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JULY 2008



MASTERSOUND DUEVENTI & DUE TRENTA

A SYNDICATED ARTICLE FROM GERMANY

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Reviewer: Ralph Werner

Sources: *analog* - turntable Acoustic Solid MPX; tone arms Phonotools Vivid-Two, SME M2 12"; carts Denon DL-103; Ortofon MC Rondo Bronze; Shelter 501 MK II; Zu Audio DL-103 - *digital* - audiolab 8000CD

Amplification: *integrated* - Lua 4040C, Myriad MXI 2080; *preamp* - bel canto PRe 3, Funk LAP-2; *power amp* - bel canto M300 monos; SAC il piccolo monos

Loudspeaker: Volent Paragon VL-2, ZU Audio Druid mk4, *WLM La Scala* [on review]

Cable: *low-level* - Ecosse Baton + Symphony, fis Audio Livetime, Funk BS-2, van den Hul Integration Hybrid, Zaolla Reinsilber NF; *phono* - fis Audio, WSS Silver Line; *high-level* Ecosse SMS2.3, fis Audio Livetime, Ixos 6006 Gamma, Zu Audio Libtec

Power distribution: fis Audio Livetime

Rack: Creactiv & Taoc AS-3

Review component retail: €2.490/2.990 respectively



Li'l masters?

The product portfolio of Italian valve smith MastersoundD includes six integrateds, two of which certain readers will remember as having been our guests during the last winter. Those units exuded feel-good vibes not just with radiated warmth but also their very special midrange and treble qualities - a distinct 300B *sexiness*. Above those 300B S.E. and 300B P.S.E amps, according to the price list at least, live the two 845 Compacts, one with a single 845 triode per channel, the *Reference* with two. But those aren't today's focus. We'll concentrate on the two "small" valve integrateds in the company's lineup, the 220 S.E. DueVenti and 230 S.E. DueTrenta. With 2 x 20 and 2 x 30wpc respectively, the DueVenti employs four EL34 power tubes, the DueTrenta four KT88 - pentodes then, not triodes as before.



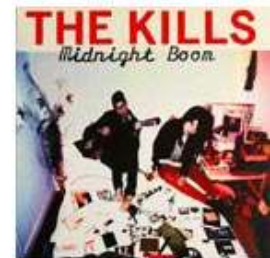
Similarities across the line show up not merely in external design cues (heavy black steel chassis, Walnut cheeks, highly polished deck) but in basic circuit choices. Not a single push/pull model is to be found with this firm whose core credo insists on class A single-ended operation. About the notorious subject of feedback, the gents of Vicenza have a "very general" basic answer: *No!* They claim to avoid any signal-path feedback altogether. Further highlights include their low-loss, high-bandwidth output transformers designed and developed in-house which span "from a few Hertz to well beyond 80kHz". Inquiries into any "how, why and what" however meet with such tight-lipped reluctance that one has to assume closely guarded intellectual properties or company secrets.

The test models DueVenti and DueTrenta are bona fide family members and as such, sport all of the above signature traits. Hence twin output bottles per channel don't indicate counter-phase but parallel operation to amplify the full signal rather than just its half wave. Parallel single-ended operation increases output power, albeit not as high as push/pull operation would allow for. Incidentally, the 220 S.E. DueVenti succeeds MastersoundD's very first 2-11-A model which entered the market in 1994 with a single EL34 per side. Hardcore purists might belabor the demise of the 'true' rather than paralleled single-ended but in the real world, today's 20wpc variant is unquestionably more practical by expanding the choice of suitable speakers.



The 220 S.E and 230 S.E. look very similar - *damn* similar in fact. That's deliberate. Mastersound pares down build costs by sharing chassis. That the DueTrenta weighs in at an extra 500 euros then isn't due to externals but internal adjustments which were deemed necessary, faulting those who expected a single model to take either tube type. That kind of tube rolling our Italians seem to frown on by insisting that a fully optimized machine taking KT88s or EL34s isn't feasible. The 230 S.E. thus benefits from a beefed-up power supply and purpose-designed output transformer.

