



Rosso Fiorentino Elba 2

Truth and Beauty

Robert Harley

Audio products

sometimes reflect the place of their creation, embodying in their look and sound the cultural and aesthetic values of a region. That's particularly true of the new Elba 2 from Rosso Fiorentino; this loudspeaker could not have been made anywhere but Italy. But Rosso Fiorentino isn't located just anywhere in Italy. The company is deeply rooted in Florence, the jewel of the country and the birthplace of the Renaissance. The Elba 2 exudes the elegance, reverence for beauty, and artisanal heritage that has animated Florentine life since the 15th century. Rosso Fiorentino's Florence-born founder, Francesco Rubenni, creates loudspeakers that reflect and honor that culture, something I discovered by living with the company's \$5000-per-pair Elba 2 reviewed here.

The Italian inspiration is apparent from the handsome matte-black cabinet flanked by beautiful walnut side panels, along with a baffle covered in textured black leather—very Italian. The elegant matte-black finish, called “silky matte black,” is a custom creation by Rosso Fiorentino. The speaker sits on an integral plinth that raises the cabinet bottom about 3" from the floor. The Elba 2 is the smallest and most affordable speaker in Rosso Fiorentino's six-speaker line, which extends to the ambitious \$100,000 Florentia.

The Elba 2 is two-and-a-half way floorstander employing dual 6.5" midrange/woofers mated to a 1" silk-dome tweeter. Sensitivity is a moderate 88dB, and the 6-ohm nominal impedance doesn't drop below 4 ohms. These specs suggest that the Elba 2 is a fairly easy load for an amplifier. Each woofer is reflex loaded out the rear panel through separate ports. The enclosure is formed from multi-layer panels of different materials for maximum damping and resonance control. To reduce internal standing waves and add a bit of visual elegance, the enclosure tapers slightly toward the rear. The Elba 2 is a significantly upgraded version of the original Elba, with new woofer/midrange drivers featuring fiberglass-coated cones, as well as a new motor structure. The aluminum ports have been redesigned to accommodate the new woofers' characteristics. An all-new crossover is built from custom-made capacitors (by Clari-



tyCap) along with custom inductors wound in Rosso Fiorentino's factory.

Instrumental to the Elba 2's design and that of all Rosso Fiorentino speakers is La Sala del Rosso (“the red room”), located in a historic castle just outside Florence. La Sala serves as the reference playback space for evaluating new speaker designs, and is also a frequently used performance and recording space. The large room's acoustic design and treatments are world-class. Jonathan Valin and I visited Rosso Fiorentino after the Munich show in 2016, a trip that included an afternoon at La Sala listening to Rosso Fiorentino's flagship speaker (see Jonathan's sidebar report).

Back in my listening room, I drove the Elba 2 with my reference electronics and sources, as well as with the NAD C658 streaming DAC (\$1645) and C298 power amplifier (\$1995) reviewed in the February issue. The speakers were positioned well

7 Great Speakers for Any Budget

Specs & Pricing

Type: Two-and-a-half way floorstanding loudspeaker

Driver complement: Two 6.5" mid/woofers, one 1" silk-dome tweeter

Frequency response: 40Hz–30kHz (-6dB at 35Hz, in-room)

Impedance: 6 ohms nominal, 4 ohms minimum

Sensitivity: 88dB

Recommended amplifier power: 30–150W

Cabinet finish: Walnut veneer, Rosso Fiorentino "silky matte black" coating, natural leather (custom finishes by special order)

Dimensions: 9.3" x 42.8" x 11.4"

Weight: 59.5 lbs. each (net)

Price: \$5000/pr.

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out into the room, about 9' from the rear wall. I plopped them down in the approximate locations where I thought they would sound the best, put on some music to get them warmed up before experimenting with placement, and immediately knew that the Elba was an exceptional loudspeaker. I heard a refinement and an unforced ease that foreshadowed what was to come.

