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MARCH 2011

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MASTERSOUND Evolution 845

This review first appeared in the March 2011 issue of [hi-end hifi magazine fairaudio.de](http://hi-end.hifi.magazine.fairaudio.de) of Germany. You can also read this [review of the MasterSound Evolution 845](#) 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: *Analog – decks* - Acoustic Solid MPX, VPI Scout II; *tone arms* - Phonotools Vivid Two, SME M2 12-inch, VPI JMW-9; *pickups* - Denon DL-103, Ortofon MC Rondo Bronze, ZU Audio DL-103; *phono pre* - SAC Gamma Sym; *digital - SACD/CD Player* - HIFIAkademie cdPlayer, Luxman D-05; *Computer & Co* - Logitech Squeezebox 3, Readynas Duo NAS-Server, HP Notebook; **DAC**- Benchmark DAC1 USB

Amplification: *Pre* - Octave HP300; *power* - Electrocompaniet AW180; *integrated* - Denon PMA-2010AE

Loudspeakers: Ascendo System F, Thiel SCS4

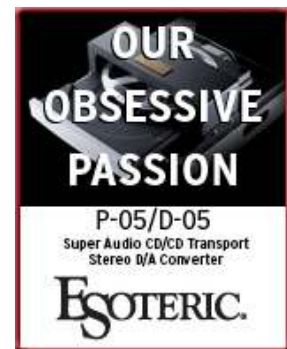
Various accessories, cables, racks and sundry

Review component retail: starting from €10.550



Many may view Mastersound's top integrated as poster child for the passionate but irrational behavior which is common currency in certain high-end circles: To set up the amp requires more space than a standard rack offers. To move its 53 kilos will likely require a helping hand. Once you power it up, 540 watts of idle dissipation substitute for central heating. The Evolution 845 Reference is hot stuff on numerous levels including literally.

We've previously reviewed amps from Italian valve specialist Mastersound—two 300B machines, one EL34 and one KT88 variant—but something this colossal was news. Including its dark Walnut cheeks the Evolution 845 takes up 55cm in width and with knobs and connectors another half meter in depth for quite the footprint. To minimize domestic reactions German importer Rainer Israel thoughtfully arrived with BassoContinuo's Italian amp stand in tow. Two backs also worked better than one.



That this beast doesn't cause cosmetic shock is probably due the special Italian flair for style and the open architecture with valves on deck. A fully enclosed 50kg+ amp usually looks even fatter in the rack but those who need to protect toddler, dog and cat can always go with Mastersound's optional tube cover. This I reckon will occur more rarely since the eye listens as well.



In casual slang one could call the Evolution 845 a *SET amp on steroids* since it does properly belong into this class of amps but puts rather more fighting watts on the scale than usual. The 845 transmitter triode is usually said to be good for roughly 20 watts so two per side in Italian math nets 50 watts RMS. Regardless of whether that's a bit optimistic, it's clearly more potent than what a lonely sweating 300Bs pushes out through its pores. The Evolution 845 is thus a SET which should manhandle more normal speakers and not just highly efficient ones.

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The heavy Italian runs dual mono as already the bird's eye view suggests. Here the two inner power transformer pots are simply spaced behind each other rather than side by side to save space. Input glass are two ECC802S, drivers for

the paralleled 845s are octal 6SN7s. The review loaner was fitted with a somewhat unusual €380 upcharge 845. This is called *Psvane 845K* and characterized by a bigger glass envelope for better thermal behavior and claimed longer life. Psvane tubes are Shuguang's 60th anniversary issue.

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Operationally and connexionally making mistakes would imply criminal intent. There's only three high-level inputs plus a main-in to bypass the preamp stage. There are 4/8Ω speaker terminals on the back and measurement ports for output tube bias current adjustments. That's it. So let's fire 'er up and delight in the first noise being a light mechanical shake as the transformers come to life. That's in line with the heavy equipment Harley vibe and accelerates the heart beat of fanatics to suspect that it's not the trafos but a special small V-twin shaker motor. Lest this induces paranoia, let me assure you that the Evolution 845 is otherwise very quiet and hum is low. You'll have to really crank the juice and run higher-efficiency boxes to hear any self noise in the listening seat.

