

Marten Oscar Duo Loudspeakers | REVIEW

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The first time I heard the Marten Oscar Duo (<https://www.marten.se/products/oscar/oscar-duo/>), right out of the box, one word came to mind. That word was *fast*. Dave McNair, currently reviewing the much larger Marten Oscar Trio, used the very same word to describe his first listen as well.

I don't use that adjective a lot when describing high-end audio products, perhaps because speed isn't one of my main priorities when it comes to loudspeakers. *Fast* is a word that fans of big panel speakers use to describe ribbons and electrostatics and how the sound is so clean, with such responsive and life-like transient edges that it makes you jump. It's a sound that constantly surprises you with its theatrics.

I'm perfectly okay with the sound of the big panels. I've been impressed by a number of them. But have I reached the point in my audiophile life where I toss out generalizations such as "I'm more of a dynamic speaker kind of guy"? Let's just say I'm settling into the late phases of my audiophilia and listening to high-quality two-way monitors is still something that excites me. I have plenty of reasons why, and none of them are "because little two-ways sound really fast."

But the Marten Oscar Duo loudspeakers are fast. My first impression was wow, these do sound like big panel speakers, nice and open and lightning-quick. Is that what I desire from a two-way bookshelf speaker? I was about to find out.



Marten Oscar Duo

The Marten Oscar Duos suddenly arrived during a very competitive time in the Best Two-Way Monitor in the World Competition that's been going on at my house over the last few years. The Vimberg Aneas, our 2020 Product of the Year, had just left the building, and I was concentrating on the "and now for something completely different" Volti Audio Razz, which I really enjoyed and sent on to our newest reviewer, Graig Neville. I knew the Acora Acoustics SRB two-way monitors were on their way, fresh on the heels of the Acora Acoustics SRC-2's Summit Award. Plus, I was still fixated on the idea of an Anea with the \$10,000 diamond tweeter option, or the SE version of the Stenheim Alumine 2. I had work to do.

Would the Marten Oscar Duo, smaller and less than half the price of either the Vimbergs or the Acoras or the Stenheims, get lost in the shuffle, that race to the top? How could I possibly get excited about these handsome little monitors from Sweden with that modest MSRP? I needed to put on my game face and evaluate the Marten Oscar Duos without thinking about those other small wonders I've enjoyed over the last year. At this level of performance, there's no such thing as "good for the money." It has to be good, period.

The whole Ricky Bobby thing caught my attention first, as I mentioned at the beginning, and I suddenly knew this review would have to be more complex than I originally thought. Marten Audio, based in Sweden, isn't an up-and-coming speaker company and they're not putting out me-too products. It's a well-established brand, notable for some of their more ambitious and considerably more expensive designs.

As far as I've seen, those designs always seem to use ceramic drivers - I believe it was the first time I'd heard of such a technology. I immediately wondered about those ceramic drivers, and how I'm relatively new to hearing them and yet I know I respond, almost subconsciously, to them so favorably. The Vimbergs use the ceramic-treated Accuton drivers, and they were so good that I started thinking that was the next chapter of my audiophile life, that "I'm more of a ceramic driver kind of guy." (This is on the heels of 2016's "I'm more of a ribbon tweeter kind of guy.")

Inside and Out

Marten Audio has always been known for using ceramic-reinforced drivers—their term—and the Marten Oscar Duo features custom-made drivers from SB Acoustics, a 7" woofer and a 1" tweeter. Here's how Marten describes their design:

"To keep the same Marten sound we designed brand new drivers, allowing more control of the details. Hard ceramic is light, yet extremely rigid, making it one of the best materials for speaker membranes – it's also known as Sapphire. Our ceramic cones have a high internal damping factor, because of a refined electrochemical process. The membrane also has a high material resonance frequency, meaning distortion is minimal; offering a level of clarity that is the holy grail for high end speaker cones."

Marten doesn't skimp on the internal wiring for the Duos—they use Jorma Design, also based in Sweden. The rest of the parts list also focuses on high quality and high performance: copper foil air core coils, silver and gold capacitors and Supreme resistors.



The cabinet of the Marten Oscar Duo is also special in its design, beautifully finished and assembled with care. These are described by the manufacturer as "high finish laminated cabinets," and are available in matte walnut, piano white and piano black. I received the matte walnut, and it looks different from most of the walnut veneers I've seen—it's got a lighter tone finished with an almost golden glow.

Set-Up

I love the dedicated stands for the Marten Oscar Duos, which cost an additional \$995. They're attractive, strong and yet light enough so that when they're bolted to the Duos it's still easy for you to pick everything up as a single piece and move it around. Marten explains that the triple-pillar design reduces weight while increasing stability. That, as you might guess, made set-up for the Duos relatively easy.



