

Test Bench

BY Michael Fremer
PHOTOS Cordero Studios

Sonus faber Toy/REL T1 Speaker System

PRICE: \$6,044 **AT A GLANCE:** Elegant, understated styling • Sweet yet detailed sound • Excellent dialogue intelligibility • Coherent three-dimensional picture • High SPLs without strain

Leather-Clad Pleasure Toy



SONUS FABER TOY/REL T1 SPEAKER SYSTEM

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

VALUE ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

What's in a name? If a 1960s-era General Motors marketing consultant had suggested a car brand named Toyota, he'd have been laughed out of the room and probably lost his job. "Are you crazy, man? No one's gonna buy a car with *toy* in the name!" No one at GM is laughing at Toyota today. The car brand was named for its founder, Kiichiro Toyoda, so the company had a reason to toy around with the designation.

Sonus faber, the Italian manufacturer of some of the world's most beautiful, expensive, and pleasing-sounding loudspeakers, was under no such obligation. It probably chose the Toy name because of the pint-sized surround speakers used in this array. To my recollection, it's the smallest speaker Sonus faber has ever manufactured. Rest assured, there's nothing toy-ish about the tiny Toy, or the floorstanding Toy Tower for that matter.

Cheeky Name, Cheeky Construction

For some reason, once-cozy home kitchens have now morphed into grotesque copies of industrial, restaurant-style cooking factories. And yet, no matter how beautiful it looks, having a loudspeaker anywhere in your home has become a source of shame in mainstream, non-audiophile America. While Sonus faber's expensive audiophile speakers remain snazzy pieces of superbly crafted furniture that are meant to be seen as well as heard, the company has moved into a line of less expensive, high-performance speakers that are designed more to be heard than seen. This began with the Grand Pianos in 2002.

Keeping the size and cost down was part of the game plan for the line that's intended for multichannel use. In order to do this, Sonus devised unique, cost-efficient, black-leather-clad cabinetry. A folded MDF center section comprises the front baffle, back, top, and bottom, while sculpted, decoupled "cheeks" seal the open sides. The cheeks are designed to control resonances and minimize standing waves within the cabinet. The look is at once handsome and unobtrusive, which is particularly useful when the speakers flank a video screen. Your eyes should be drawn to the screen, not to the loudspeakers. On the other hand, when the lights are on, you don't want to look at butt-ugly speakers, which the older Grand Pianos and the new Toys certainly are not.

At just 3 feet tall, 10 inches wide, and 11 inches deep, the three-way Toy Tower is relatively small for a floorstander. But it's substantial compared with the 11-inch-tall, 7-inch-wide Mini-Me-sized Toy surround. The surround would probably make a swell desktop computer speaker or pair well with an iPod when used with an external amplifier.

Both Toys feature a rear-ported 4-inch coated cellulose cone driver and a 1.5-inch ScanSpeak ring radiator tweeter, the same brand tweeter that Sonus faber

uses in its more expensive Cremona line. The Toy Tower adds a 7-inch rear-ported Nomex (a DuPont-developed Kevlar variant) cone woofer. The relatively large, dual-front-ported Toy Center uses two 4-inch cone drivers that flank an offset 1.5-inch ring radiator.

The Toy Tower crosses over at 400 hertz and 4,000 Hz and is rated down to 45 Hz. The Toy, crossed over at 4,500 Hz, is said to be good down to 60 Hz, while the Toy Center, crossed over at the more common 2,000 Hz is rated down to 55 Hz. Clearly, without a subwoofer, you won't get much deep bass. However, when I ran the Toy Towers full range, the bass they did produce was clean and honest. It did not sound bumped up to give the impression of more bass than it actually produced.

Sonus faber importer Sumiko also sent me a compact REL T1 subwoofer. REL's game plan is to run the sub off the front L/R amp or speaker terminals, which requires you to run the speakers full range. (That's a potential

problem for small satellites that have limited power and bass handling capacities, but it wasn't in my experience with the Toy Towers.) A line-level input accepts bass/LFE information from surround processors and AVRs. Individual control of each input allows for smooth integration of both into the final sonic picture.