That the Mastersound Evolution 845 would be a lustier elegant player rather than science nerd seems foregone conclusion. Core differentiators are a *certain* tonality and a *certain* way of depicting space. All clear? Hardly. Let's start then with tonal balance in the basement.

For the money asked you can buy lower, faster, more articulate resolved bass elsewhere. The last transistor amp through here was the less than half-priced Plinius 9200 with a rather drier foundation. If that's what your doctor prescribed because half your library consists of electronica weaponized with evil synth bass rocket launchers, you'll

have problems with the MasterSound. Conversely when the money aspect is eliminated to focus solely on the technical concept—class A single-ended with minimal feedback and triodes—bass becomes surprisingly potent. It goes real low with conviction and clarity; *for a SET*.



To be clear then, should S.E.T. reflexively conjure up femmy vocals with light New Age piano washes, you've got it all wrong. For garage-born Rock of one, two, three, four, off we go calibr the MasterSound is perfectly suited. Think Dire Straits, Stones or as I did, Violent Femmes' *Live* which in either case will mean that deep bass isn't an issue (not really fully present on such fare in the first place) and that the Italian has plenty of piss, vinegar and punch. To be more specific, bass *quantity*—energy, impact, bass drum displacement—is plenty sufficient and if in doubt even slightly enhanced. It's fair to talk of a *juicy* balance over which handmade Rock has never yet complained. How 'bout quality though?



My first note in the black book reads "bass overall generous, juicy, not very dry but still differentiated and mobile". And so it was that on the *Live* classics "I Alone" and "All Over You" the Evolution 845 produced more low-down welly than my pre/power combo of Octave HP300Mk2 and Electrocompaniet AW180. While the Norwegian monos applied firmer control to be theoretically 'righter', the Italian injected more energy. With these neither audiophile nor excessively fat Rock numbers, the Scandinavian version felt less powerful and somewhat more abstinent/sober. The MasterSound gifted more gravitas to the e-guitar workout which I found exceptionally attractive. It also sounded more *substantial*.





The overall tonal balance and flavor of the midrange was clearly due to a light emphasis in the bass and a light depression in the upper midrange. This deviation from flat seemed neither sinful nor excessive but characteristic nonetheless. On Joanna Newsom's *Have One On Me* I remembered her voice at particularly higher levels as more pixie-ish whilst male vocals got a boost in sonority. The Evolution 845 plays it round, full and a bit softer. Relative to certain female vocals I'll have to retract my earlier phrasing and call it *sinful* after all – splendidly so too.

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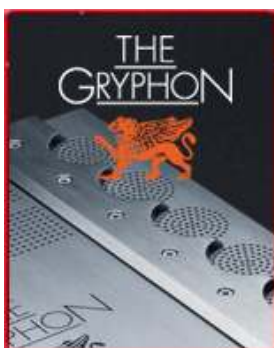


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One could likewise conclude that this slight diffusing of presence spikes doesn't fully support listening habits which are used to *impulse response true to the original*. The Jazz number "Tilldless" made that case. I loved the MasterSound for how fat and shiny it parked the sax into my room but it did lack some teeth. That metallic bite had clearly softened. Ditto the piano section in the middle of the song. From a certain playback volume upward I'm used to the forcefully hammered keys loosening a volley of lances at my ears. Not everyone delights in this but to my mind music occasionally *should* hurt. Here the Evolution 845 differed in opinion. Its tonal balance of the midband is clearly a matter of taste and beyond that should be strongly contingent on speaker pairings. But generally speaking the MasterSound's vocal zone is clearly Italian and not Prussian.