They weren't fussy loudspeakers, either. I used several amps with the Marten Oscar Duos over the months I had them—the 400wpc Jeff Rowland Design Group Continuum S2 integrated amplifier was my favorite, perhaps because the Duos are roughly average in the sensitivity department (86 dB with a nominal 6-ohm impedance). The 70wpc LFD NCSE Mk. 3 integrated amplifier was also a lovely match. For most of the review period, I used a complete loom of Atlas Cables' Mavros line, complete with the Grun Coherent Earthing system.



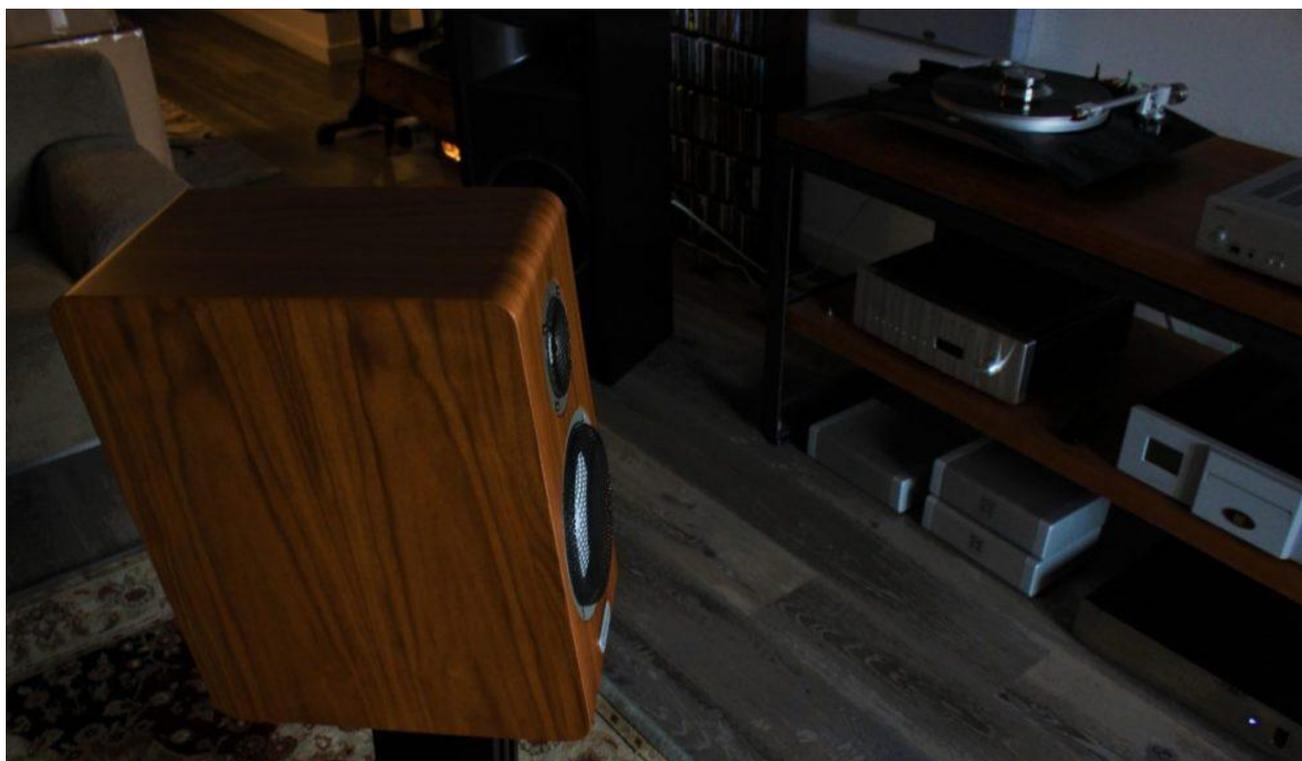
You can also purchase the optional grilles for \$75. But why hide those beautiful ceramic drivers when they're already protected by a mesh cage? The looks are understated, but the Duos become more impressive when you get close and sniff around. That veneer just radiates amber light like honey when you place these speakers close to a window. It's gorgeous.

By the way, the owner's manual for the Marten Oscar Duo is a book. Not big, like a book, but bound like one. I've never seen that before, even with the really expensive stuff.

Sound

I started off by talking about the Marten Oscar Duo's quickness. Now I want to talk about the second most distinctive characteristic, which is just as impressive: the bass performance. If you're getting saddled up for another review of a little monitor that sounds much bigger than it is, I think it's more complex than that.

