

Lautsprecher und Vollverstärker

Ensemble Ondiva Silver und Massimo Fuoco

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Remembering, dreaming and forgetting

If this were my last contribution on audio playback equipment, I could lean back with satisfaction because I would have found a perfect ending. But I still owe you a beginning and a middle.

Special hi-fi, especially high-end, has a lot to do with dreams. The dreams of an individual, how music reproduction could be realized with technical devices. And the dreams of a listener, how his music should sound. In a small green booklet of the Auditorium 23 distributor it was once said: "The desire to hold on to something once experienced, in order to be able to experience it again and again, has something excessive about it." Perhaps it would be better to let go of our memories of what we once experienced. In this way, they could become dreams that we best forget again, similar to a wish, so that their essence is preserved and eventually flows into a new reality.

I lived in Berlin from 1994 to 1998 and quickly became a regular customer at 'Schall-druck', the hifi store of which Cai Brockmann was a part. One day he tried to make new Tannoy Canterbury loudspeakers sing. A Marantz SB power amplifier, which seemed perfect for the job, was not up to the task. But then he plugged in the 'Evocco', a handsome compact integrated amplifier from the Swiss company Ensemble. I put Emmylou Harris' masterpiece (Elektra 61854-2, USA 1995, CD) into the Linn Karin player, clicked myself forward to 'Deeper Well' and could hardly believe what the little Swiss made happen with the big box from England: the music began to float, dance and groove - it was a kind of epiphany that the 'Evocco' produced. That's why I put that very CD back in now and realize - it was really the Evocco that fed my sound memory, not the Canterbury. Because his grandson named Massimo Fuoco is now playing in my home at a similarly great musical level together with the Ondiva loudspeakers. The Ondiva may seem like satellites compared to the big Canterbury, but they can carry you weightlessly up to the moon. The man who dreamed Ensemble into the audio world is Urs Wagner, and actually deserves an even greater tribute than I can give him here.

From his German distributor ATR I received, in addition to the integrated amplifier and speakers with matching stands, two different power cables and a speaker cable. The cables are made of copper of the greatest possible purity, which Urs Wagner purchases himself in order to get his cables manufactured from it. The more complex 'Dalvivo' cable is constructed with seven approximately 2 mm thick conductors in a helical arrangement. Each conductor is individually shielded, plus three additional shields. Electrically, the cables are uncritical and deliberately designed to be compatible with every conceivable component. The 6 mm bananas, silver plated for maximum conductivity, and making a tight contact, can be adapted to 4 mm sockets by means of adapters, but they were not included in the package. But that doesn't really matter. Regardless of the qualities each Ensemble product has on its own – I also tried everything separately except for the speaker cables - I am convinced that when playing together the Ensemble members take it to another, higher level. In the course of a very enjoyable exchange with Urs Wagner, I understood how he coordinates every detail of his products to live up to his company name 'Ensemble'. So one should at least keep the system idea in mind. I was not able to develop the slightest interest in Wagner to divulge more manufacturing and material secrets than he was willing to divulge. This does not matter, because even if you knew every detail, it would be impossible to achieve the same result as he does.

Incidentally, with Urs Wagner's almost infinite creative will, one might assume that something like a cerebral sound would emerge in the end. The exact opposite is the case, one experiences an infinitely free, unrestrained reproduction. The man does not appear obsessively single-minded, he simply knows exactly where to go and what it takes to achieve it. Urs Wagner truly loves music above everything else, and during his studies of linguistic phonetics in London, took every opportunity to experience the great conductors of the 20th century live. It is in the seats behind the orchestra in the Royal Festival Hall that his sense of spatial relationships and inner guidance seem to have been condensed into his music-making machines. Back in Switzerland, he wanted to make these experiences accessible to others and founded Ensemble in 1986. At a hifi exhibition he met Harry Pawel, whose compact prototype speakers had "potential", as Wagner says with a smile. So they got together and thanks to a great review by Dick Olsher about the Ensemble PA-I & Reference models in Stereophile magazine, the product made the leap across the Atlantic in the 90s and later mainly to Asia. But in the course of the collaboration Wagner developed more far-reaching ideas and so the cooperation with Harry Pawel came to an end. Wagner says about this: "There was a precisely defined, project-related cooperation with Pawel, outside of which his company and ours always moved independently of each other. Our relationship gradually wound up between 2006 and 2007. One reason for this was the end of production of the Podzus/Görlich drivers and the KEF passive radiators. With the end of more than 20 years of production, the desire for new shapes and new design approaches came to a fork in the road. There was the sonic-acoustic challenge to go beyond the established qualities: bass reproduction, dynamic range, the greatest possible freedom from resonance, 3-D like reproduction recreating live music-making."

