

Sam Tellig

Opera Callas Divina, Tomo Uno

"ITALY URGED TO BATTLE THE BULGE" —BBC News World Edition (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4188069.stm>)

G irolamo Sirchia, Italy's health minister, says Italians are too fat. He wants to take measures. Literally. Signor Sirchia would deliver a tape measure to each Italian family so folks could measure up. It's cheaper than sending out bathroom scales.

A male, however tall, should have a waistline not exceeding 102cm. Oops, that's just under 40". I had a 40" waistline once. Back in 1967. A woman should be even trimmer, with a waistline of 88cm or less—about 34".

Signor Sirchia, who must be lean himself, says that 28 million Italians—roughly half of the country's population—are overweight, which likely means fatter than he. Five million are categorized as "officially obese."

It's not just grownups. Some 36% of nine-year-olds are overweight, signor Sirchia says. This is more than in any other European country.

I think I know why half of Italy is overweight. Food is far better in Italy than in any other European country.

Northerners are slimmer than their southern compatriots, says signor Sirchia. Especially fat are those who reside in and around Naples.

Again, the reason is simple. The food is better in the south of Italy and people have more time to eat.

I remember reading that Italian cats are overweight, too, compared to their counterparts in other places, but I can't place my paw on the piece right now.

Meanwhile, I'm worried about our trip to Italy later this year. Might I be turned back for being overweight? I can just imagine signor Sirchia setting up weight scales at customs entry points. Too fat? Go home. I may have to fly into Frankfurt first and enter the European Union there. Or fly into Naples.

Ah, Napoli. The people there will likely scoff at the health minister's [*ahem*] measures. Neapolitans may opt to eat more, just to stick it to signor Sirchia and

the politicians in Rome.

I love Naples. Drivers consider seat belts a nuisance. Some car owners, I'm told, remove their seat belts. Talk on your cell phone while driving? All Italians do it. The difference in Naples is you won't get nabbed by the police, who have too many accidents to investigate. As for smoking in public places, go on. Light up.

This is another of signor Sirchia's crusades: an almost total ban on puffing in public places. Café and restaurant owners are expected to rat on customers, to call the cops on those who light up or face a stiff fine.

I can just imagine Giovanni Nasta enforcing Italy's new smoking ban.

business—better than the south, no doubt—but life there is cold. It's all about money, money, money, Gianni says. Not that he's averse to making it, but is money all there is? No, he says. It's passion. Passion for what you do. Hopefully, in pursuit of your passion, you will make enough money to live well.

Still, Gianni says he may move back to the south of Italy. Not now, not anytime soon. He's just turned 50. He's brought his two sons into the business and his daughter may follow. Opera Loudspeakers is very much a family affair—as is so typical of Italy, the entire firm has the feeling of an extended family.

Maybe a little of southern Italy's warmth finds its way into Opera loudspeakers. After all, Enrico Caruso launched his career in Naples, which still has the most lively opera house in Italy. It's one of the few remaining houses whose patrons bring a little extra food—especially fruit—to throw at underperforming singers. I love it. The opera house in Florence is almost as rowdy.

Io rido il mio diavolo rido. I laugh my evil laugh.

Focus, Sam. Focus.

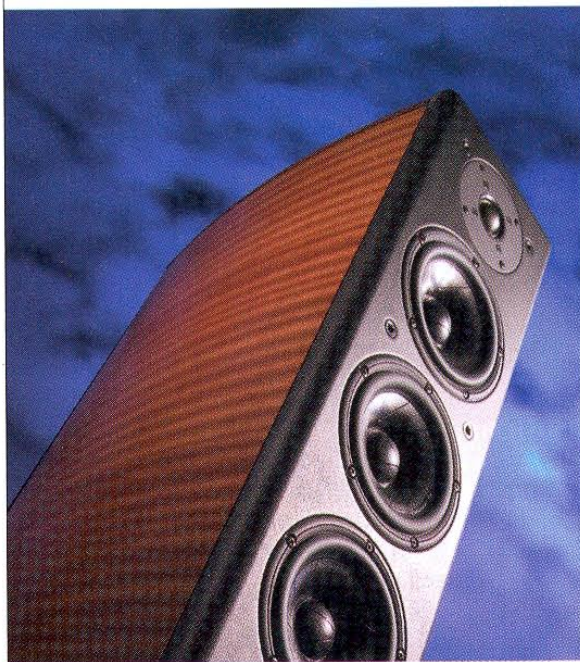
Thirty years ago there was no Italian hi-fi, but there were—and still are—plenty of Italian music lovers, eager to buy whatever the UK and the US exported their way. British and US companies still loom large in the Italian hi-fi market. Mention Wilson Audio Specialties. Martin Logan.