The Marten Oscar Duo goes down to 37 Hz, which is excellent for a speaker this size. If I can get 40 Hz out of a two-way monitor, I know I can get out of the "I wish there was a little more on the bottom" type of thinking. That's the Achilles' heel of many audiophiles who don't quite absorb all the great things two-ways routinely supply, such as coherency. That aforementioned speed, however, is what makes the low frequencies so tactile and juicy.



Think about two common musical sounds that are often used to calibrate relatively deep—but not quite subterranean—bass. I'm talking about a kick drum from a fairly standard drum kit, and the bottom note of the double bass—what is it, an E? Yeah, that note. With the Marten Oscar Duo, those two sounds were consistently rendered in a way that allowed me to navigate through the crisp transient edges and hear more into the production of said notes. By hearing "more," I mean I can hear those different components contributing to the sonic result, from the sound of the drum pedal squeaking to the distinct ragged edge of horsehair across a string. Those are the moments that reinforce that feeling of honesty and clarity you get from the Duos, that profound impression that you're hearing something that's less than abstract, a mere sound you're supposed to consider from all angles.

In other words, both the double bass and the kick drum sound tonally real and natural. I can't say that about too many other 2-way monitors in the world. Some, but not many.

That makes for rather unique presentation of the lower frequencies. With many capable two-way monitors, things can get fuzzy or distorted or anemic or, unfortunately, all three at once. I've noticed that many modern two-way monitor designs have a much more abrupt roll-off, something that's quite the anathema to the pumped-up mid bass of some of the classic BBC monitors like the LS3/5a. The former approach is a bit more honest, while the latter is clearly more euphonic and pleasing. The Marten Oscar Duos just get there in a straightforward way, as if it never had to make a decision about which path to follow.



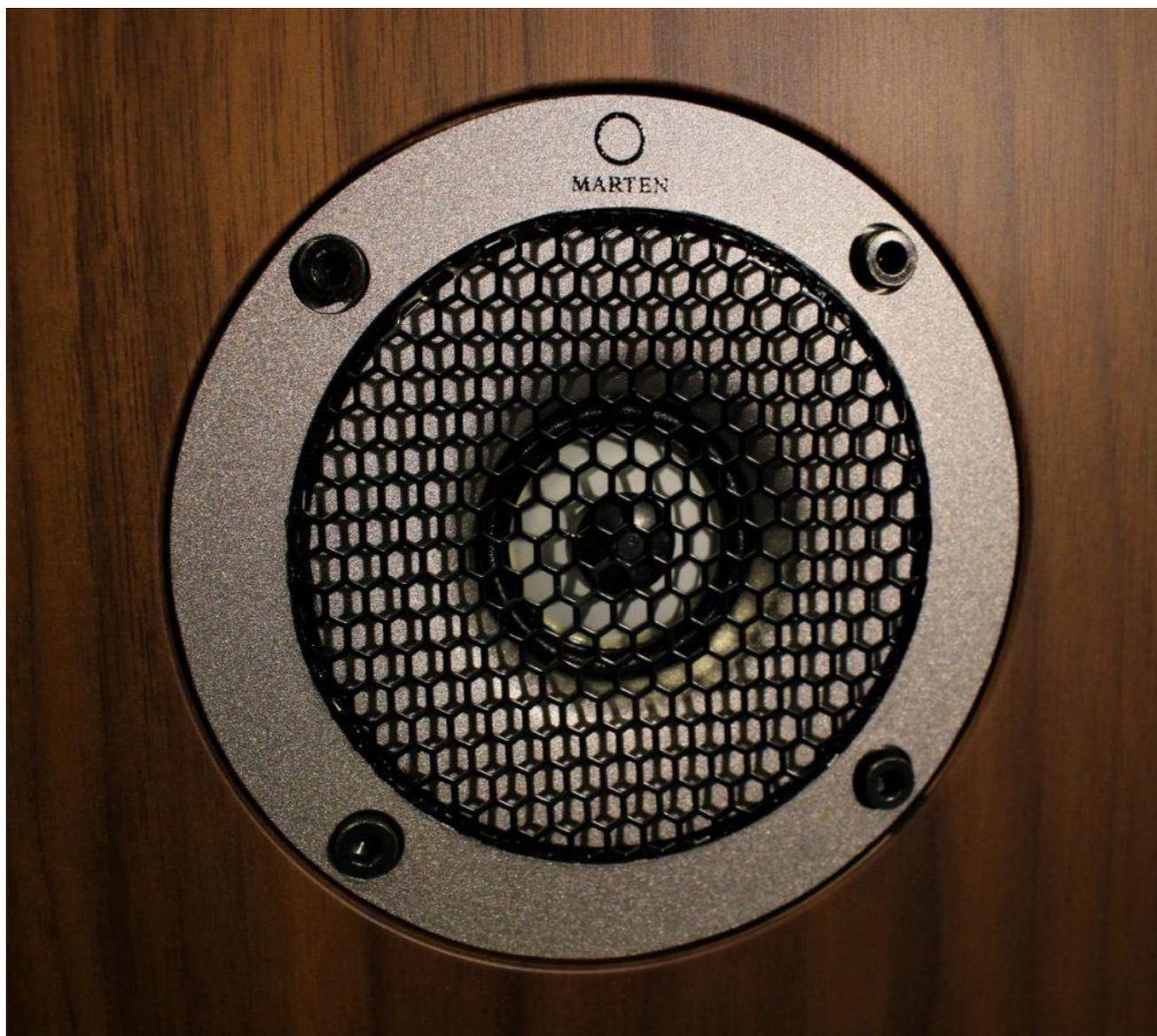
The superb low frequencies of the Marten Oscar Duo are, in turn, intertwined with that large soundstage. I've always said that lots of room in the soundstage is a more than ample substitute than the lack of the bottom octaves, but I probably wasn't talking about the Martens. That transparent, tight bass doesn't sound like it's being fluffed up by the soundstage boundaries. Quickness, superb bass response and incredible soundstaging add up to much of the Duo's essence - except for one thing.

