



mbl

5011 preamplifier

as reviewed by Marshall Nack



the mbl 5011 does Mr. Mozart

First of all, with no tubes in the chain, it's dead quiet. You will not find anything to complain about in the introduction to Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20 (*Mozart Piano Concertos 17 & 20*, with Piotr Anderszewski on piano and conducting the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Virgin Classics 0946 344696). String tone is good—no, make that excellent—for solid-state. (I'm spoiled by exposure to tube preamps. There's a certain kind of warmth and shimmer bordering on lushness that you sometimes hear at concerts, which I've never heard from anything but tubes. But that's icing on the cake.)

MARSHALL NACK'S SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS
Kharna CRM 3.2 and Kharna
Ce-Sb-10 sub woofer.

ELECTRONICS

von Gaylord Audio (formerly Legend Audio Design) LAD-L2 Signature line preamplifier, Kharma MP150 mono-blocks, and ART Audio Jota SET amp.

SOURCES

Linn LP12, LINGO, EKOS tonearm, ARKIV II cartridge, AHT Non-Signature phono preamp modified by Walker Audio, Extremephono Limited Edition and Graham IC-30 arm cables. CEC TL1X transport, von Gaylord Audio 2 chassis DAC.

CABLES

Interconnects by Kubala-Sosna, Kondo, Kharma Enigma. Digital Cables by Kubala-Sosna, and Kondo. Speaker wire by Kubala-Sosna, and Harmonix. Power Cords by Kubala-Sosna, Harmonix, Golden Sound, and TARA Labs.

ACCESSORIES

TAOC Rack and TITE-35S component footers, Golden Sound Intelligent Chip and Magic Rings, Walker Audio Tuning Discs and Valid Points for LP turntable, Harmonix RFA-78i Room Tuning Discs, RFS-66ZX Tuning Feet, RF-900, Acoustic System Resonators, Argent Room Lenses, Echo Buster & Sonex acoustic panels, TARA Labs PM/2 and IDAT power conditioners, and Ensemble Mega PowerPoint outlet strips. ERAudio Space Harmonizer component platforms.



Dynamics, stage width and image separation are superior. It's a deep stage. Images are well shaped, even if a little 2-D. (What I mean to say is, all in all, it's pretty realistic, if lacking ultimate audiophile embellishment.) No grain, no glare, no harshness in sight. Frequency response is uncommonly even and powerful in the low-end. The fullness and bloom of woodwinds surprised me, again given the solid-state origin. (This was with the mbl 5011 preamp on its built-in footers; a set of Harmonix RF-66ZX under it gave woodwinds even more bloom.) Ditto for decay and hall sound. Actually, there's more hall sound than I'm used to on this recording. Trails were longer and tended to converge towards center stage, in the process spreading the instrument's sound over a large area. Smooth... Let's see what happens when the piano comes in.

Individual piano notes are distinct, yet there's a good deal of blended sound. I bet there were at least two mikes on the instrument: one close, the other for hall perspective. As mentioned above, width is excellent, stopping short of tearing apart the gestalt of the instrument—notes are heard individually, but not in total isolation, not with those pockets of deep, dark anti-matter between them that some guys get off on. The hammer action at the transient is there, but heard dully. You hear a little of the strike, and then it quickly becomes the sustain. And it's a fairly homogeneous, smooth sustain, with only slight texture. Transients are fast and never abrasive. But I'm nitpicking here—the key thing is the reproduction is damn good, with all the things we audiophiles listen for. This preamp is not at all conforming to my expectations of a solid-state component costing \$8382.



The piano on Geri Allen's, Lush Life (*The Life of a Song*, Telarc CD-83598, with Dave Holland and Jack DeJohnette), is another story.