The compact, gracefully styled T1 fires its active 10-inch woofer downward and an equal-sized passive radiator forward. With careful placement and meticulous attention to level setting, the T1 can disappear and create the impression of very large L/R speakers—or if you're sloppy, some kick-ass mid-'70s-style Cerwin-Vega lease busters.

The 21st-Century Loudspeaker Reviewer's Dilemma

With effective DSP-based room-correction programs like



• REL's compact and elegant T1 subwoofer complements the Toy speakers in both looks and sound.

Features

SPEAKER:	TOY TOWER	TOY CENTER	TOY
TYPE:	Three-way, monitor	Two-way, center	Two-way, monitor
TWEETER (SIZE IN INCHES, TYPE):	1.5, ring radiator	1.5, ring radiator	1.5, ring radiator
MIDRANGE (SIZE IN INCHES, TYPE):	4, coated cellulose		
WOOFER (SIZE IN INCHES, TYPE):	7, Nomex cone	4, coated cellulose (2)	4, coated cellulose
NOMINAL IMPEDANCE (OHMS):	8	8	8
RECOMMENDED AMP POWER (WATTS):	35-200	20-100	20-100
AVAILABLE FINISHES:	Barred Black Leather	Barred Black Leather	Barred Black Leather
DIMENSIONS (W X H X D, INCHES):	10.6 x 37 x 11.6	21 x 6.5 x 8.9	7.2 x 11.3 x 10.6
WEIGHT (POUNDS):	39	16	45
PRICE:	\$2,750/pair	\$998	\$1,298/pair

Audyssey now standard on even modestly priced A/V receivers, should you review a speaker system pre or post correction? You tell me, because I don't know the correct answer. Most systems allow easy on/off, so I auditioned the Toy system both ways. With the room correction on, midband coherence seemed to improve somewhat, as if a small hole had been filled in, but the overall tonality changed very little.

Either way, Sonus faber has managed to produce a speaker that's smaller and less expensive than 2002's Grand Piano and

outperforms it in every way except for low-frequency extension. The Grand Piano's specified low-frequency extension is 10 Hz lower than the Toy Tower, but it's easy enough for the subwoofer to compensate.

The Toy Tower produced greater dynamics at both ends of the scale, particularly at the microdynamic level. Its midrange presentation was more supple and nuanced, producing enticing instrumental textures and delicacy that's usually reserved for more expensive speakers. The smooth-sounding ring radiator was utterly effortless and free of tizzy and etchy artifacts that often infect speakers at this price point. It created a deep and wide soundstage that was free of hot spots. Overall, the speaker's top-to-bottom integration, coherence, and freedom from congestion produced a mesmerizing and effortless mix of harmonic balance and spatial generosity—even with two-channel material.

Add the Toy surrounds, which produced a similar sonic and spatial picture, and you have a nearly ideal room-filling sonic bubble with the speaker locations submerged within the 3-D acoustic.

However, the center of this speaker universe is the Toy Center. Many music-in-surround mixers avoid the center channel because many center-channel speakers tend to "sound" rather than blend into the L/R mix for a variety of reasons. Often the only

solution is to manually drop the center level when listening to 5.1-channel SACD mixes. Still, the attempt to reduce its tendency to beam, give away its location, and diminish its timbral differences is often a vain one. This isn't so with the Toy Center.

There isn't a better musical test of a surround sound speaker system than Herbie Hancock's *Gershwin's World* (Verve SACD). It's a true 5.1-channel mix that doesn't shy away from using the center channel. It mixes Hancock's piano front and center with a sumptuous string section and a strong reliance on reeds and guest vocalists Joni Mitchell and Stevie Wonder. This superbly recorded disc mixed for 5.1 by the great Al Schmitt and mastered by Doug Sax is an audio extravaganza. It can sound either rich, glorious, and spatially coherent or tinkly, shrill, and spatially disjointed. If you wish to hear how far we haven't come in the art of symphonic recording, get a hold of one of RCA's Living Stereo SACDs produced from a three-track original master tape (recorded in the late 1950s through the early '60s) and play it back on this system.

