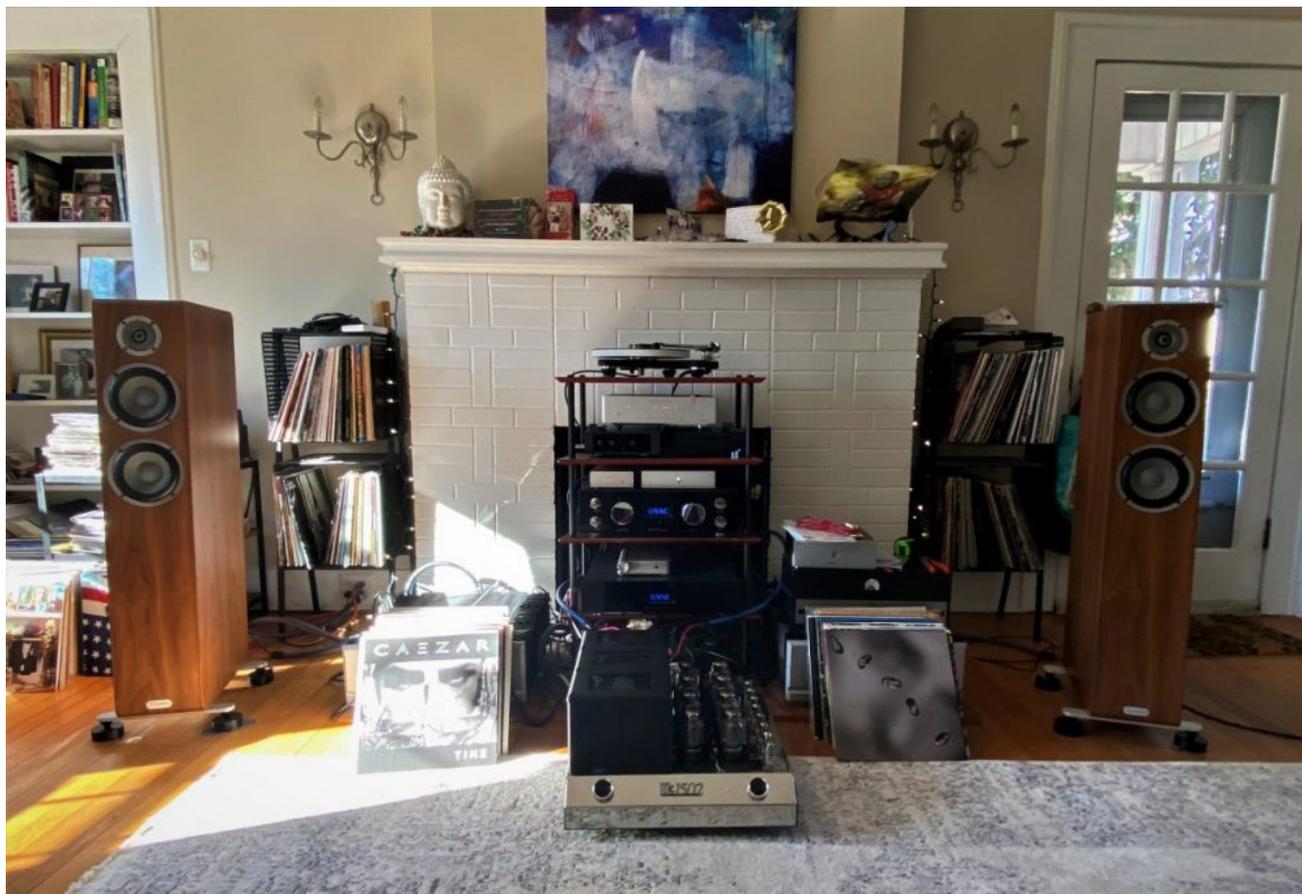


Marten Oscar Trio Loudspeakers | REVIEW

Posted on February 14, 2021 by Dave McNair in Loudspeakers



At Casa de McAudiophile, the impressive hit parade of floor standing speakers continues. This latest installment of chart-topping performers is the seductive sounding and beautiful Marten Oscar Trio from the Sweden (<https://www.marten.se/>). The Oscar Trios are not only the first speaker from Marten I've had the pleasure to hear; their ceramic composite drivers are also a first in my listening room.