Played back via the mbl 5011, I know I'm listening to a studio recording, and not a good one at that. (It was recorded at Avatar Studios, NYC by Michael Bishop in 2004.) I remember it being bright and thin on first listen about a year ago. It sure has a lot of weight and flesh now, with a big, percussive sound. The treble is extended, but no longer prominent—the lower midrange is now in the fore. Pieces of the piano span the stage (I assume that's because microphone choices put frequency bands

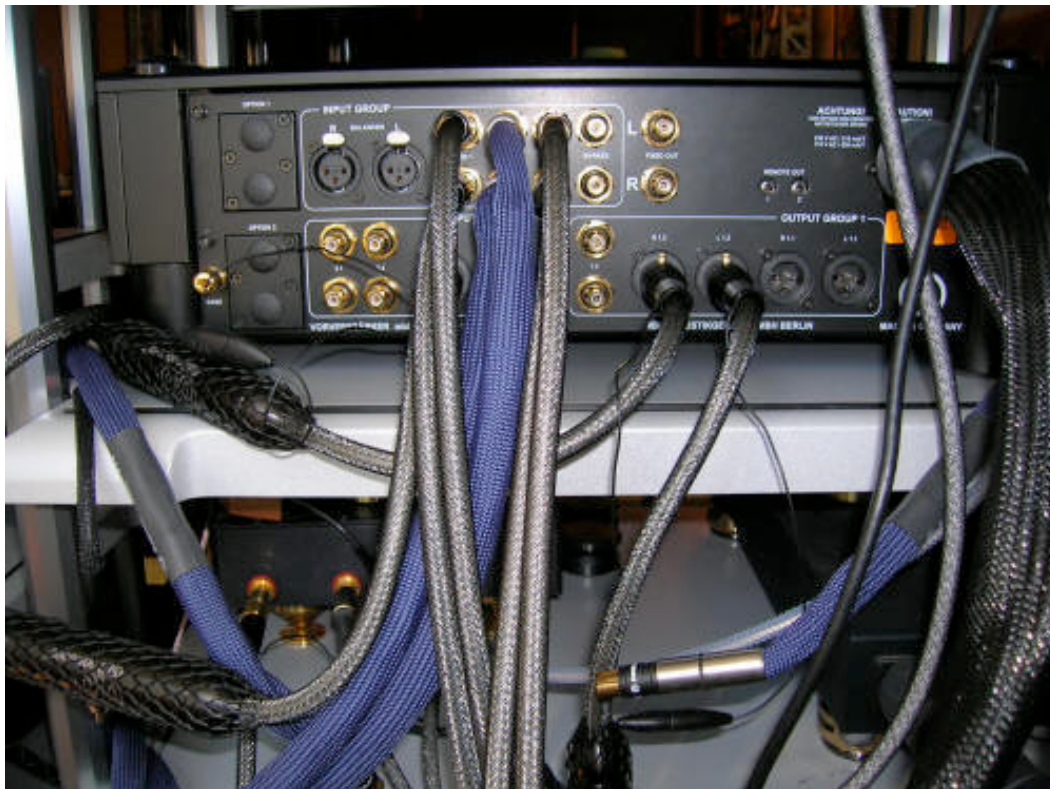
all over the place). Quite distinctly, though very softly, the double bass comes in. As the music builds momentum, the tight bass gains power and becomes oversize, just like the piano. Soft taps on the high-hat cymbal exhibit an interesting decay, displaying lots of low-level variation. I still don't hear enough hammer action on the piano. In fact, it sounds a lot like the one on the *Mozart Piano Concertos* CD.

These two recordings give you a quick snapshot of the mbl 5011 preamp. First impression is a stunner. What you get is a smooth, slightly warm and dark frequency response, with great dynamics and a ton of low-end, fulsome body, and a certain kind of purity, or freedom, from the telltale clues to its solid-state origin. The mbl 5011 sounds direct, immediate, slightly forward. It gets an A on all majors on the audiophile report card. (In a minute, we'll get to the minor subjects, wherein lies its shortcomings—things like the hammer action on pianos.)

Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra doing *Big Train* (Sony SRCS 8980, Japanese import) requires a good deal of brawn to pull off. It only clicked once for me, back when I had the massive low-end thrust of the high-sensitivity Hørning Agathon Ultimate loudspeakers. Subsequent combinations just couldn't manage it.

The mbl 5011 appears to be made for this sort of torture test. It shows its mettle with large, complex material, stuff that needs to sound powerful. You can throw anything at it; it doesn't seem to have a dynamic ceiling. It never broke up or lost its composure at any volume level I tried. *Big Train* was happening. The air in the room was in motion—the sound circled out from the speaker plane into the room, giving you the sense of pressurized air you get from the real thing.

With the mbl 5011 in place I had a solid-state lineup that no one identified as such. Didn't sound much like tubes either: it just sounded *real* good. Actually, it was a whole lot better than good. The typical session unfolded thusly: guys came in with green visors on, inspecting the system from top to bottom for sub-par performance areas, like a group of auditors from what used to be known as the Big Five. So far, this is normal. The attitude was quickly dashed after just one or two tunes; after which 90% of conversation was related to musical performance. The configuration at this point was the mbl 5011 preamp into two pairs of Kharma MP150 mono amps bi-amping Kharma Exquisite-Midi speakers and it cleared the deck, just wiped the table clean... and let you relax as never before.



Ancillaries for the mbl 5011 included TARA Labs The One power cord, IDAT power conditioner and The .8 interconnect (in for review), along with my reference Kubala-Sosna Emotion ICs.



Issues gone, I found the system had developed a massive immunity to tweaking. An assortment arrived just at this time—and it was just a case of bad timing. Unfortunate, because we heard what they did—clarify and expand the soundstage, or deal with treble issues, stuff that would have been magical elixirs at any other time. With this rig, they were unnecessary—we kept going back to the untreated

components. The tweaks didn't make it better, just different. I'm referring to the wild-n-wacky evening that Golden Sound Wizard Allen Chang came to visit, lugging two suitcases that didn't contain his toothbrush and PJs. (I hope to have more on the reincarnated Golden Sound Intelligent Chip next month).

the Audio Note Japan M77 preamp

So far, the mbl 5011 pre probably sounds too good to be true. It is impressive—more impressive than it has a right to be for \$8382—and I'm sure most audio consumers would find it so. Well, it's time to let some helium out of the balloon. To that end, I will have to do something that's not really pro forma: reach out to two Statement Class preamps.

I had access to the Audio Note Japan M77 preamp for a couple of days (MSRP \$39,000). This return visit proved just as sobering as on first acquaintance. The M77 presents another side of the coin. (I say "another," as opposed to "the other," because the coin of the audio realm has many facets.)

Amazement begins as one attempts to comprehend the M77's unbelievable timbral fidelity, which is simply without peer. Tonal shadings, articulation and expression are foremost, in the way a cello might begin, build in intensity, then trail off, with varied bowing technique and shifting vibrato along the way. This is a well-formed, round sound, and very far from an aggressive one. The sound doesn't come out to you in a straight line, but kind of curves and sidles up. One doesn't look to analyze this sound to death (actually, for once, I couldn't). One hears the M77 speak and just knows it's the truth. The audiophile layer of comprehension is misplaced in this context.



The M77 presents you with a wide-open window, with unparalleled "see-through," or maybe I should say "see-into," transparency. Its view is more distant—the stage moved a giant step back. Now you feel you're in a medium/large hall and the piano sounds like an acoustic instrument on Geri Allen's rendering of Lush Life. And again, with violinist Hilary Hahn doing the Bernstein Serenade, another demo class CD (*Beethoven Bernstein*, SONY SK 60584), you have orchestra seats (no, more likely, you have mezzanine or first balcony). The "you are in the audience" feel of the M77 attained the highest level of concert hall verisimilitude, if always from a balcony seating. I was finding this to be the case with everything I played through it.

