

ENSEMBLE

PHONO

MASSIMO FONOBRIO

HAUTE FIDÉLITÉ JUIN/JUILLET 2022 N° 257

PRODUCT OF THE MONTH – BEST BUY

'PHONO HORS CLASSE' - UNRIVALLED PHONO

The Swiss brand Ensemble delighted our ears on its return to our premises with the Massimo Fuoco integrated and the Ondiva Silver loudspeakers, born of the immense passion for music of their designer Urs Wagner. His love of vinyl records led him to design the ultimate phono preamplifier Massimo Fonobrio, refined over the years and capable of revealing the unsuspected riches hidden deep in the groove.

The Massimo Fonobrio MM/MC is equipped with a pre-pre stage capable of handling very low level MCs thanks to 74dB of total gain, with two MC positions of 30 or 24dB, in addition to the 44dB gain in MM. Its fully discrete circuitry uses 36 transistors per channel in a dual-mono configuration, including a Class A biased output stage. A triple-shielded Luminoso power cord is supplied to match the phono, in keeping with the brand's philosophy of perfect harmony between each component. Not calling for attention with its grey-toned appearance, the Fonobrio is all about extracting all the musical quintessence from each vinyl.

It hides well of what it is capable of, because the important thing here is what you can't see. The dual-mono circuit design includes two separate, low-loss printed circuit boards, six times the quality of those used even in the most expensive products. The chassis is mechanically decoupled, as are the rear panels that support the connecting sockets, protecting sensitive components from effects of microphony. The circuitry consists of three separate assemblies, each using 12 transistors : the MC gain stage, the active/passive RIAA correction for ultra-

precise equalization across the entire audio band, and the pure Class A output stage with high linearity.

The bandwidth is very wide, with an infrasonic attenuation of 12 dB per octave (-3 dB at 10 Hz). An unusual feature is that the output is direct DC coupled, but an internal jumper also allows AC coupling via an Ensemble 'Procap' capacitor. To minimize DC output (less than 25 millivolts), the last two stages are individually adjusted by a trimmer.

The load impedance for MCs can be selected by means of two 4-pole gold-plated DIP switches on the rear, allowing 16 positions ranging from 51.7 ohm to 1.0 K ohm. A custom-made shielded choke in a mumetal housing ensures maximum bandwidth extension (85 kHz), while protecting the circuits from incursions of disturbing high frequencies. Each component has been carefully and stringently selected, among which low thermal drift military-grade resistors with 0.1% tolerance at critical points, ultra-low noise transistors, custom-made 1% polystyrene capacitors, and high-quality custom-made RCA sockets made of pure silver- and 24 carat gold-plated copper. More than 1,400 soldering points are made by hand with silver-alloyed solder, and internal connections are made with Ensemble Film Shield cable.

DEEP SILENCE

The power supply, which counts a lot in the final result of a phono stage, is a linear dual-mono type, very precise and a thousand times quieter than a very good standard design. Isolated in a separate compartment, it is a regulated shunt circuit, not using classic regulators but driven by an op amp. Ultra-fast and stable at the same time, this silent power supply ensures an extremely low noise level (less than 1 microvolt !), as well as a very low impedance (0.016 ohms). The IEC II medical grade transformer, shielded in a stainless steel interference-proof enclosure, mounted on dampers, is preceded by a special module for power factor correction.

LISTEN

Timbres: Like the Massimo Fuoco, the Fonobrio's timbre accuracy is unheard of. It is a perfect balance between realism, definition, richness of texture and, above all tonal coherence throughout the entire bandwidth. The harmonic balance is striking from the extreme lows to the extreme highs, no register taking precedence, including the high range which can easily be

highlighted on an MC system. The great richness of nuances in this register extends from the midrange without rupture - as is the case in front of a real prestigious violin, a majestic concert piano or a choir, whose voices will be felt in its smallest variations - in a harmonic and tonal envelope always in perfect coherence. The low register descends deeply, contributing to the realism felt with symphonic orchestras, as in the boxed set Debussy: *Famous Orchestral Works*, Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Bernard Haitink (Philips). On *Images : Le matin d'un jour de fête*, all the majesty, emotion and expressiveness of the orchestra are masterfully reproduced in an opulent palette, without omitting a single detail, all without unnecessary and deceptive artefacts.