I found the sound of these speakers to have a uniquely classy quality: they are precise, clean and fast, but with a richness and ability to portray tonal complexity in recordings that is something more than just accurate. The Marten Oscar Trios bring an inviting quality to the music played through them. That stately and authoritative *something* puts them in quite a charming spot on my listenability/accuracy matrix.

Brothers

I seem to be receiving a preponderance of speaker systems from Scandinavian countries, Sweden in particular. Is it possible there is an informal World Class Nordic Speaker Designers club in



Gothenburg? I wonder if the Marten team of Leif, Lars, and Jorgen Olofsson ever hang out in a sauna and talk speaker design with (<https://parttimeaudiophile.com/2020/09/22/an-interview-with-mats-andersen-of-qln-audio/>)? Well, even if the two companies don't share ideas, the friendly competition has undoubtedly resulted in some fantastic sounding speakers.

It seems like we are in the midst of a golden age of loudspeaker system design. Driver technology using exotic materials has come a long way in reducing distortion and increasing linearity. Carbon fiber, Kevlar, aluminum, ceramic, diamond, both in a pure state or as part of a composite with paper and other materials, has reduced distortion of all types to a degree not previously available in dynamic drivers.

Reducing or eliminating cabinet resonance by controlling or mitigating the driver and cabinet's energy transfer is commonplace in many current designs. Some use exotic materials like aluminum, granite, carbon fiber composites, while others use innovative ways to disperse energy using more common materials. While the basics of crossover design are rooted in physics that hasn't changed, there seems to have been quite a bit of progress in making passive crossovers more invisible and better integrated into the entire driver/cabinet ecosphere.

Another interesting plot twist has been the emergence of the price-is-no-object category for a flagship product or product line. With enough buyers to warrant today's flagship prices, this also means companies can get more return from their investment in flagship tech when it's applied to lower-priced offerings.

The Marten Oscar Trio is a floor-standing dual-bass driver two-way. The Trio (\$10,995 MSRP) and its little sister, the stand-mounted Duo (\$6,995, add \$995 for stands), are the two models in Marten's

new lower-priced Oscar series which sits below the Heritage, Parker, Mingus, and the flagship Coltrane series. (The Coltrane Supreme 2 can be had for the kingly sum of \$500,000.) I could easily hear the result of this extraordinary tech trickle-down and boundary-pushing in the Marten Oscar Trio, so did Marc Phillips when (<https://parttimeaudiophile.com/2021/02/07/marten-oscar-duo-loudspeakers-review/>).



The Duo and Trio are entirely new designs featuring all-new ceramic drivers designed in house by founder Leif Marten Olofsson. Leif was kind enough to give me some of his backstory, which I find as fascinating as the product. Having built speakers since the mid-'70s, he first came across and started experimenting with ceramic drivers around 1992 or so, and that's when things got interesting. Leif feels that ceramic drivers exhibit an electrostatic style of transparency and resolution with none of the drawbacks of an electrostatic driver-based system. Later, when a bass-mid ceramic driver became available, the first Marten loudspeaker was born—the Mingus.



But ceramic drivers, while more straightforward to use than electrostatic panels, are not totally without unique issues to overcome. To quote Leif:

“The challenges to design a loudspeaker with hard and stiff ceramic drivers are to take care of the fundamental resonance that a ceramic driver has. If you don’t do it properly, the sound could be horrible, but if you can take care of it, the result is better than any other material (except diamond) I know of.”

The cabinetry of the Marten Oscar Trio also plays a large role in controlling or reducing the transfer of energy-based colorations. I’ll be honest—there was a time when I didn’t see how there could be a whole lot of benefit in using exotic enclosure materials past the point of a solidly built, conventional enclosure. It’s just marketing, right? Oh, Hell No. At this point, I’ve heard enough modern designs that employ these newer, more exotic energy/resonance damping techniques to know what I’m hearing is different. And great.