Tonally, the M77 has a similar midrange to the mbl 5011, and its top is about the same, too, just a little thinner. But bass was woefully reduced. Yet the M77 bass is tighter and more articulate, because of its fondness for the higher harmonics, just like the ANJ wires in my reference library. The note strikes and immediately you hear all these higher overtones, giving it bounce and lift—the sound is light on its feet—and makes for great PRAT (pace, rhythm and timing—the quality of playback that sets your foot a-tapping).

The M77 has a silvery metallic signature, compared to the saturated copper of the mbl. This is the M77's lovely voice (or coloration, if you will), imposed on everything

played back through it. It doesn't do many of the things audiophiles talk about. I'd guess it would fare only so-so in the measurement section of a review. The mbl 5011 does them all.

Build quality of the M77 brought perspective. The build reflected the voicing—elegant, reserved, black tie, Cole Porter, if you will. When you heft the M77, you instantly realize there's more to it than its simple appearance lets on. The look and feel of the M77 reminds you of the existence of the luxury-class component.

the Lamm L2 Reference preamp

Now I'm going to slip in the Lamm L2 Reference preamp (MSRP \$14,790). Here's what we got. On Geri Allen's rendering of *Lush Life*, compared to the mbl 5011, all images inflated, focus dropped a notch, and the bass warmed up and spread. There's amazing textural filigree and animation around the cymbal deep right, it's something I could pick out and listen to all on its own. This newly revealed filigree didn't sound like an acoustic add-on (artifact) fabricated by the component. It had more to do with resolution and fulfillment of vulnerable low-level info. It wasn't there before. Then there's the light, snappy taps on the ride cymbal, and a heck of a low-end on Dave Holland's solo. Sure, the upright bass is more spread, but it also has little things going on within it, like the occasional plucking of the strings, and sometimes the string making a slapping noise when plucked too hard.

The Lamm had more blending and less separation of individual piano notes. It's just as quiet, but there's no sense of "deep blackness between the notes," or deep silences. On the contrary, I'm impressed by the seamless continuity across the stage, with all musicians in the same place. It's unmistakably an acoustic instrument, and it's unmistakably warmer and more *midrangy*. I can't believe how far I've come since my first listen to this CD about a year ago, when I deemed it so bright and badly engineered, I almost sold it back to the record store. The Lamm has a seriously acoustic, modern tube sound, even though all five tubes are in the separate power supply chassis. The control unit itself is 100% solid-state.

On the Bernstein *Serenade* with Hilary Hahn, my god, what string tone! It's a very spacious stage. Sounds come from everywhere but the speakers. The *pianissimo* intro consisting of violin, soon joined by upper strings, has an ethereal, airy ambience. It's definitely more lush than the mbl, but far from euphonic—we have a ways to go before that. Most of its energy was contained between the ranges of upper bass through upper midrange. There wasn't as much deep bass or high treble. The Lamm's treble is sweet and round, its bottom a little ripe (warm), and its midrange on the cool side, verging on analytical—sounds like a recipe for schizophrenia, no? You hear these different personalities, depending on the frequency. It has lots of bass, but it doesn't hit you with a closed fist—it's more like a slap with a warm heating pad. Tonal balance overall was much lighter.

When the orchestra builds momentum, dynamics are a little flatter—images don't pop like they do with the mbl. The Lamm's presence and immediacy came from subtle, natural sounding cues: the mbl's come from its impressive dynamics. Some might hear the Lamm's drop in dynamics, its flatter, more recessed stage, as veiling. Coming from an education in and a preference for classical music, I hear it as quite true to the concert hall experience, at least from my usual balcony seats. But snappy jazz tunes didn't have as much snap—dynamics are less impressive.

In its own way, the Lamm L2 had a timbral truthfulness as convincing as that of the ANJ M77, if done differently. It's more about informational nuances and facets, like the flutist adjusting breath control on his *flute à bec*, or the odd quill-like, plucking noises of a *pianoforte*. The Lamm brings out more textural content, rather than the M77's timbral kinds of things.

