.

Sensitivity is quoted at 90dB, and the inevitable impedance dips look reasonably benign, making this an easy enough load for a wide range of amps, from robust solid-state designs to valves in the 20-30W bracket.

Sound quality

In cooling the tonal temperature and raising the liveliness of the Prima's handling of tempo – shooting for more speed, clarity, precision and transparency – the danger here, I suppose, is throwing the *bambino* out with the *acqua del bagno*. So, although seduction by mellifluous manipulation might have been jettisoned, at its core the Prima v2's tonal realism and hard-wired musical communication continue to win out over what could be initially impressive but stone-cold and emotionally barren analysis. It all makes for a highly engaging, musically supple speaker with a real spring in its step and is huge fun. If not quite a lean, mean music machine, there's something crisp, clean and airily open about the v2's more athletic and precise presentation.

Treble is beautifully judged: extended yet relaxed and composed, rendering detail without the too-often-noted spotlight dazzle. Bass produces low frequencies of undoubted weight and authority that could easily embarrass a compact floorstander while, more importantly, exhibiting fine pitch definition and timing, and integrating cleanly with the midrange.

But it's the right weighting of these assets that's key and Opera's technicians have done an uncanny job here, particularly in the crucial midband region. Voices sound like the product of flesh and blood, delivered with convincing body and presence, avoiding excessive warmth and cool detachment. Sarah Bareilles singing Michael McDonald's *I Can Let Go Now* streamed on Qobuz is simply scalp tingling, the Prima v2 shown to be perfectly attuned to its gift of delivering emotion without excessive vocal theatrics, moving between the song's energy and intimacy with ease while wringing every last drop of beauty from the soaring climax.

The spare piano phrasings and dreamy massed strings are harmonically rich without edge or glare and have a remarkable depth of tonal texture. Yet it's the way these attributes are layered through a spacious soundstage that makes the presentation so grounded and



satisfying. Whatever the genre, the midrange possesses an uncontrived naturalness that informs the whole.

Dynamic expression is unusually good for a standmount, too. Nothing feels hyped or juiced up. Rather, subtle inflections are handled just as fluently as wholesale shifts in intensity, the sense of realism and flow largely putting listener fatigue to the sword.

Conclusion

The Opera Classica Prima v2 looks for all the world as if it's up for that famously fat, ripe, rich and rosy Italian sound many love. The reality is somewhat different: livelier, cleaner and more incisive. The romantic excesses have been shaved away yet, much to its maker's credit, what remains is more rewarding still: tonal beauty, natural vocal reproduction, expansive imaging and effortless musical flow with an openness, transparency and drive that gets us closer, with more excitement, to the living heart of the performance ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Straight-ahead Italian design chic and build; clean, precise sound
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Some of the Italian romance has gone West
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Traditional Italian good looks meet monitor-class sound
EASE OF DRIVE ★★★★★	

OVERALL