That first time you hear dynamic driver based/exotic material damped enclosure speakers like a Wilson, TIDAL, Magico, Acora, or Stenheim (to name just a few), you know something about the sound is exceptional. Whether that kind of sound (or lack of) resonates with you is your business. I like the sound of those types of designs a lot. But I also have a soft spot for speakers that employ more traditional materials yet designed with current, cutting-edge thinking. The QIn Prestige Three (and Five) are a couple that come to mind, and now I’ll add the Marten Oscar Trio to that list. To quote Leif on enclosure materials:

“I use mostly carbon fibre laminate that is probably the best material that can be used for loudspeaker cabinets. This is the reference and my benchmark. So all other cabinets for the Oscar, Parker and Mingus series I tried to achieve similar performance but with less exclusive materials. For the Oscar series, I use a specially chosen fibreboard and the bracing of the cabinets are crucial to get the best result.”

Could it be that one of the reasons I liked Marten Oscar Trio and its sound so much is the combo of very high-resolution ceramic drivers coupled to a slightly more traditional but very well designed and constructed enclosure? Are the wood and fiberboard doing something that makes the sound more forgiving? I can’t know the answer to that question, but whatever it is, I like it—a lot.

Is That Red House With White Furniture Inside Yours?

The Marten Oscar Trio pair that arrived for review were a beautiful walnut matte finish that looked great in my room. The simple, clean lines of its timeless Scandinavian modern styling exudes high-quality craftsmanship. Piano black and white finishes are also available.

Marten uses WBT Nextgen terminals and internal wiring by Jorma Design along with two 7” ceramic mid/woofers and a ceramic tweeter, all fed from a quasi 1st order crossover. Marten uses proper 1st order filter shapes in their higher-priced lines; however, Leif opted to go for something in between a 1st and 2nd order slope in the Oscar series for simplicity of components and better matching driver limitations. While I’ve found that 1st order crossovers can significantly contribute to an audible sense of *coherence*, Leif and the fellas at Marten have somehow figured out how to maintain that same sense of wholeness with a crossover that’s not a true 1st order slope. Regardless, the Marten Oscar Trios are some of the most coherent sounding loudspeakers I’ve had the pleasure of hearing.

While not exactly small or light (43” high, 11.4” wide, 15.7” deep, and 67 pounds apiece), unpacking

the Marten Oscar Trios was easy. I didn't need to call Sergei or Chris this time, just little ole me. They came with an excellent book-bound manual, also containing a CD. The CD had a track of test tones that Marten recommends using for break-in.



I found the Marten Oscar Trio sounded great on the first needle drop but did get better as time went on. Most noticeable to me was the bass that seemed to loosen up a bit over time. This change was not in a simple tight-to-loose way, but rather a subtle increase in fatness while remaining ultra-fast and precise. I didn't notice the mids or treble to change that much—most of the time, I was too mesmerized by the music.

I set up the Trios in approximately the same tried and true spot that most speakers end up in my room: 42" from the front baffle to the wall behind. The included the round pucks that were placed under the conical feet below the metal outriggers. I made subtle adjustments during setup, but unlike some speakers I've tested there wasn't that One Spot where everything locks in. Maybe the down-firing port has something to do with it—who knows? Toe-in was to taste as per the Marten manual. Unless the speakers are designed to sound best with little or no toe-in (like the Acora SRC-2), I usually gravitate to a more focused presentation that happens with just a little less angle than a full on-axis to my listening spot. That's about where the Oscar Trios ended up.

The associated gear was as follows:

Rega Research P10 with Charisma Audio Signature One cartridge or Vertere MG-1 with Vertere Mystic MC cart, VAC Master Preamplifier with built-in phono stage, mostly a McIntosh MC 1502 power amplifier with occasional use of a pair of Pass Labs XA-60.8 monoblocks or Audio Hungary Qualiton APX-200 Mk II. I played digital sources via Roon and Qobuz from an Innuos Zen Mini streamer feeding a Denafrips Pontus DAC. All cabling was the exceptional Cardas Audio Clear Light and a Cardas Power Bar with associated power cords.

“If You Have Something To Say Of Any Worth, People Will Listen To You” —Oscar Peterson

I knew immediately on first listen that what came out of the namesake Marten Oscar Trios had great worth, at least to me. Hi-fi component designers and some reviewers love to talk about realism as their undying goal, but that's not a thing for me. Okay, when playing a handful of what I call documentary-style recordings on a very linear, wide bandwidth, low distortion system in a properly treated listening space, you *might* be fooled into thinking people are playing music in your room. I may be a picky listener, but for some reason, I don't care about that. Ultimately I just want things to sound good. The Oscar Trios sounded *amazing*.