Conrad-Johnson. Italians love Conrad-Johnson. (I've been in enough Italian hi-fi shops to know.)

The word in Italian for *music lover* is *musicofilio*. I wish English had such a word. It's even nicer than the French *melomane*. The Italian word for *audiophile* is *audiofilio*.

Io sono musicofilio. Io non sono audiofilio.

Italy's home-grown hi-fi industry happened almost by accident. Flash back about three decades. A certain importer was bringing into Italy a line of loudspeakers made in Massachusetts. One



Opera Callas Divina. Six drivers (there's a second tweeter on the back), but the speaker acts as a two-way.

Gianni Nasta is from a village near Naples. Before he became one of Italy's loudspeaker manufacturers, he ran a disco. Before that he was a police officer, in a small town just outside the city of Treviso, in northern Italy, a stone's throw from Venice.

It's hard to imagine Gianni actually arresting anyone. But if he'd stuck with law enforcement, he would probably have been police chief by now, just like his father-in-law.

The north of Italy is okay for doing

speaker arrived damaged. What to do?

Easy, said the person who handled repairs for the importer. We'll salvage the drivers and crossovers and craft new cabinets.

Ecco! When the cabinets were made, the two gentlemen of Vicenza (that's where it happened) were amazed. They looked better than the US originals. They sounded better, too. (I wasn't there, but I heard this from a source who almost was.) In comic-book fashion, a light bulb went off.

We can make these!

Eventually, they did. They made something better—as witnessed by the fact that the Italian firm is still going strong, while the Massachusetts company was toast more than 20 years ago.

I don't mean to suggest that Italian loudspeakers are all about cabinets—although cabinets count for a lot. There's more involved, of course, including the ability to listen and, above all, the ability to voice a loudspeaker. Voicing is what Italian loudspeaker manufacturers do superbly well. I have yet to hear an Italian loudspeaker that doesn't sing, or that sounds sterile, dry, devoid of life.

To this day, most Italian loudspeaker manufacturers use drive-units made in Scandinavia. Some Italian loudspeaker designers talk, respectfully, of "the Northern European school." That's shorthand for ScanSpeak and Dynaudio.

Scandinavians excel at making loudspeaker drivers. Perhaps the French rival them—but no Italian loudspeaker manufacturer, so far as I know, imports a driver from France, any more than Italian restaurants import their wines from just across the border.

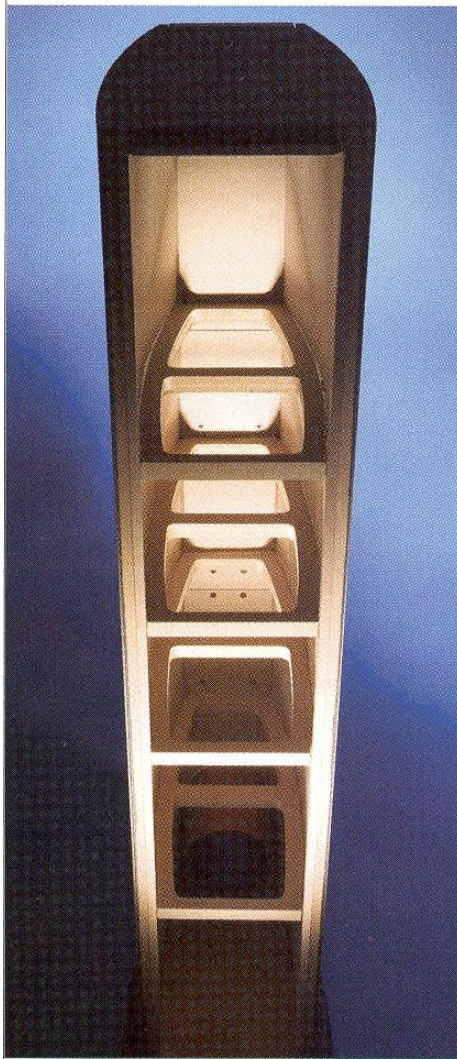
I love it. European disunion. *Io rido il mio diavolo rido.*

Opera Loudspeakers was launched accidentally, too. So many people get into the hi-fi industry by accident.