The Toy Tower system delivered this disc better in every way than any sub-\$10,000 surround sound system ever has in my home theater. In fact, I preferred the sound to some more

expensive systems. It may have given up some detail, sparkle, air, and that last bit of macrodynamic thrust compared with some far more expensive systems. But it gave up nothing in terms of tonal believability, textural richness, instrumental suppleness, three-dimensionality, and non-judgmental listening pleasure.

The Toy Center's ability to disappear and submerge itself into the musical works, perched atop my 65-inch Hitachi boat anchor of a CRT-based RPTV was complete. Not surprisingly, the Toy Center reproduced sound-track dialogue with equal transparency. Although two-way horizontal woofer-tweeter-woofer center-channel speakers usually



● Measuring in at just 3 feet tall, the Toy Tower makes up for its small size with big sound.



HT Labs Measures

SONUS FABER TOY/REL T1 SPEAKER SYSTEM

L/R Sensitivity:
87 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz

Center Sensitivity:
88.5 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz

Surround Sensitivity:
86 dB from 500 Hz to 2 kHz

This graph shows the quasi-anechoic (employing close-miking of all woofers) frequency response of the Toy Tower L/R (purple trace), REL T1 subwoofer (blue trace), Toy Center center channel (green trace), and Toy surround (red trace). All passive loudspeakers were measured with grilles at a distance of 1 meter with a 2.83-volt input and scaled for display purposes.

The Toy Tower's listening-window response (a five-point average of axial and +/-15-degree horizontal and vertical responses) measures +0.99/-3.79 decibels from 200 hertz to 10 kilohertz. The -3-dB point is at 84 Hz, and the -6-dB

point is at 61 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 4.96 ohms at 141 Hz and a phase angle of -56.28 degrees at 69 Hz.

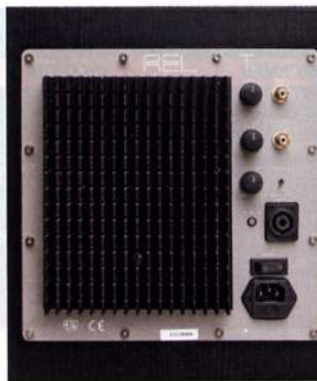
The Toy Center's listening-window response measures +0.64/-4.29 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. An average of axial and +/-15-degree horizontal responses measures +0.71/-4.63 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. The -3-dB point is at 81 Hz, and the -6-dB point is at 65 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 6.16 ohms at 9.8 kHz and a phase angle of -38.55 degrees at 139 Hz.

The Toy's listening-window response measures +1.52/-2.69 dB from 200 Hz to 10 kHz. The -3-dB point is at 162 Hz, and the -6-dB point is at 102 Hz. Impedance reaches a minimum of 7.21 ohms at 314 Hz and a phase angle of -45.79 degrees at 136 Hz.

The REL T1's close-miked response, normalized to the level at 80 Hz, indicates that the lower -3-dB point is at 43 Hz and the -6-dB point is at 36 Hz. The upper -3-dB point is at 98 Hz using the LFE input.—MJP

Visit our Website for a detailed explanation of our testing regimen, plus a list of our reference gear.

on the web



Connections

REL T1 SUBWOOFER

ENCLOSURE TYPE: Passive radiator
WOOFER (SIZE IN INCHES, TYPE): 10 active, 10 passive
RATED POWER (WATTS): 300 RMS Class A/B
CONNECTIONS: Speaker- and line-level, RCAs for line-level inputs (LFE and low level)
CROSSOVER BYPASS: Switchable, LFE
AVAILABLE FINISHES: Black Ash, White, Cherry
DIMENSIONS (W X H X D, INCHES): 15.75 x 14.25 x 16.5
WEIGHT (POUNDS): 40
PRICE: \$998

excellent dialogue intelligibility at both high and low SPLs.