Ensemble, whose guiding principle is "consistency at all levels", has always been solely owned by Urs Wagner and his wife.

The Massimo Fuoco is the provisional end point of the Ensemble integrated amplifier and heir to the Evocco. To report on it in detail would fill a book. In fact, the company that builds it, has a 100-page manual of instructions for it. You read that right: One hundred pages. And as Wagner remarks, all the parts are exclusively supplied from Ensemble.

Already at the very first glance the Massimo Fuoco shows that it is more than ordinary. The multi-part housing, the many elegant ventilation slots in Ensemble logo design on the hood of the chassis, the RCA jacks and speaker terminals designed by Ensemble or the precision-turned knobs alone speak volumes. Inside, everything is elaborately decoupled from one another and damped. The triple-shielded transformer is wound with expensive laminate, as used for noble audio signal transformers. Like the entire amplifier, it is dead silent.

I would like to pick out two points to shed light on Urs Wagner's way of working. After very extensive research, he realized that he didn't want to use cheap standard resin circuit boards. He uses a much more expensive, but dielectrically far superior material, the composition of which he does not reveal. Of course, he won't go along with the usual soldering process, in which solder is poured over the circuit boards in a wave bath and, thanks to a solder-resist varnish, only sticks where it is supposed to. In Urs Wagner's world, soldering is done by hand, with pinpoint accuracy, many hundreds of times per board. He says that with so many carefully placed soldering points a different musical flow emerges. He has a point there!

In addition, custom-made internal wiring and custom-made capacitors are in places where they make a difference to the sound. For all signal-carrying contacts, including those of the plugs, the copper (Ensemble uses copper, not brass) is first silver-plated and then hard gold-plated, at Swiss prices, mind you, like everything else.

Wagner has always maintained the hybrid tube/transistor concept, apart from that there is not much left of the original Evocco. As input tubes he uses Brimar ECC81 double triodes in best old quality. The choice of output transistors may come as a surprise, since they are classic, metal-encapsulated, bipolar TO3 transistors. According to Wagner, they sound more balanced and natural than the MOSFETS he has tried - and for him, in his way as I met him, that was it once for all.

The Ondiva speakers only share the fantastic sound with their ancestors. Uwe Kirbach had the pleasure of listening to two older Ensemble models for years and says of the Ondiva: "Wagner has already reached the goal once. That he has now achieved it again with completely different means, is simply phenomenal." And this result bears witness to his crystal-clear inner guidance, the dream that he makes into a reality. He brings in expertise where needed, for example in the digital field, but is responsible for all decisions alone. The shape of the Ondiva, which is also a homage to the sculptures of the great Henry Moore, was designed going through countless experiments and simulations. The cabinet is made of seven different materials, hard and soft alternately. The cabinet is additionally damped on the inside with a special foam. The elaborate crossover separates with 12 dB at 1800 Hz. It consists of two parts to better counteract the return currents. You won't be surprised when I tell you that the crossover components are mounted by means of a damping material, and that the special board of superior dielectric quality rests again on a decoupled aluminium plate, interleaved by a layer of damping foil.

Of course, both drivers are special custom-made units. The cone of the bass-midrange driver has a micro-aluminium coating, vapour-deposited in a vacuum. Partial vibrations are practically zero, which you can hear by way of the speaker's extreme lack of distortion. The dust cap has a thin coating of pure gold, because that simply sounds best, it's as simple as that. The 'ARC' speaker stands are optional, but ultimately indispensable. According to Wagner's experience, to get the "unleashed energy" of the transducer under control, it can only be done by a kind of spring action. Although the Ondiva is acoustically almost dead, it nevertheless remains a "prisoner of resonance". The ingenious speaker stands (registered design), redirect the residual energy through their spring-loaded design.