Both amplifiers offer four high-level source inputs via ultra-solid RCAs. The speaker binding posts are of equal quality, something my 300B review celebrated already. Very nice. As the photo shows, there are 4- and 8-ohm tabs. Auto bias eliminates concerns over adjustments unlike with the 300B models whose rear bays sport voltmeter probe points. The front view here shows an uncluttered fascia (source selection and volume), a black box to the right which hides the power trafo and filter coil and toward the rear, two reassuringly hefty covers which enclose the fully potted output transformers. The tube forest sits upfront, with ECC82 drivers bracketed by paired ElectroHarmonix EL34s or JJ KT88s. Anything else? Not really - except that volume control is remote via relay-switched motorized Alps pot unlike the manual source selection. The plain wooden remote with matching felt bag is a nice detail.



To stick with shared values, both amps remain mum. Nothing hums, hisses or crackles. Leash up a high-efficiency speaker, crank open the pot and nada. Well, perhaps just a little if your ear hovers 5cm from the drivers and there's zero wind outside - an auspicious beginning. Whether Venti or Trenta, both amps were equally capable of driving the speakers (Elac, Volent, WLM, Zu) I connected to them. Granted, none were diabolic current hogs but why seek those out in the first place? Pick a speaker sensitivity of around 90dB/W/m, avoid 10 drivers per side plus roller-coaster impedance plots and there seems little left to screw up. To wit, at high noon on the dial, I got *serious* levels; serious meaning that one doesn't (or shouldn't) listen that loud routinely.

Which segues directly into the main course, sonic impressions. Here close family relations -- stemming from the same firm and looking nearly identical -- dilute. Differences appear in nearly all aural facets, not worlds removed but clearly distinguished by nuances. This starts with bass basics. Here the KT88 amp favors the fulsome. That doesn't render the 220 S.E. DueVenti lean but rather, sitting at zero neutral and not being the lesser for it. Yet its colleague goes for the extra serving. With a wink, this causes no real issues but it's also fair to say that its presentation has overall more "elegant swing" if you want to avoid calling it "rounder". Clearly the Italian EL34 offers more contrast and definition.



Switching from 230 to 220, this was confirmed in the low bass which initially suggested some loss but ultimately proved to be a lowering, by a few degrees, of the warmth factor in the bass region. Down low, the DueVenti demonstrated great control. In fact, teamed up with the right speaker (my best match were WLM's La Scalas), this control proved downright amazing. On The Kills' new *Midnight Boom* release, I was suspended in disbelief for the entire duration, by how blackly damped, precise and extended the drum machine made its round. These were valves on non-valve music after all. Never mind, things took off and bloody well at that.

Naturally, the same album was fun also over the DueTrenta but there results were more predictable: expansive, full, saturated rather than impulsive and with plenty of textures. This needn't be worse per se, particularly if lithely voiced speakers ask for spare calories. Or your preference gravitates towards it. Personally, I prefer the DueVenti's greater speed, higher dryness and superior definition, none of which come at the price of meagerness. By comparison, bass amplitude with the Lua 4040C proved equivalent but in matter of contour and grip, it couldn't equal the MastersoundD 200 S.E. Due Venti. And the latter's speed proved completely beyond it. If memory serves, Magnat's RV-1 meanwhile would be its equal for speed and definition but not punch. To be sure then, the bass range of the DueVenti is both high class and great fun.

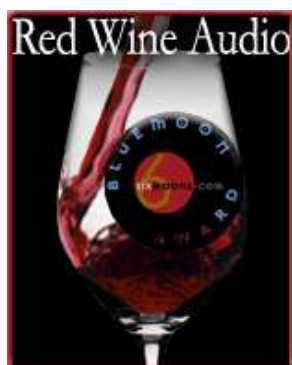
The two MastersoundDs diverge in the midrange as well. The DueTrenta is probably the more complimentary player whereas the 'smaller' sibling is spicier, with more highlighted solo vocals and greater presence. Should your speakers veer towards the bright and potentially forward, the KT88 will be milder. The flip side is, you won't be as intimate as with the EL34 machine which moves the microphone closer to the singers for more detail and nuance. Additionally, the DueVenti models its voices with more corporeality. This admittedly includes a touch of emphasis, some minor highlighting action. Which I like. Ditto for piano. On Keith Jarrett's *Köln Concert*, the DueTrenta declares "piano runs" whereas the DueVenti injects "as well as piano attacks" in-between - not by forgetting the flow but by clearly enunciating the transient impulses.



In the upper registers, the 200 S.E. DueVenti is open, free and clear. The 230 S.E. doesn't skip either but won't lead into the airiest of heights. Its sonic picture appears integrated, fulsome and somewhat flattering. The EL34 is more linear and to my ears more articulate in the frequency extremes, hence also the treble. It's theoretically *conceivable* that, combined with the more present vocal range, this might overdraw for some who then would fancy the bigger brother. Pure matter of taste.