Dynamics: The Fonobrio is simply fantastic in expressing dynamic nuances, on the one hand thanks to an absolutely total silence, bringing out the tiniest nuances usually masked by even imperceptible noise, coming from a less masterful circuit conception, and on the other hand thanks to a dazzling speed in the establishment of notes. This is very striking on the magnificent Zakir Hussain, *Making Music* (ECM), surrounded by such luminaries as Jan Garbarek and John McLaughlin, where the sounds of the very varied percussion instruments such as the tablas are amazing in their realism, as well as the bamboo flute with the tiniest attacks of breath rendered with disturbing realism, not forgetting the singularly high timbre of Jan Garbarek's soprano saxophone. It is a perfect combination of velocity, wide dynamic range, and temporal coherence characterized by long fading of notes, so that a permanent richness emerges which always gives the impression of being on the true side of the instruments.

Soundstage: Bringing these complete musical qualities to perfection, the Ensemble phono stage is capable of projecting a sound image that removes many veils in front of the listener, drawing a striking relief of the instruments, where the air circulates around as in a concert and not simply in two dimensions; the spatial reproduction is more palpable, including its silences and ancillary sounds such as the sound of woodwind keys or the expression of the audience, which is perfectly felt and which facilitates the perception of the performers, without the listener being put at a distance by an artificial soft focus around the sound stage. So much so that in excellent recordings the character of the recording

locations and the acoustics of the venues, and the preferences of the recording engineer become audible, in accordance with the different schools of thought of the various eras, which are the source of the richness of the vinyl legacy . The treasures of your record library will be completely revealed and sublimated by the Massimo Fonobrio.

Value for money: This is a true goldsmith's work, assembled entirely by hand in Switzerland, where each component has been carefully chosen for its sound qualities, then selected before integration, and many are custom-made to order, such as the Ensemble Procap polypropylene capacitors or Synergia RCA sockets. Featuring no unnecessary complications, the Fonobrio's versatility will suit the vast majority of users.

Considering the musical results obtained, it is one of the best MM/M phono preamplifiers you can afford, even compared to much more expensive competitors.

VERDICT

The Massimo Fonobrio is a declaration of love to analogue recording as the medium preserving timeless musical treasures, albeit perishable by the wear and tear of the groove. It will highlight the most beautiful phono cartridges mounted on the best arms installed on the most powerful vinyl turntables. In essence: it will make you spend intense moments listening to vinyl records, close to a concert experience, closest to the true sound, without showmanship but faithful to the original musical intention. In this, added to its universality, it can become your definitive phono stage.

Bruno Castelluzzo

CAPTIONS

Under its grey livery, this phono uses an active/passive RIAA with high linearity, low distortion and high resolution, and disposes of a good overload margin.

The IC board is very low dielectric loss. A power correction filter (marked with the logo) precedes the dual mono power supply.

The components are exemplary, many of them custom-made. An internal jumper can adjust the gain to 100, 75 or 50% of the maximum level.

One input is dedicated to moving magnet (MM) cartridges, the other to moving coil cartridges (MC), where 16 load values are selectable via gold-plated DIP switches; there is also the possibility to add a custom resistor if required. Note the mounting of the back plate on shock absorber

TECHNICAL SHEET

Origin: Switzerland Price: 8 850 euros

Luminoso power cable included

Dimensions (W x H x D) : 395 x 138 x 315 mm

Weight: 9 kg

Type: MM/MC phono

Bandwidth: 10 Hz - 85 kHz

Gain: MM 44 dB, MC 24 and 30 dB, total max. 74 dB

Input impedance :MC between 16 values (51.7 R - 1 k)

Input capacitance: 2300 pF MM: 220 pF

THD: < 0.03% (MC)

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