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Callas Divina cabinet is wider at the front than at the rear. Top and bottom endcaps are solid wood.

Nicholas Green, a Brit residing in Italy, was importing UK hi-fi into Italy and doing not too badly. But wait—what about going the other way and exporting Italian hi-fi to the UK? That's how UKD, Ltd. was formed: United Kingdom distribution. It's also part of how Opera Loudspeakers was formed. You need product, after all.

Giovanni Nasta was not looking forward to spending the rest of his life running a disco. And he was good with wood. Very good with wood.

We can make these!

The old Opera Loudspeaker factory, which I visited some years ago, looked more like a lumberyard than a speaker factory. Logs, logs everywhere—and from every part of the world. Giovanni Nasta himself did some of the cutting—I saw him at the saw. Here, I'll make you a pair of loudspeakers. And he did.

Over the past two decades or so Opera has released nearly two dozen models, including the Super Pavarotti.

(I wonder what Italy's health minister would say about Luciano's waistline.) Another favorite has been the stand-mounted Callas. This speaker is a favorite of mine—and of John Marks, too. I finally caught up with the Callas in the April 2004 *Stereophile*.

The Callas is a classic Italian monitor featuring high-quality Scandinavian drivers in a stunning solid-wood cabinet. Voiced to sing—it's not called the Callas for nothing—the speaker offers a superbly tactile soundstage.

But for some time, signor Nasta has wanted to capture the qualities of the Callas in a full-range floorstanding speaker.

Gianni Nasta is not an engineer. This seems like a good thing when it comes to building loudspeakers. Engineers already know the answers and there is no need to listen. If it's perfect on paper, it's perfect in practice. If you don't believe me, I'll wire your brain to some electrodes and you can take a double-blind test.

Enter Dr. Mario Bon (you met him last September), a physics researcher at the University of Padua, Italy's oldest university. It's about an hour from Venice to Padua by train—a worthwhile day trip.

Dr. Bon—a native Venetian who still lives there—specializes in superconductors. I mean atoms, electrons, and stuff, not Riccardo Muti or Claudio Abbado. Dr. Bon also loves music. And eating. Ask for his recommendations before you dine in Venice. I do. Italy's health minister may soon be after him.

Dr. Bon carries with him the most elegant, handwritten design notebooks I have ever seen, filled with exquisitely drawn diagrams and calculations. Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks should have been so neat. Signor Nasta listens. Dr. Bon designs. His first two designs for Opera are floorstanders: the Callas Divina, which I discuss here, and the smaller Callas Diva.

Dr. Bon's English is better than signor Nasta's, and I continue to struggle with Italian—so Dr. Bon explained the collaborative process. I can't quote verbatim. We were too busy with serious eating, and there was too much noise to take notes.

Signor Nasta has definite ideas about how Opera Loudspeakers should sound, Dr. Bon explained. Harmonics should fall into the proper register, of course. When vocals sound right, instruments do, too.

Signor Nasta has ideas about soundstaging, too. An exaggerated soundstage—too wide—leads to an unrealistic presentation of voices and instruments. A

singer's mouth seems two meters wide. Better to present—even confine—the soundstage between the two speakers than have it stretch beyond them. This leads to superior focus, more precise imaging, more truthful sound.

Depth, on the other hand, is *molto bene*—very good. So is soundstage image height—up to a point. By keeping the soundstage within bounds, as it were, the focus improves and you get more of a pinpoint image. Vocal or instrumental soloists are precisely located and intimately defined.

Big speakers, with plenty of bass extension, can have a way of sounding bloated, Dr. Bon suggested (or words to that effect). That's the downside. The upside is that big, full-range speakers can be exciting in ways that small speakers cannot. There is the weight, the authority that accompanies greater bottom-end extension. Music has more body, more heft, more dynamic impact. Macrodynamics—large-scale dynamic shifts—are presented more realistically.