The imaging.

I haven't really examined imaging in a long time, because I feel like most speakers can do it quite well. When's the last time I heard a two-way speaker and thought, "Wow, I wish the imaging was a

little better”? There’s only one issue—I listened to the Marten Oscar Duos for several weeks, and suddenly I was thinking about how well they imaged. Like, much better than usual. Why? I think it has to do with the idea of a transducer disappearing in a room completely, something I do discuss on a regular basis. Thanks to the Duos, I now think they’re connected, both imaging and disappearing, but in a mighty triumvirate that includes that big soundstage.

It’s been a long time since a loudspeaker design made me think of the importance of imaging and soundstaging and low frequency performance, especially the way they impact each other. The Marten Oscar Duos might just possess the best imaging I’ve heard in a long time, no joke.



Listening

Since the Marten Oscar Duos excelled so well with complex music full of tiny details, I trotted out a steady parade of these types of recordings. On Rasmus Kjaer’s *Turist* LP, one of my favorite electronica recordings from last year, I had the constant and distinct feeling that I was hearing loads of tiny details for the first time—so much so that I felt that some of these familiar tracks had been tweaked a bit in the studio, the ol’ Different Take effect. Focusing in, I was able to determine the difference between the electronic sounds and the natural percussion with more ease than ever before.

On the incredible new album from pianist-composer Satoko Fujii and “mallet virtuoso” Taiko Saito, *Beyond* (which is performed under the duo name Futari), the interplay between the piano and the vibraphone is exquisite because you can instantly compare the differences in timbre, decay and dynamics of each instrument. That huge soundstage and ultra-precise imaging really enhanced and refined the idea of two performers performing in a large space, awash in a sea of constantly varying sound.

Speaking of performers in large spaces, the Marten Oscar Duos were superb with all of my 2L Recordings - in many ways these Swedish monitors conjured up an insane amount of synergy with those Norwegian recordings, so much so that I had an all-day 2L marathon more than once while the Martens were in the system.

Conclusion

Over on the other coast, Dave McNair sounds like he’s equally impressed with the Marten Oscar Trio. Oops, spoiler alert. Sorry, Dave.

The Marten Oscar Duos are definitely intriguing from a variety of angles. They’re \$6995/pair, which may seem like a lot when you look at them, perhaps from a great distance, but the fit and finish are extraordinary. (Our own Grover Neville thinks they’re lovely in that classic Scandinavian sort of way.) Based on sound alone, these are incredible values—you’re definitely getting a small monitor that sounds much larger than it is, but the world-class imaging and soundstaging takes the Duos to another level.

On the other hand, the Marten Oscar Duos are intriguing because they don’t sound like the other premium two-way monitors I’ve championed lately, although I do think they have a lot in common with the Stenheims in terms of clarity and presence. Instead of me saying that the Duos aren’t like those other speakers, which suggests a “not my cup of tea but you may love it” pseudo-recommendation, I’m going to come out and say these speakers made me reconsider what I deem a priority in bookshelf speaker designs. The more time I spent with the Marten Oscar Duos, the more I realized that I could definitely make this new, *faster* approach “my” sound.