After I fine-tuned placement and toe-in and installed the spikes, the Elba 2 revealed itself to be an utterly natural-sounding transducer that instantly engaged my head and heart. When I evaluate products under review, my first inclination is usually to analyze the product's sonic character and begin to catalog its strengths and weaknesses. After all, it's the reviewer's job to describe in detail exactly how the product sounds. Leaving the critical-listening mode and shifting to pleasure listening comes later. But the Elba 2 led me in a very different direction, one of engaging with the musical expression, of experiencing music rather than hearing sound. I quickly abandoned my Roon playlist of evaluation tracks in favor of a session of pure musical exploration and enjoyment. Despite the Elba 2's entry-level status in the Rosso Fiorentino line, the speaker had a refined sophistication, elegance, sense of presence, and ability to convey music-making that was more in line with the best speakers in the \$15,000-per-pair price range.

The first, and most important, quality that set the Elba 2 apart was its combination of relaxed ease and smoothness, on the one hand, and its very high resolution, on the other. This may sound like a contradiction, but the Elba 2's resolution comes not from hyped transients, a forward treble, or a bit of added etch, but rather from revealing, with tremendous beauty and grace, the

inner harmonic structure that gives instruments their density of tone color and thus realism. The Elba 2's resolution was of the musical, rather than sonic, variety. This speaker beautifully portrayed music's very fine timbral structure, revealing a warmth and richness to instruments and voices that sounded closer to the real thing than any \$5k speaker has a right to. The baroque instruments of the Finish new-music group Ensemble Ambrosius, performing arrangements of Zappa compositions on *The Zappa Album*, had a natural liquidity and authenticity, with the Elba 2 conveying how the instruments were being played. String instruments weren't overlaid with a metallic patina that causes my ears to "tighten up." The Elba 2 may sound a little dark through the midrange compared to similarly priced competitors, but in my view this tonal balance is much closer to the sound of live music than the threadbare timbres and bleached tone colors that so often passes for "clarity" and "resolution." As a result, I never felt assaulted by the Elba 2. Rather, it put me at ease and invited me into the music in a way that even some far more expensive speakers fail to do.

Despite its warmth and richness, the Elba 2 was the antithesis of thick, congested, or closed-in. In fact, the presentation had tremendous clarity and transparency. The Elba 2 had an uncanny ability to differentiate each instrument in timbre and spatiality, in a way that made music that much more engaging. It was easy to follow individual lines, shifting my attention from one instrument to another. Concomitantly, the Elba 2's soundstaging abilities were nothing short of spectacular. I was able to position the speakers much farther apart than expected, without compromising tight focus on centrally placed instruments and voices. This made the soundstage wider than you'd think possible. The depth was equally impressive, not just in how far back the stage seemed to extend, but also in the way the Elba 2 revealed that little bloom of air and space around images, furthering the impression of real instruments playing in an acoustic space. This three-dimensional quality was particularly apparent on recordings made in a hall or live-in-the-studio. On bluesman Jimmy Rogers' *Blue Bird* (winner of the W.C. Handy award, by the way) the Elba 2 brought to vivid life the impression of a group of musicians playing live in the studio together, and with that sonic impression came a greater sense of hearing spontaneous music-making. The clarity of the spatial presentation, with the tight image focus, layers upon layers of depth, and overall sense of size were remarkable for a speaker of any price, never mind one that costs \$5000.

The low end had satisfying weight, extension, and transient fidelity. Stanley Clarke's bass on the acoustic trio album *The Rite of Strings* with Al DiMeola and Jean-Luc Ponty was superbly articulated in pitch and dynamics, a quality that was particularly apparent in the unison phrases with the guitar and violin. There was just a hint of excessive warmth, at least with the placement I chose. Moving the speakers closer together and away from the sidewalls made the bass leaner and tighter, at the expense of the ultra-wide soundstage I just described. Nonetheless, the bass was

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7 Great Speakers for Any Budget

very well balanced and satisfying.