Those extremely low distortion ceramic drivers played music in my room in the most sublime way.

The Marten Oscar Trio had a unique combination of speed, impact, resolution, and any other typical audiophile 'splainin' I could use to describe a speaker with almost undetectable levels of coloration. Yet there was a special soulful *something* that I heard in nearly every recording I played, a cozy feeling of *rightness* that made listening to my favorite tunes a special treat.

For some reason, the first thing my ears zero in on is always the low frequencies. Maybe that's because I have to focus so much on the low end when I'm in my mastering studio. I found the low end of the Marten Oscar Trio to pressurize my room extraordinarily well. Super-controlled bass and plenty to satisfy a bass lover like me. Those babies went deep with a size and authority I've only heard before in mega-buck, carefully set up systems. There's one big thumbs up.

The second thing I became aware of early on was a delicious smoothness coupled with a sense of ultra high resolution in the mids and treble. The Trios were not what I would term relaxed-sounding, but certainly not forward. I heard a very slight dip around 3-4 kHz that my ears loved.

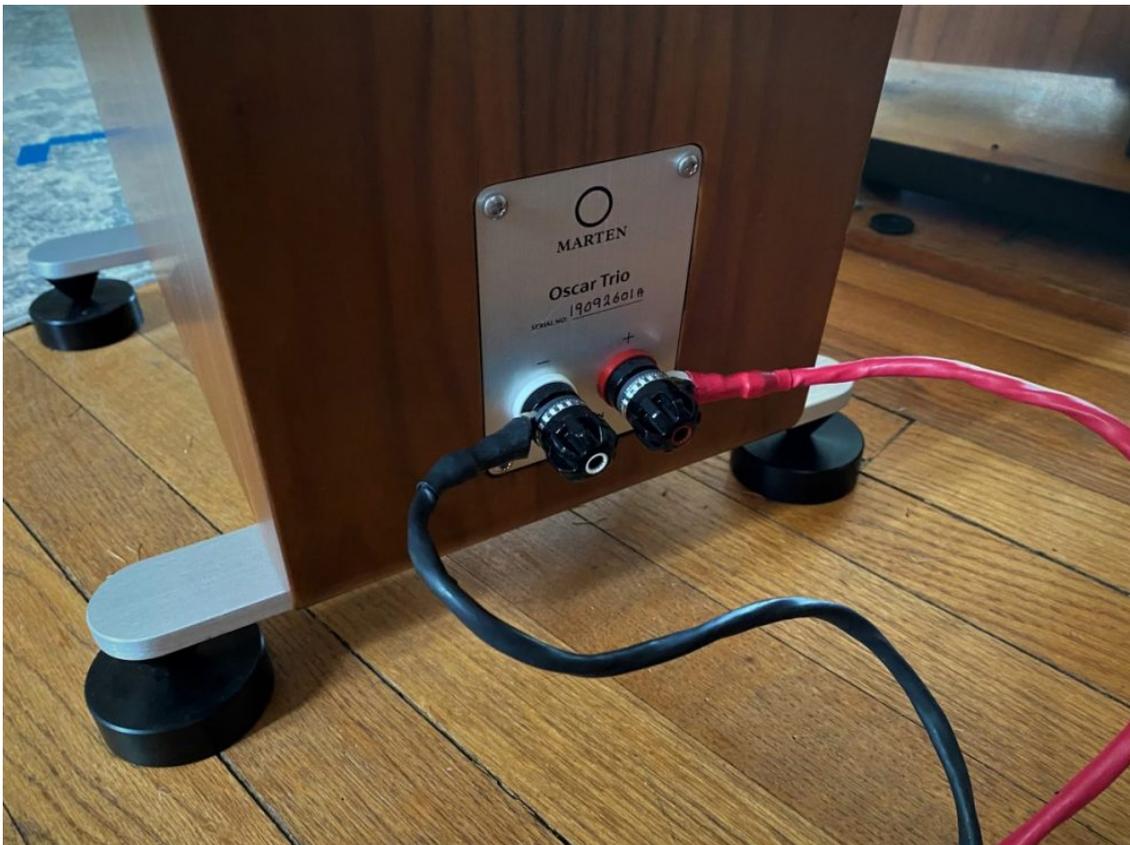
Another big thumbs up.