Speaking of SPLs

The Toy Tower system doesn't play around when you crank up the volume. It can play loud in a fairly large listening room without audible strain or dynamic compression. And that's with the Toy Towers running full range and augmented by the REL T1 subwoofer. If you like to rock out loud or watch movies at high SPLs, the Toy Tower system will give it to you. There's nothing small about the volume, dynamics, or spatial picture that this system delivers. With that said, it's important to consider the contribution that the REL T1 makes to both sound effects and music. Turn it off, and you're still running the front L/C/R array full range. So it was easy to hear its considerable contribution in filling in the foundation, adding weight and especially the sense of a large space on appropriate musical and cinematic material. You'll need a subwoofer to get the most from the Toy Tower system. With the REL T1 driven off the amplifier or speakers' L/R speaker-level terminals, I achieved a level of seamlessness that wasn't possible for me with most line-level-only subwoofers.

Conclusion

If the Toy Tower system errs on any side of the sonic fence, it's toward warmth and richness, which it does without a noticeable loss of low-level detail. Given the bright, processed nature of many soundtracks, it's the side on which to err. If you're looking for an all-purpose system for both cinema and

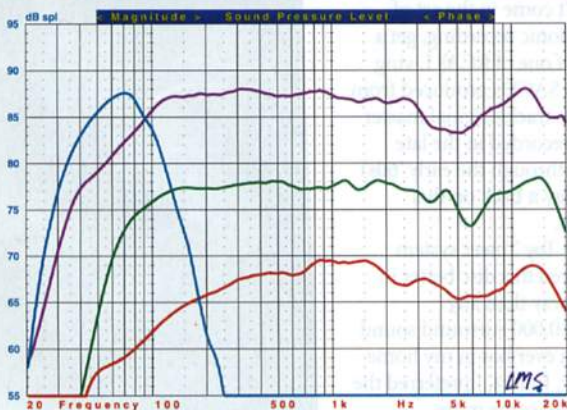
music at a price point that doesn't break the bank, the Toy Tower system with REL's T1 subwoofer will make you very happy even if you're a picky audiophile. I speak from personal experience. The Toy Tower system is among the most listenable systems I've reviewed at any price.

Don't let the small size fool you. In a small to medium-sized room, the Sonus faber Toy Towers (run full range) produce big sound with almost unrestrained dynamics, especially when you team them with a competent subwoofer like the T1. The tiny Toy surrounds perform with the same level of cleanliness, low coloration, and smooth dispersion. The real star within this constellation of speakers is the Toy Center. Whatever it might measure, it offers a degree of transparency, low coloration, and freedom from mechanical artifacts that you don't often hear at this price point. When you put it all together, you have a relatively small, attractive, unobtrusive-looking, and well-balanced system. While it's not inexpensive at \$6,044, it won't break the bank, either. It delivers nuance and delicacy with musical sources and head- and gut-throbbing punishment with effects-heavy movies. It's a highly recommended system that proved difficult to return. ¶

Sonus faber • (510) 843-4500 •
www.sumikoaudio.net •
www.sonusfaber.com
Dealer Locator Code SNF



SONUS FABER TOY/REL T1 SPEAKER SYSTEM



suffer from off-axis lobing and irregular frequency response off axis (and the measurements may confirm that this one does too), it was not an issue subjectively. Dialogue intelligibility was excellent. Male voices avoided chestiness, female ones avoided shrillness, and the Toy Center's

sibilant performance was clean and free of illusion-spoiling artifacts. It wasn't quite the "Brad Pitt's hiding behind the screen" transparent performance that some far more expensive center-channel speakers have managed, but it was close enough. What's more, the Toy Center produced