

**ENSEMBLE
MASSIMO FUOCO**



Le feu intérieur

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PRODUCT OF THE MONTH award
Haute Fidélité REFERENCE award

The Swiss brand Ensemble brings back fond memories to music lovers and confirmed audiophiles. They will remember the very musical Reference Silver stand-mount loudspeakers, tested in January 1994 (*Haute Fidélité* n° 8), or the Primadonna Gold (*Haute Fidélité* n° 16). But Ensemble also designs refined electronics, like the Massimo Fuoco integrated amplifier presented here: the musical embers are ready to ignite !

Urs Wagner is a true music lover, which is why he founded Ensemble in 1986. For him, a brand must create a perfect harmony between the equipment, the cables and even the accessories, providing the homogeneity necessary for a truly musical system. Ensemble currently manufactures the Ondiva speakers on their Arc stands, the Natura floor-standing speakers, and the new Massimo series, which includes the Massimo Fonobrio MM/M phono amplifier, the Massimo Fuoco integrated amplifier, the Massimo Evivo power amplifier, and the Massimo Isolink Duo, a power line isolator incorporating two isolation transformers, according to Ensemble the ultimate magic link between its devices. A complete line of cables is also available, such as the Espressivo, Incanto, Supremo, Luminoso, and Dalvivo, plus a few well thought-out accessories, such as the Al-Zorbo equipment isolation platform, the Gambagard absorber feet, and Tubesox tube dampers.

'ALLEGRO CON FUOCO'

An evolution from the previous Fuoco, the Massimo Fuoco's optimizations have focused on redesigned boards made of six times higher

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quality material than standard epoxy ones, power factor correction, a three-screen instead of two-screen isolation transformer, dual isolated and screened mains wiring and new Synergia connectors. It incorporates the Sondoro line of high quality passive components, such as Ensemble Golden Gate filter capacitors, Procap polypropylene capacitors, and low noise magnetic precision resistors. The unassuming appearance is without luxurious display of adornment. The front panel features a bluish illuminated power switch and two switches illuminated by LEDs: one for the monitoring function, also activated on powering-up, and the other for engaging the balance. Three finely machined circular knobs control inputs, balance and volume, while the remote handset (machined from an aluminium slab) controls the volume and monitor/mute function.

To assure total reliability, the Massimo Fuoco has a seven-tier safety system. As such a mute is activated when the amplifier is about to go into overload or sees a short, play being resumed as soon as the situation has normalized. The system is further protected by a number of fuses, such as the super-fast ones for the speaker outputs, which are accessible from the outside. A servo-bias feature prevents overheating of the output stage, while the five line inputs and the monitoring loop are relay-controlled, always leaving only one input open.

Like its predecessors, the Massimo Fuoco demonstrates that the successful marriage of triode tubes and bipolar transistors can bring out the best of both technologies, without their shortcomings.

INCANDESCENCE

The ECC81 New Old Stock Brimar double triode tubes are selected, burnt-in for 100 hours and matched. They are of British manufacture from the 60's and 70's, but the pins are gold plated by Ensemble. All this gives them the specific 801S designation. They drive the input stage for voltage gain, demonstrating their superiority in the management of textures and timbres as well as fine dynamic gradations, without any problems of saturation.

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The tubes are fitted with anti-microphonic Tubesox tube dampers, made of a kevlar /copper braid. The power stage uses selected and matched TO-3 bipolar transistors in quasi-complementary, class AB configuration, with a fairly high bias current applied. They provide low distortion and the low impedance necessary for a good control of the speakers, especially in the low register. The driver transistors are also bipolar in order to keep the sound coherent.

The construction shows a rare attention to detail, such as the Microsorb resonance damping system that isolates each sensitive circuit by decoupling from the chassis, and is also applied to the big power supply transformer. The latter is made of audio-grade grain-oriented silicon steel laminates, and offers true galvanic isolation through its three screens. The transformer is vacuum resin impregnated and is manufactured in Western Europe to Ensemble specifications. The construction avoids the shortcomings of much cheaper toroidal transformers, which by their nature have non-symmetrical windings, and therefore an irregular magnetic field that creates much greater radiation.

LISTENING

The Massimo Fuoco is very sensitive to the cables used, which is normal for a device of this class. We got the best results with the Ensemble Dalvivo speaker and Luminoso mains cables: there's really something going on in this configuration, fully validating the brand's approach.

Sound quality: The Massimo Fuoco impresses by a supreme harmonic balance, rarely found except in extreme highend and much more expensive equipment. It can be characterized by a rather extraordinary tonal accuracy, where the precision of the harmonic signature of the instruments is hallucinating, even when the musical texture is complex. This is particularly true in the mid/high frequency range, which has incredible integrity, naturalness and beauty at the same time.

The treble is probably one of the finest and purest we've heard from an amplifier, the notes extinguishing naturally, right up to the highest

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frequencies on cymbals or guitar, always remaining perfectly true. Voices give a feeling of incredible presence, of authenticity, even the ones we thought we knew well, revealing their humanity in a rare way. The Massimo Fuoco is not content with reproducing frequencies or delivering watts, but brings the musical momentum to life, making it more lively, more dense, intensely present and coherent.

