

This review first appeared in the February 2013 issue of [hi-end hifi magazine fairaudio.de](http://hi-end-hifi-magazine.fairaudio.de) of Germany. You can also read this [review of Mastersound](#) in its original German version. We publish its English translation in a mutual syndication arrangement with the publishers. As is customary for our own reviews, the writer's signature at review's end shows an e-mail address should you have questions or wish to send feedback. All images contained in this review are the property of fairaudio or Mastersound - Ed.

Reviewer: Ralph Werner

Sources: VPI Scout II with SME M2 12-inch and VPI JMW 9T arms, Denon DL-103, Ortofon MC Rondo Bronze and Zu Audio DL-103 pickups; SAC Gamma Sym phonostage; Luxman D-05 SACD player; Logitech Touch, Readynas Duo NAS-Server, HP Notebook and M2Tech Hiface, Benchmark DAC1 USB
Amplification: Octave HP300 with MC phono preamp, Electrocompaniet AW180 amplifier, Denon PMA-2010AE integrated

Loudspeakers: Dynamikks Monitor 8.12, Thiel SCS4

Sundry accessories, cables and racks

Review component retail: Starting at €1.950



From biggest to smallest. Where our last encounter with Mastersound had dealt with their top Evolution 845 model whose 53kg to this day top the scales for any integrated amplifier, today's North Italian affair is their entry-level offering. Christened Dueundici, it costs one fifth of the Evolution, weighs three-and-a-half times less and, nomen est omen, puts out a solid 2 x 11 watts.

That's not opulent power but one EL 34 per channel simply isn't capable of more. The Dueundici is a class A single-ended power amp sans global feedback. Clearly the Italians here were after maximal sonics rather than maximus power.



And fine by me I might add. My [Dynamikks Monitor 8.12](#) are an honest 93dB/W/m and their impedance doesn't undercut 6 ohms (at around 150Hz). This was definitely worth a try. Boxes barely north of 80dB won't be any fun particularly in bigger rooms and under higher levels of course. The correct match of speakers and amp becomes paramount whenever a mere fistful of watts are on hand.

Visually Mastersound's Duendici cuts an impressive figure – big enough to garner respect, small enough to remain charming. Not only its design but also manufacture take place in Vicenza northwest of Venice. This shows. Cosmetics, proportions and fit'n'finish don't leave much to be desired. Needless to say the comparatively higher European labor costs reflect as well. The same coin achieves higher weight, flashier trim and more opulent power with competitors like Audreal's V30, Vincent's SV-236, Opera Audio's Consonance M100+ and Magnat's RV1. It'll simply won't bother those who are fine with 11 watts and three high-level inputs to primarily judge this machine on sonics. As do we here at fairaudio too...

To not coddle our two-times-eleven sonic maestro, I decided to wait on my efficient Dynamikks and first leash up a less compadre two-way mini by way of Thiel's SCS4. That's not really a true current guzzler either but mating a compact monitor to a low-power valve amp doesn't tend to be wisdom's first choice after all. But sometimes wisdom is a wash. This match came off rather well. The Thiel is averse to electronics which are harder, crisper and

overly present since its own highly accurate core flavor then likes to flip into the rigid and unpleasant. Here the Dueundici became the veritable antidote. The small Italian injected an extra dose of charm into the equally small American which particularly in the mid and treble regions acted like balm without causing tonal-balance shifts. Yum.

Of course I couldn't fail to suspect that more abstinent colleagues might translate 'charm' as 'total harmonic distortion'. I had to admit that Boys' Valeska Steiner did sound prettier than usual but hey, why else would one get it on with a low-power SET in the first place? On the other side of 12:00 on the dial even the most generous inspector wouldn't invoke charm any longer but cry obvious distortion. Two handfuls of watts simply hit their limits at high levels. With the Thiel one doesn't miss too much since the speaker itself hits its own limits a bit later. You want mo louda, get ye a Dynamikks Monitor 8.12!



Though on paper endowed with 'only' 6dB more sensitivity, the difference in achievable loudness was most notable. Only out of curiosity and not really because I meant to listen that loudly, I again pushed the volume control past high noon and even now distortion set in eventually. Granted, now that was accompanied by SPLs I'd not consider healthy over the long haul. Unlike with the Thiel, this ceiling simply far from coincided with the

Dynamikk's own. The Dueundici isn't merely limited on max loudness, the same holds true for dynamic certainty.

For context let me state that I abused the amp with a 30m² space of high ceilings and for purely porcine badness had cued up the electronica band Pivot whose gnarly synth exploits can bring even 10 times more potent amps to their knees. It really wasn't a sandbox to have an 11-watt valver blossom for joy. So let's leave excess and listen more *carefully*.

Tonally the Mastersound played it balanced with a tendency for the warmer. If you wanted to tag on 'valve typical' I'd not fight you but would simply add that I've heard dozens of transistor amps with similar leanings, say our team's workhorse Denon PMA-2010AE. In the midband the Dueundici was only mildly warmer than the Japanese. This was clear early on with Lisbeth Scott's vocals from *Charmed*, a 24/96 classical audiophile download, read good-sounding but boring. The Japanese was a tad more open on high, the Italian a tick fuller.

Par for the same course was bass which didn't track into the abyss hard as nails. Sub bass attenuated poco a poco whilst loosening its grip as well. But what lacked in the first octave was made up for in the upper bass/lower midrange transition. Hence the impression of warmth and good overall balance. It's a quite common trick but properly pulled off still effective. The two extra fingers of girth here didn't obscure musically vital detail but created the overall tonal impression. Here that's in fact the core task of the bass range. Anyone after maximal shove and attack will logically look elsewhere.