The treble was smooth and well-integrated, with just a hint of added sibilance on vocals that was only occasionally apparent. The Elba 2's soft-dome tweeter was more relaxed sounding than most hard-dome tweeters I've heard. The top octave (10kHz is a much higher frequency than most people think) was not quite as airy as some other speakers, but that was a small price to pay for the utter smoothness and liquidity of the treble. At the same time, the upper octaves were very nicely textured and detailed. During Teddy Wilson's beautiful and spare piano solo on "Harpo's Blues" from Phoebe Snow's debut album (Analogue Productions, 45rpm), the drummer *very* gently strikes his crash cymbal a few times, allowing it to fully decay into silence each time. The Elba 2 reproduced the cymbal with great subtlety, resolving the instrument's very fine structure all the way down as it shimmered into blackness.

Another quality of the Elba 2 that puts its performance in the league of more expensive products was the speaker's low "self-noise," a term that describes a sense of blackness to the soundstage from which instruments and voices emerge. This silence between notes is usually the result of heroic cabinet construction and well-damped drivers, characteristics of much more expensive speakers. The musical effect is greater realism and presence, something I appreciated on the perfect music for the Elba 2, the stunning-sounding LP *Vivaldi in Venice* from Chasing the Dragon, performed live by Interpreti Veneziani in the beautiful, rich acoustics of the San Vidal Church in Venice. The reverberation decayed into the acoustic's air and space rather than into a greyish haze

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Conclusion

The Rosso Fiorentino Elba 2 isn't a great loudspeaker for the money. It's a great loudspeaker, period. It possesses virtues of speakers costing far more, most notably the realistic reproduction of instrumental timbre that combines ease, warmth, and harmonic richness with palpability, resolution, and musical vividness—a trick that few speakers of any price get right. This is a speaker that doesn't sound like a hi-fi component. Rather, it expresses the beauty of music in a way that defies expectations at the price.

The Elba 2 is the kind of speaker that will benefit from high-quality sources, amplification, cabling, and AC conditioning. Even if your speaker budget is up to \$15k, you should audition the Elba 2. You may be pleasantly surprised at how much performance you get for \$5k, not to mention having \$10k left for upgrading your associated equipment.

Owning the Elba 2 is like bringing into your living room a taste of the classical elegance and passion for beauty that Florence exemplifies. You may even find yourself exclaiming, "*Bellissima!*"



Building crossovers in the Rosso Fiorentino factory.

Francesco Rubenni with two of his creations.



TAS Visits Rosso Fiorentino

Jonathan Valin

On more than one occasion before he passed away, my mentor Harry Pearson voiced the fear that today's computer-based loudspeaker and electronics designers were in peril of losing touch with the sound of the real thing, and that high-end audio was, in turn, in peril of losing its indispensable connection to the sound of acoustic instruments. Francesco Rubenni, the 46-year-old guiding light behind the Italian high-end loudspeaker company Rosso Fiorentino, is one of those immensely likable, passionately dedicated, and highly talented young men who remind you that not all audio engineers have lost their bearings when it comes to the absolute sound—that, at bottom and at best, this business is about more than making money. It is about pursuing the ideal of highest fidelity to the sound and expressiveness of real instruments in a real space.

That Francesco pursues this goal with inborn Italian style is to be expected; he is, after all, a native of Florence, who named his company after one of that city's most famous Renaissance Mannerist painters, Rosso Fiorentino (Giovanni Battista di Jacopo, known as the "Red-Headed Florentine"), and whose listening studio, La Sala del Rosso, is located in Bisarno's Castle, a beautiful walled villa on the outskirts of Florence. From the lush gardens outside the building to the historic architectural and decorative details inside, right down to the arched-wood acoustic treatments in La Sala, it's hard to imagine a more idyllic setting for enjoying music.

Given that Francesco is a trained musician (a percussionist), who studied harmony and composition in Florence before taking a degree in electroacoustical engineering at the University of Salford (the Royal College of Advanced Technology) in Manchester, England, it is also unsurprising that Rubenni (in concert with Florence's Head of Culture and other Florentine musical luminaries) regularly hosts evening recitals by distinguished jazz, acoustic rock, and classical musicians in La Sala del Rosso. Indeed, Francesco's beautiful (and exquisitely designed and treated) "red room" is as much a performance and recording space as it is a high-end-audio listening spot—an area expressly designed for making music as well as reproducing it.