Common to both MastersoundD amps is the generous soundstaging. In keeping with its tonal balance, the DueTrenta appears more grounded and earthbound. The EL34 colleague avoids all flinty nervousness -- it's rather more precise in fixating individual voices -- but appears more aerated, with a soundstage dome between the speakers which isn't perceivable with the 230 S.E. Depth layering too is dissimilar. The precise depiction of the 220 S.E. renders individual sonic events defined and specific. This means there's *nothing* between voices and sounds and the vision through these "holes" is unobstructed to the rear. Visibility in the classic sense is higher. The DueTrenta proceeds differently, decidedly not wishy-washy but with auras whereby discrete vocals retain their localization but lower edge definition to be more enfolded in the voluminous stage.





This has its own merits which some will call more organic and natural. Of interest is the different layer perspective. It appears closer to laminations of individual sonic foils with soft transitions rather than the more geometrically resolved dimensional sorting which the DueVenti exercises. If so inclined, you'd call the latter closer to audiophile virtues whereas the KT88-fitted machine demonstrates more artistic liberties. Again, personal preference will make the call.

Naturally, the 230 S.E. DueTrenta has more power. Even though a mere 10 watts per channel extra appear little to write home about, this difference -- in conjunction with the heavier fundamentals -- produces more steam and pressure to benefit particularly Rock. Dynamically speaking, I'd give the edge to the 220 S.E. DueVenti however since that's not merely a matter of loud but quiet as well. While macrodynamic equals, the 220's closer distance in the micro range is glued more intimately to a singer's lips, shows more detail action on a fret board and, for my tastes, superior structuring. The DueTrenta isn't merely tonally but dynamically rounder while its greater reserves create more forward momentum when the Pixies or Peppers let 'er rip. As usual, choices impose their own suffering.



Conclusion

Both MastersoundD's 220 S.E. DueVenti and 230 S.E. DueTrenta are solid heavies of their breed. The term *value* applies squarely to these 'smaller' models of the Italian manufacturer. 2 x 30 watts in the DueTrenta produce more power of course but the 20 watts per side of the DueVenti are far from petite. Were it my decision, I'd reach for the lower-priced EL34-fitted DueVenti which for my tastes offers more resolution, more extension in the frequency extremes, a better sorted soundstage and, well - a higher *live factor*. Others will prefer the fuller, more voluptuous DueTrenta over the more highly present smallest MastersoundD, hence a personal audition is called for.

220 S.E. / DueVenti:

Extended and detailed in the treble, astonishingly dry, elastic, fast and controlled in the bass. The midrange is transparent with a slight presence region emphasis which renders voices fetchingly close up.

The amplifier presents a large stage in all three dimensions including height. Instruments and voices are accurately placed to create an excellent overview particularly in the depth domain.

The 220 S.E. has fully matured macrodynamics which are due not least to its agile competent bass. Microdynamics

are fascinating, with an intimate close-up of the proceedings.

230 S.E. / DueTrenta:

Tonal balance begins in the bass which is voluminous and potent. Ultimate treble extension isn't on the books, this amp is rounder and more relaxed. It also lacks the presence emphasis. The vocal band is warm and realistic. This amp too renders a large stage. Image lock is good but with less edge definition than over the DueVenti. The music is freely suspended in-room and the musicians are properly placed but I'd not whip out a slide ruler for extreme cartographical precision.

The DueTrenta offers more energetic pressure than its smaller sibling. When displacement is called for, the higher reserves parlay the full joy of music rather than audiophile obsessions. You'll never accuse the amp of macrodynamic restraint.

Facts:

Model: 220 S.E. DueVenti / 230 S.E. DueTrenta

Concept: Valve integrateds, parallel single ended, class A, zero NFB

Tube complement: ECC82 drivers, EL34 or KT88 power pentodes

Dimensions: 43x33x20cm

Weight: DueVenti 23kg / DueTrenta 30kg

Plower output: DueVenti 2 x 20 watt / DueTrenta 2 x 30 watt

I/o ports: 4 inputs, 8 and 4 ohm outputs

Trim: black chassis, Walnut cheeks (high-gloss black or Cherry €100 surcharge)

Other: Remote volume

German importer's [website](#)

Mastersound [website](#)



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