Physical limitations must exist in a compact 2-way loudspeaker, but they are so slight here that they simply don't matter to me in my listening habits. With the Ondiva Silver, you can listen to music so loudly, so undistorted, so full-bodied, that only low bass fanatics might miss something.

Speaking of listening. If a device is just playing there or thereabouts, it's hard for me to say anything about it. I then search for music, feel my way forward and gradually find indications to evaluate it. But here with the Ensemble components? They find the music forme, I simply can't listen fast enough. First I put in Pat Metheny's *What's it all about* (Nonesuch 4931741, EU 2011, EU 2011, CD). But what is going on? Is the CD running slower? No, but the accentuation is different, the harmonics on "Cherish" rise like glow-worms, like individual creatures, each deserving separate attention.

That's exactly the point where this subjective slowing-down plays a role; it allows me to pay the necessary attention to the finest nuances. Such shifts in perception are reported by people who have been shot at. How time seems to expand, the bullet coming at them as if in slow motion, and only through this were they able to dodge and survive. I consider culture, audio culture in this case, as food, or even more as a means of survival, because it has saved my life again and again, and often made it easier. Magic components make this possible. But please don't confuse this with slowed-down dynamics, because the next moment there's a lightning fast impulse that can frighten you. In addition, there is an almost unbelievable richness of colour and detail that always seems completely integrated. On "Pipeline", Metheny strikes all the strings at once at the beginning of the piece. And then follows a knock on the body of the guitar, which previously seemed to be a dry 'tack, tack' and now presents itself as a soft and then a somewhat harder knock, not with the edge of the hand, but rather with the ankle and ball of the foot.

Once again, a book could be filled with my musical experiences. Miroslav Tadic, Can, and Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli shake hands with each other, almost breathlessly following each other, as my time with this ensemble is unfortunately limited. Andy Bey sings 'River Manu' in *Tuesdays in Chinatown* (2K Encoder Music NKEC4223.2, USA 2001, CD) in such an intimate, present and personal way that only the Boenicke W5 SE+ speakers have been able to convey to me in a similar way. In her first recording of the Beethoven Violin Concerto under Karajan (DG 2531 250, Germany 1980, LP) Anne-Sophie Mutter reveals the subtlest nuances and refinements of her playing. So beautiful, so delicate and still a little raw, the silvery lustre of

her violin shines in a space you can walk about, as if in a 3-D concert. I can also follow Peter Serkin's nimble playing in the last movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 14 (Sony 19075879582, EU 1973, 6 CDs) with ease, right down to the most subtle nuances, before the abrupt orchestral tutti tear me out of my meditation. Have I already mentioned Handel's *Ariodante* (Archiv Produktion. 457271-2, Germany 1997, 3-CD) ? A feast of almost tangible singing, Anne-Sofie von Otter at the centre, with strings swelling on and off behind her as light as a feather. This is uplifting music in the truest sense of the word, and I can follow it up without any hesitation with Trentemoller's *The Last Resort* (audiomatique MICD02, EU 2007, 2-CD) with its elastic electronic beats.

All this is possible thanks to this 'Ensemble', which is not even complete, since the sources, interconnect cables, equipment platforms, power distribution unit and isolation transformers are "missing". But even this 'small ensemble' conveys the essence of Wagner's dream. And so that I won't forget what I may dream of from now on, I play *Winter Moon* by Art Pepper (Galaxy GXY-5140, USA 1981, LP). Pepper's late alto saxophone appears in front of my ears as if out of a dense fog, the strings rise delicately like cloud droplets, I feel the beauty, the pain and the infinity in his music and feel as connected to it as one can ever be.

Maybe Urs Wagner has delivered his masterpieces with these components, maybe he'll put another crown on it again. I can't imagine it. Because what these team players can do is magical and, in my view, cannot be improved upon. It may seem strange or even provocative to you when I claim that Ensemble makes exceptionally inexpensive hifi components. But I hope that my story has communicated how much effort, time, love and sonic prowess are contained in them, in order to offer an audiophile haven to all those on the lookout. It is important for Urs Wagner to charge decent prices for his products, and that is what he does for his gems dreamed into this world, which in my view represent the absolute and still reasonable end of the possibility to experience music at home. //