After spending five years in Manchester studying transducers, acoustics, and psychoacoustics, Francesco designed high-efficiency horn loudspeakers for the company GEA before founding Rosso Fiorentino in Firenze in 2006, in cooperation with the ultra-sophisticated Florence-based loudspeaker company B&C Speakers (which supplies drivers and complete speakers for fully one-quarter of the world's pro-audio market). At Rosso, Francesco's goal was to synthesize the sound of the Italian electroacoustical school (e.g., Sonus faber) with that of the English school (e.g., KEF, Spendor, B&W), while also incorporating the dynamic range and sheer SPLs of the horn speakers that are Rubenni's first loves.

That Francesco has succeeded in his goals was apparent on listening to his flagship five-way, three-box Florentia loudspeakers in La Sala del Rosso on a visit to Florence. Weighing nearly 400 pounds each and priced around \$100,000 the pair, these stately transducers appear, at first, to be examples of form following function. But as be-

fits a manufacturer who handcrafts in Italy, high style also comes into play with several paint and custom-leather finish options.

If there were one other high-end loudspeaker that the Florentia reminded me of it would be Carl Marchisotto's Nola Concert Grand References, in that the Florentia combines a sealed-box bass section (with powered 12" B&C woofers) on its bottom, with a separately housed, open-baffle, dipole MTM array (CS Millennium midrange, Scan-Speak ring-radiator tweeter, and ribbon supertweeter) on its mid-level, and a sealed-box upper-bass unit (with a 10" B&C driver) on top of its gorgeously finished, slightly tapering stack. Each of the three enclosures is made of the combination of materials—HDF, aluminum, glass, rubber, and marble microchips—most appropriate to the resonance-free reproduction of its segment of the frequency spectrum.

Point-to-point wired with high-purity silver wire and the finest Mundorf caps, coils, and resistors (as well as proprietary Rosso Fiorentino parts), the Florentia has the rich tone color and vast soundstage of Marchisotto's flagship speakers. More importantly, it has the beguiling musicality of the Nolas. There was a reason why HP used Nolas as his references through most of the last two decades of his life. They sounded (and sound) like music. So, equally, do the Rosso Fiorentinos. Their dark, rich timbre was exceptionally pleasing on everything from Holly Cole and Leonard Cohen to Holst's *The Planets*, as was their superb imaging, excellent transient speed, large soundstage, and powerful, well-defined bass (down to below 40Hz). A psychoacoustician as well as an audio engineer, Rubenni has designed a slight Gundry dip into the Florentia (*à la* the aforementioned British School loudspeakers), which makes them anything but aggressive in the upper mids and lower treble.

While the pricey Florentias are (currently) Francesco's most ambitious efforts, the Rosso line—which is subdivided into the Flagship, Reference, Prestige, and Classic Series—comprises a large selection of more affordable options. Particularly attractive, sonically, aesthetically, and commercially, is the new Elba Series 2 that Robert just reviewed. But then I've not heard a Rosso speaker—from the Florentia through the Siena through the Volterra to the Elba—that hasn't sounded beautiful and powerful.

A visit to the little workshop in Florence where Rosso's speakers are constructed helps to show why. All the drivers are hand-selected for their respective duties. All the boxes are hand-built and artfully damped and finished. All the wiring, soldering, and assembly is done manually by expert Florentine technicians. At Rosso Fiorentino, Old World craftsmanship is put in the service of advanced scientific techniques (including computer-assisted modeling), and both are put in the service of musical expressiveness by a designer who is as much a practicing musician as he is an audio engineer and psychoacoustician. If this isn't a formula for high-end excellence, I'm not sure what would be. **tas**



A musical performance at La Sala Del Rosso.