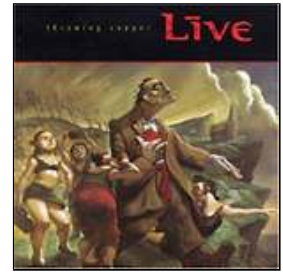


To conclude tonal considerations we need treble. Here one deals with precious shimmer over spectacular sparks. To my ears the uppermost range was lightly shelved down. Still on "Tilldless" the airy filigreed cymbal decays remained intelligible and relaxed of course but I've heard more clarity and liberated effulgence elsewhere. Nuances. Not relevant with this number but apparent with others, cymbals over the MasterSound turned somewhat matte on top but also acquired more body, size and—wherever the initial hit was concerned—more realism. The latter references a big metal disc being made to really *oscillate* (rather than merely pretend at it). This benefited rhythm work on ride cymbals in particular. Those grew very insistent but importantly never unduly so given the MasterSound's aforementioned mild presence region depression. The effect was energy without hardness. My notes called it *cymbals for gourmets*.



The *elegant charm* of the Evolution 845 didn't rely solely on this tonal balance but at least for me rested squarely on the physical handling of sounds and their spatial context. Let's start with the virtual stage dimensions. Depth and breadth were quite developed but in this price range other amps manage deeper layering (and others are flatter which puts the MasterSound in the midfield). The first specialty was involvement from moving the music a step closer to the listener rather than playing it laid-back or distanced. This animated take or perspective wasn't faked up with a presence region emphasis as is often the case for more frontal presentations. Here the amp was more defensive and softer yet the music gestured forward toward the audience. Think of it as a soft turn-on – charming and in this iteration rarely heard. Too often immediacy particularly at higher levels or over longer

session is paid for with a harder more nervy undercurrent. Not here. That goal goes to the Italians.



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The second specialty relates to the physical embodiment of sounds to become materially tacit. Particularly in the midband and with voices I fancied this 3D factor and the MasterSound complied fully. While my resident combo does it too it still sounds differently.

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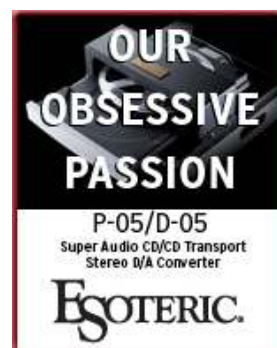
Back to Joanna Newsom with "In California". My usual Octave/Electrocompanionet combo is very good at something hard to describe for which I've come up with the working title *empty room vibe*. It's the illusion that even when there's no sound the presence of another acoustic remains intact. In this quasi empty background space sounds get suspended in precise locations with dimensional plasticity.

The MasterSound begs to differ. I assume that's predominantly because its sonic bodies are bigger and more voluptuous. Miss Newsom doesn't turn outright brothel madam but takes up more stage space. Since this effect translated equally to the harp, woodwinds and remainder of the band without increasing overall stage dimensions, the venue seemed simply *more packed* than usual. One could go verbally fancy and posit that with the MasterSound individual sounds *constitute* their acoustic environ whilst space precedes my house combo in which sounds then *arise*. Ayee. That's nothing but wordiness even though, in principle, it points at something substantial. Lest you think my hardcore sonic philosophising exits here, let me tighten the screws by two more turns.



Enter colleague Jochen after 90 seconds worth of auditioning the MasterSound with rowing arm motions: "That breathes nicely!" he opined. Indeed and not only en masse during tutti but already with solo vocals. With song, brass or strings the impact was physical and the performers breathed i.e. shrunk and expanded dynamically depending on intonation, pitch and loudness. That was very attractive and some will fall for the MasterSound just because of it.

More bodily opulence doesn't just seem more curvaceous on humans. Forget laser edges and checker-board sorting also sonically. The MasterSound is an impresario of the organic/harmonic kind and as such a sensual animal. Beyond matters of personal taste I would point at the many studio productions which over analytical holographic equipment sound like lovelessly collaged sound tracks. Those benefit wildly from gracious curves. The MasterSound does this on tonality and staging.