Big full-range speakers usually pack a wallop—which can be particularly satisfying with large-scale orchestral works and with operas. Maximize Mahler, make

your Brahms more brawny. Charge Tchaikovsky, vivify Verdi, punch up Puccini. For all of this you need a speaker that has some testicular force. *La forza testicula?*

How to preserve the superior soundstaging and imaging of a small monitor? That's what signor Nasta wanted.

crossover point. Each bass/midrange driver below the top one is attenuated, via a low-pass filter, in order to fill out the bass a little more. The second woofer from the top rolls off above 1500Hz, the next above 800Hz, and the bottom one rolls off above 400Hz. The bottom

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Dr. Bon's solution is elegant. The way to retain the qualities of the original Callas was to keep the Divina and Diva two-way speakers. There is only one crossover—to the 1" fabric-dome tweeter at around 2kHz. Below the tweeter lies an array of four identical 6.5" bass/midrange drivers. (On the smaller Diva there are two of these.) There is no "midrange driver" as such, and no crossover from bass to midrange.

Starting at the top, the first bass/midrange driver runs up to the 2kHz

driver acts almost as a subwoofer.

"The ear hears only the top woofer," Dr. Bon told me last spring, when I heard a prototype of the Divina and when I could take notes. (In other words, when we weren't eating.) "Psychoacoustically, the speaker acts as a two-way."

Makes sense when you think about it. Only the top bass/midrange driver is powered full-range. The other three are progressively attenuated.

Signor Nasta described the ScanSpeak drivers as custom-made and very ex-

pensive. He shrugged. Never mind the knock-'em-dead cabinets—nearly half the build cost is in the drivers, which are made of pulp fiber with other stuff mixed in, like carbon fiber. A butyl rubber surround allows for a wide cone excursion—a claimed 2cm, in this case. This is necessary because the top driver must reproduce the midrange as well as the bass.

Notice the hand-cut radial lacerations applied to the cone at oblique angles. These are razor cuts designed to break up vibrational standing waves that emanate from the voice-coil to the rim. When a standing wave runs into the cuts, it breaks up. A polymer adhesive renders the cone material whole again—healing the wounds, so to speak.

The Callas Divina's sensitivity is rated at 89dB/W/m. Nominal impedance is given as 8 ohms, dropping to a minimum of 4 ohms at around 4kHz. Most single-ended triode amplifiers need not apply. Two SET amps that did work beautifully with the Divina were the Unison Research Performance integrated amplifier and the Cary 805C Anniversary monoblock. The Performance is made in the same factory as the Opera loud-

speakers. (Watch for "Tomo Secondo" next month devoted to the Unison Research Performance.)

Since I first heard a near-final prototype at the factory last spring, further design work has been done. Each Callas Divina now includes a rear-firing 1" neodymium dome tweeter covered by a protective wire mesh. (The front and rear tweeters are different.) Also on the back are three pairs of speaker terminals to allow for single, bi-, or triwiring. Your dealer can make a killing selling cables.

The front baffle of the speaker is padded in black leather, just like my cell. This is not just an Italian fashion statement. Soft leather helps to minimize backwaves bouncing off the baffle and leads to tidier sound.

Grilles are provided, but it almost seems a crime to leave them in place unless you need to protect against pets, cleaning people, and pests—by the latter I mean destructive children and greasy-fingered audiophiles who love nothing better than to poke drivers.

The Callas Divina is slim—each speaker measures 46.5" high by 7.9" wide by 18.9" deep. Italy's health minister would approve. A wooden platform sta-

bilizes the speaker and tilts it up at an angle of about 5°. Each Callas weighs 103 lbs—about what signor Sirchia would have Italian women weigh.

Cabinet build has much to do with the sound. The interior of the cabinet is described as a "drop shape," wider at the front than at the rear. All six drivers—the four woofers and two tweeters—reside in this single chamber. The original Callas was made of solid wood, but that's not so practical for a larger cabinet, especially one with curved sides. The Callas Divina's cabinet is made of an 8-layer multi laminate, veneered in your choice of: American Cherry, African Mahogany, and Durmast (European Oak).