The inner fire is permanently kept glowing.

Dynamics: This ardent musicality is supported by a very present vivacity, as in "September Song" from Michel Petrucciani's *Trio in Tokyo*, recorded in 1997, a posthumous live album released in 1999. The artist is nearly tangible, more relentless than ever on his attacking the notes, and whose virulent hammering conveys all the creative energy of the pianist in the improvisations. The Steinway's timbre is sumptuous, while the rhythmic density of the trio in unison is present even at moderate volume level, which shows a total respect for microdynamics and a remarkable absence from background noise. The bass descends with conviction and depth preserving an undeniable tonal richness, with a certain roundness, where in terms of attack some more powerful amplifiers do better. The Massimo Fuoco however always delivers a perfect spectral coherence, without emphasizing any particular frequency range, which is a great musical value. It even manages to surprise with its speed and energy, constantly alert on rhythmic inflexions, highlighting the lightning fast response of its well dimensioned and isolated power supply. Joey Baron's percussion in the piece Lion's Dream in Michel Portal's *Dockings* album has superb impact and texture, just as the bass clarinet has lush presence.

Soundstage: To complete this ideal trilogy, the Massimo Fuoco never leaves anything artistically unclear in the musical flow, whether it is positioning the performers in space, such as extremely punctual and delineated voices, or in an orchestra the differentiation of the position of the various instruments. All this is executed without any platitude or approximation. The result is a great deal of dimensionality, but without exaggerating and risking of becoming spectacular, and with a sense of measure that is always realistic. The breathing of the Berliner Philhar-

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moniker conducted by Claudio Abbado is manifest in a natural and coherent way.

Everything seems so easy for the Massimo Fuoco, so that the listener's analytical mind quickly gives way to the sphere of emotions, nourished by the flawless rendering of the melodic lines, the Fuoco employing his mimicking gifts to immerse us in all the sound universes, eclipsing itself in order to better blow on the embers of musical emotion.

Quality/price: The Massimo Fuoco, which comes supplied with a triple shielded Luminoso power cord, is not cheap, especially as it has no digital input. On the other hand, we can assure you that by its musical qualities it is on a par with the best current electronics, providing an exceptional quality / price / musicality ratio. Everything in this world is relative, but this Swiss quality down to the smallest details is not so unaffordable after all, the accuracy of the hybrid design, the meticulousness of the manufacturing and the choice of premium components, each contributing its part to the sound, just like the NOS tubes.

VERDICT

As you will have understood, we were dazzled by the musical performance of the Massimo Fuoco, which recalls the good memories of Ensemble in all of us. It must be said that it is very difficult to gather in a single device such a quality of harmonic accuracy, characterized by transparency, naturalness without bluff, a sense of nuance and detail, adding to it the silence and the general coherence of the sound image. The Massimo Fuoco hides its qualities in a puristic, compact chassis. The Swiss brand is more present than ever, expert and music-loving, just like its creator Urs Wagner. The Massimo Fuoco is without doubt a flamboyant reference.

Bruno Castelluzzo

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SOUND QUALITY ■■■■■■■■

DYNAMICS ■■■■■■■■

SOUND STAGE ■■■■■■■■

QUALITY/PRICE ■■■■■■■■

TECHNICAL DATA

Origin: Switzerland

Finish: grey

Dimensions (W x H x D) :

395 x 135 x 315mm

Weight: 15.5 kg

Warranty: 3 years

Type: hybrid tube/transistor

Input tubes :

ECC81/I2AT7 NOS select grade

Input impedance: 45 Kohm

Signal to noise ratio: 99 dB

Harmonic distortion : 0.2% (1W/1 KHz)

Inputs: 5 x RCA, 1 monitor

Fixed output: 1 x RCA monitor

Speaker terminals: banana (6mm), fork, bare cable, banana (4 mm)

CAPTIONS

Sober and almost austere, the grey facade exudes a sense of seriousness.

On power-up, the volume control returns from any position to zero, then immediately adjusts to a low level, releasing the mute.

The Microsorb concept:

everything is isolated from the main chassis:

transformer,

main board with inputs (housing the sensitive electronics),

rear wall with mains inlet and speaker outputs

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The printed circuit boards have lowest dielectric losses, the internal connections use Dynalink and Megalink shielded cables. Lifetime of select grade NOS tubes: at least 50'000 hours

The front panel features the Ensemble logo, very graphic, worthy of the Swiss school in this field, the design of which is taken up on the air vents of the chassis. When the balance is turned off, the output increases by 2 dB.

Synergia high quality RCA's jacks and binding posts, made of 99.6 % pure copper with 0,4 % tellurium, silver and 24 carat gold plated.

They accept 6 mm bananas, spades, bare wire, or 4 mm bananas. Situated above the binding posts: the output fuses.