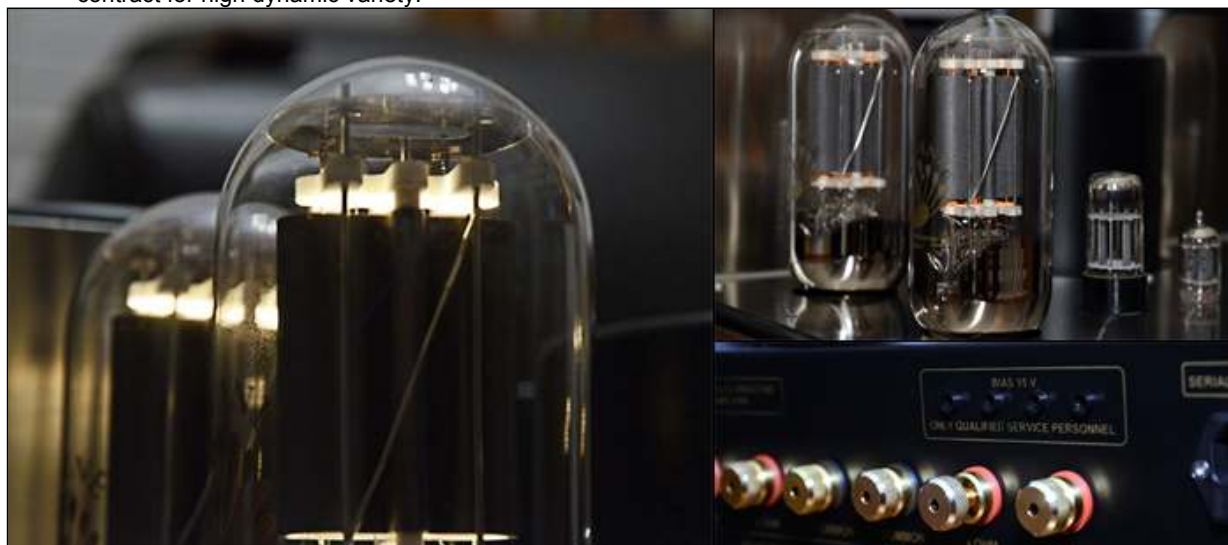


Conclusion: In certain ways the MasterSound Evolution 845 reminded me of luxury limousines of days gone by – shark finned profiles, white-rimmed spoked tyres and wheel bases six meters long. Even fuel consumption fits this image. If this ain't no bona fide single-ended valve amp, I plain don't know what is. Sonically too it's more about an idealized world than strictly measured neutrality. The MasterSound goes about things with *Schmackes*, harmonic riches and plenty of satisfaction.

- The big MasterSound integrated isn't complete LF stable. Relative to the chosen architecture (single-ended triodes) things are rather more developed than expected however.
- Overall the lower frequencies are juicy and opulent. A minor upper-bass emphasis is evident and textures aren't

very dry. Even so this range remains differentiated and intelligible.

- The very low bass too is well padded which in conjunction with a more defensive presence region makes for very fulsome mids. The focus is more on harmonic softness than wiry energy. Voices occasionally approach *sinful marvelousity*.
- The treble is energetic, free of harshness and well resolved. Cymbals in particular sound very compelling. The uppermost range is slightly attenuated however.
- Dynamically there are no nits safe for torturing the amp with brutal LF attacks at high SPL.
- The virtual stage has a strong forward projection to the listener and is distinctly not distanced.
- The Evolution 845 renders sounds very materially incarnate and opulently dimensioned. Fascinating is the ability to render the virtual performers as *breathing* entities which depending on level and intonation expand and contract for high dynamic variety.



Facts

- Dimensions and weight: 55 x 45 x 28cm (WxDxH), 53kg
- Trim: Black chassis with Walnut cheeks, optional high-gloss cheeks for an extra €150
- I/o ports: 3 x high-level, 1 x main-in, speaker terminals with 4/8Ω tabs
- Other: Walnut body remote control for volume comes standard, 4 x Psvane power triodes are optional [€380]
- Power consumption: circa 540 watts, no standby
- Warranty: 2 years

Ralph Werner


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