The imaging was superb, and among the best I've heard in my room. The Marten Oscar Trio didn't quite have the size and disappearing speaker trick of the Acora SRC-2's unique imaging presentation but rather their own thing, which was not exactly shabby. Plenty of clearly defined, beyond-the-speaker-placement width combined with the most stable and palpable phantom center image of just about any speakers I've heard in my little music palace.

Sensitivity is listed as 89db with a specified 6 ohm (3.1 minimum) impedance, which might matter to some folks with very low powered amps, but I found them easy to drive as loud as I wanted with the 60 watt Pass Labs XA-60.8. The Marten Oscar Trio sounded great with all three amps I had on hand. Still, I preferred them with the excellent 150 watts per channel, vacuum tube-powered McIntosh MC 1502—not for the extra power, but its complimentary tonality.

In the realm of subtle and possibly hard to describe attributes was the ability of the Marten Oscar Trio to portray recordings coherently—a feeling that the threads of the musical cloth, if you will, are a very tight weave. Even as recordings with dramatic dynamic and imaging properties sent sounds of instruments and vocals out of the speakers all over the sound field, things never seemed disjointed. It was more than merely a seamless handoff from one driver to the next (which is hard enough to achieve!) but a hard to describe, holistic vibe to the sound. The more time I spent listening to the Marten Oscar Trio, the more I agreed with Leif Olofsson's assessment that ceramic drivers can sound like electrostatic panels. I think the purity and coherence of sound in electrostatic designs are the dominant factors for why some folks will put up with their usual shortcomings.

I heard that same purity and coherence in the Trios, and I also heard a massive, fast low end combined with almost limitless ability to reproduce dynamics. The Oscar Trios could pound out Billie Eilish's "Bad Boy" ridiculously loud and yet the sound remained clean and clear with zero sense of strain in my room. They also reproduced every tiny dynamic and tonal shading of Kyung-Wha Chung's exquisite violin playing so emotionally that I had to remind myself to breathe.



Some Tunes I Used To Get My Groove On

I almost didn't put in this part. To use a tired audio reviewer's cliché, a short time after the setup and exploratory phase, I found it challenging to listen analytically. Music just sounded too good to engage that part of my brain. I usually have difficulty turning that little voice **off**; I had a hard time turning it **on** with the Marten Oscar Trios.

I like to see music references in reviews, so I'll pick a few to minimally chat about from the pile of records and the Qobuz/Roon combo that floated my boat.



The Brand New Heavies – *The Brand New Heavies* FUN
Talk Talk – *Spirit Of Eden* HYPNOTIC
Keith Jarrett – *My Song* ENGAGING
Becca Stevens – *Wonderbloom* MULTIDIMENSIONAL
Snarky Puppy – *Live At The Royal Albert Hall* THE ROAR OF THE CROWD
Wagner – *Tristan Und Isolde* DRAMATIC
Fantastic Negrito – *Have You Lost Your Mind Yet?* PHUNKY FRESH AND ROCKIN'
Tchaikovsky – *Violin Concerto in D Major* (Kyung-Wha Chung) JAWDROPPING
Marlon Craft – *How We Intended* SPITTIN' TRUTH
Vivaldi – *The Four Seasons* RELAXING

Hey, I said *minimally*. Whatever.

Last Call For The Sauna



What more can I say about the Marten Oscar Trio? I fell hard for their charms, that's for sure. I've had so many incredible sounding speakers in my listening room since writing for *Part-Time Audiophile* that it's impossible to pick a winner. Even if I could, I wouldn't because there is no such thing as the perfect loudspeaker. More importantly, everybody hears things differently, has different sounding listening rooms, and has a unique set of likes and dislikes that form their listening biases.

Some listeners may prefer a different setting for their musical playback picture, either the soft glow of evening lighting on your date at a romantic restaurant or the simple truth of outside light on a clear, sunny day. Either is valid or anywhere in between. To make matters even more complicated, I want a single pour black coffee on some days, and on other days I want a London Fog. But in the end, as I said before, the Marten Oscar Trio sits very close to the imaginary perfect spot on my personal accuracy/listenability matrix.

As far as value, one thing is definite: I only know of a handful of speaker systems anywhere **near** their price that offers worthy competition. Find a dealer. Arrange for a safe demo. You won't be sorry.

Highly recommended.