The Callas Divina could have been crafted only in Italy. Giovanni Nasta is such a perfectionist that he bought his own furniture factory. The finish of the cabinet and its overall appearance are exquisite—downright mind-boggling, actually.

"Our pair is coming in European oak," Marina tells guests.

She'll have to wait until her *byirzzday* comes around. The spouse acceptance factor is likely to be 150%—this is one of the most beautiful hi-fi products ever

made. Marina's friend Natasha asked her husband, Mark, "Why don't we have speakers like this?"

Most people in North America will likely go for the cherry or the mahogany, said Richard Kohlruess of VMAX Services, Opera's US and Canadian importer, who knows customer preferences

IT ALMOST SEEMS A **SACRILEGE** TO USE SPEAKERS OF THIS **QUALITY** FOR HOME- THEATER CRASH, BANG, BOOM...

better than I do and who can attest, apparently, to US and Canadian tastes. The light-colored European oak, is especially stunning and would be my first choice, too. Go for the Durmast—at least look at it. The same wood is used in many wine barrels. Signor Nasta should know—he's big into wine.

Last spring, signor Nasta projected the price of the Divina at about \$8000/pair. Despite the current debasement of US currency, the price of the Divina now comes in at \$8995/pair.

The Callas Divina likes some power. It's not so much that it *needs* a lot of power, but it can make good use of it. A Musical Fidelity A5 integrated amp did superbly well, as did my Parasound JC-1 monoblocks. More powerful amps seem to get a better grip. If you don't want to go for the Unison Research Performance (\$9500), you might consider Unison's new Unico SE (140Wpc) or Unico 200 (220Wpc). Either of these integrateds should do the trick. Along with flea-watt favorites, you can probably forget low-powered solid-state integrateds. It would be a shame to spend nine Gs on a pair of speakers and be starved for power. (The Unico Performance integrated is rated at 45Wpc. But single-ended power is different.)

I had the original Callas stand-mounted monitors for nearly a year and know them well—I wish I'd kept them. The Callas Divina combined the delicacy and detail—and fantastic sound-tagging—of the Callas with extended bass, greater dynamic authority, and the ability to play loud. Of course, the Callas Divina extends the price, too: larger cabinet,

more drivers. The Divina's frequency response is given as 32Hz–30kHz.

But it's not just a matter of bass, it's an issue of weight. Shake the floor. It's almost as if the Callas Divina loves to be played loud, without protest, without congestion, without [*ahem*] constipation.

Dr. Bon is correct: The Callas Divina sounded like a two-way monitor. The ears—my two, anyway—hear mainly the top woofer, the only one that's fully powered. This is what I find most remarkable about the Divina: the bass does not compromise the clarity of the midrange and treble. When the music had little bass content, I could close my eyes and think I was listening to a small speaker, like the original Callas. When the music gathered force, so did the Divinas.

It almost seems a sacrilege to use speakers of this quality for home-theater crash, bang, boom—and with bass extension down to 32Hz, who needs a subwoofer? But put this on your plate of pasta, assuming you don't count carbs: If you enjoy quality cinema and good film scores, the speakers should be magnificent. What they do for the singing voice they can also do for movie dialog.

Opera is working on a center-channel speaker and a matching subwoofer. For the rear channels, they offer options including the smaller, floorstanding Callas Diva (\$5995/pair).

Like other great Italian loudspeakers, the Opera Callas Divina was open, airy, and detailed, but never sounded sterile or harmonically thin. There was a sweetness to the sound, especially noticeable on female voices. Maria Callas's voice never sounded better.

Gianni Nasta told me that his speakers are voiced to work well in actual listening rooms rather than in an anechoic chamber. As I recall, Harbeth, the esteemed British loudspeaker maker, prefers to deviate slightly from a ruler-flat frequency response in the models they produce for home use. Opera says that the frequency response is shaped partly according to loudness curves developed by Churcher, King, and Pollock in the 1930s. These are better for hi-fi listening than the more famous Fletcher-Munson curves, also developed in the 1930s. Makes you wonder if we've learned much of anything since then. The real magic probably lies more in the way that Gianni Nasta hears than in any loudness curve.

Sauzi. I must visit the exercise room at the Y. Otherwise, I risk being turned back by the health minister at Marco Polo Airport in Venezia. 