Mated to a speaker with a properly developed foundation, the small Mastersound renders acoustic instruments like double bass, big drums, concert piano and such natural and well timed, neither truly dry nor shoddily loose. And a bit of fine-tuning is available with the transformer output tabs. The 4-ohm option was a bit tauter but also more subdued whilst the 8-ohm terminal was juicier and also softer and looser. Depending on the music one or the other terminal was the more convincing.

The opposite end of the scale acted slightly defensive. Here the Mastersound played it more subdued than the Denon, albeit more resolved at that. Glockenspiel and cymbals felt true and physical and decays lingered long and nicely teased out where the Japanese transistors were more silvery, flatter, less feathered out and in the final analysis less true.



On the flip side of the same equation, brassy over the Denon acquired a tad more cutting power, be it Miles Davis' trumpet or Anders Paulsson's soprano sax. Here the Mastersound focused on substance and warmth. The small Italian handled the upper registers with sensibility but care. In the same vein the most sharply honed transients weren't its thing either. This didn't mean sleepiness but a bit more bite on a hard piano attack, a snare or plucked guitar string wouldn't go amiss. In this price class that's simply routinely accompanied by less overall resolution and disconcerting hardness. The Dueundici handled the treble with subtlety and long-term comfort rather than crispness.

The best part were the mids. Here one may rightfully invoke 'positively valves' and not merely because of the aforementioned minor tendency for warmth. Two further virtues factored into this equation which, poetry alert, might be called fluidity and plasticity. The former is a bit difficult to nail. Have you ever experimented with a super tweeter? Mostly it won't translate into sounding brighter or more extended on high. Rather it's in the spatial dimension where it weighs in as a kind of elasticity which envelopes the midband and refashions former dryness and excess outline sharpness into something milder but more natural.



Many feel similarly about a good analog front-end versus a lesser digital equivalent. Aside from response differences and mechanical noises, vinyl tends to be more nubile and fluid from the midband on up which isn't solely the outcome of greater tonal warmth. And here the small Italian was similar. Exactly why it sounded so darn fluid—whether it had anything to do with my super tweeter parallel or the analog/vinyl detour—I'm not sure. All I know is that it acted as an antidote to the dry porosity of other amps in this price range. Be it the vague 'valve magic' reason or class A single-ended circuitry, there was no doubt that it played more fluidly to make even more critical albums more palatable.

Perhaps the currency this was paid for was some midrange resolution but the upshot was, it *still* sounded natural and clearly bypassed any risk of going on the nerves. With Fiona Apple's *Tidal* I became aware of how competing amps might have dug deeper on detail but routinely at the price of pushing the very close-up song into something betraying effort. The Dueundici remained loose and relaxed even though (or because) it didn't apply the same acoustic zoom. It simply felt real. This was assisted by the aforementioned plasticity as the sense of 3-dimensional embodiment of voices and instruments. Here the comparison to the Denon became interesting again. Though the Denon cast individual images that were even bigger, they were also more compacted and less developed in the depth domain. Dipping into the full with grand orchestral or hard Rock/electonica, the Japanese transistors maintained better on-stage order and sorting during the densest of interludes.



On smaller-scale stuff however where the Mastersound was in its element—standard Pop, more intimate Jazz or singer/songwriter fare—it had the edge on staging. Not only did individual sounds become more tacit but the general overview of the stage (true in general but particularly in the depth direction) was less crammed as though the stage actors had more space to breathe between each other.

Conclusion. Two times 11 watts go farther than you'd think if one adheres to certain preconditions. You'll own more sensitive speakers, your listening room won't double up as gymnasium and max level and macrodynamic fortitude won't feature on top of your wish list. The Mastersound Dueundici pleases with a warmish timbre, exceptional fluidity, a long-term non-fatiguing well resolved treble and a very embodied spatially involving presentation. If on top of it all you'll admire an attractive packaging without bling but flawless workmanship, you better plan an audition with your nearby Mastersound dealer.

Psych profile:

- Mastersound's Dueundici plays it tonally balanced with a hint of warmth. This mixture consists of a slightly fleshy upper bass/lower midband combined with minorly soft top registers.
- In the low bass this 11-watt valver relinquishes power and articulation. On quality the bass is semi-sec, hence the ideal loudspeaker won't have to rely on undue control. That accounted for, the small Italian particularly with acoustic instruments cuts a very believable figure.
- The treble isn't ultimately resolved to feel slightly mild. Even so the upper octaves are nicely elucidated and filled with detail which in this price class is often less accurately teased out.
- The sonorous midband exhibits a very attractive slightly silky quality and great fluidity which benefits less than perfect recordings. The Mastersound thus is somewhat of a charmer.
- Microdynamics are good, macrodynamics and achievable SPL are limited by design.

- Soundstaging has realistic scale and individual stage actors exhibit good body. Friends of beautiful voices have much to admire.

Facts:

- Concept: Tube integrated
- Dimensions and weight: 40.5 x 29.5 x 20cm WxDxH, 15kg
- Trim: Black chassis with Walnut cheeks, high-gloss option for the latter €150 extra
- I/o ports: 3 inputs, 4/8-ohm terminals
- Power consumption: ca. 77 watts at idle, no standby
- Warranty: 2 years