Note: all serious listening with the Lamm L2 was done with a set of Harmonix RF-66ZX, or the TAOC footers under its power supply. (The control section was left to

its own feet). The unadorned Lamm L2 sounded lightweight, and diffuse.

the Minor Subjects

In the final analysis, I was aware of compromises. These two Reference level preamps provided the timbral truthfulness (the M77), or the convincing articulation (the Lamm) I was missing—the mbl 5011's ascent stops short of those peaks. Ultimately, its smoothness is responsible for a blunted aspect that gets in the way of resolution of surface texture and timbre, and causes a loss of some of the variation in massed strings, for example.

There are more of these calculated shortfalls of subtle things. I say calculated because I think the mbl 5011 strikes an intentional balance between performance and cost. The design covers the major concerns admirably, while making sure to avoid potential offence. The noted smoothness that gets in the way of ultimate resolution also insures that it will never sound brittle or edgy. And probably it all has to do with cost. Taking what the mbl 5011 does and building in the *nth* degree of performance is not feasible at this price point.

But it would be a mistake to be dismissive of the mbl's strengths. There are very few preamps that vanquish the major concerns so thoroughly. In terms of dynamics, noise floor and evenness and quality of frequency response, neither of the big boy preamps did. In my book, you better address these major areas early on, or else you're going to be spending a lot of time and money later. There's almost nothing worse (nor more prevalent) than thin, bright sound. Excellent timbre and natural articulation hanging on a weightless body means you're going to have to fix it. God, if only there was a product that did it *all*, at *any* price.

Late breaking news. I have found one. Such a phantasm exists in the mbl 5011's bigger brother, the mbl 6010 D preamp. This guy does it all, and in a shockingly transcendent manner. One taste will mean you can't go home again, even if home is a Lamm L2.

The 6010 D is darker and even more dynamic than the 5011. Its soundstage is vast, with images well segregated and arrayed where you would expect them to be. There isn't a huge increase in detail per se, but somehow, even though the same musicians are out there, the stage is more densely populated. It does the audiophile dog and pony show like no preamp I've encountered. And then, the 6010 D rises to the level of natural articulation offered by the Lamm L2, if not quite up to the M77's timbral verisimilitude.

Downsides? If you thought the mbl 5011 was physically large, which it is, wait 'til you spy the 6010 D: it is *gigantus*—so oversized in all dimensions, it may not fit on your shelf. And it will set you back \$18,920.

These two mbl preamps have a lot in common. They are warmer and smoother than any transistors I've known. And they are more accurate, measurement-wise, than tubes. There's absolutely no glare, grain or hardness. They have a strikingly un-electronic signature. I don't know how mbl achieved this, or what kind of technology is responsible for it.



Functionality & Cosmetics

The mbl 5011 has a staggering number of options. The flexibility of this component will satisfy any kind of audiophile, from the two-channel purist to the multi-room, any-number-of-input home theatre rig. Think of the possibilities with two variable output groups, each with its own volume control. I was bi-amping with Group 1 for mid/treble and Group 2 for bass, and able to do on the fly bass/treble equalization, just to answer "What If" scenarios. Or, use the second set for a powered sub. Each Group has both balanced XLR and single-ended RCAs. (There is also a Fixed Output Group to connect to a recorder).

And these are the built-ins. Then there are the options which can be specified when you place an order. Space is reserved on the rear panel for what looks like a template with two slots. These are in case you want the optional phono MM/MC, CD direct, processor or sym-in units.

The mbl 5011 is quiet as a church mouse. You can put your ear right up against the drivers... and not hear a peep. How can a device with so much functionality (which implies complicated circuit design and extra parts in the signal path) have such purity and be so darn quiet? Noteworthy also is the absence of cross-talk leakage from the various inputs. You can leave your tuner on while playing vinyl—you won't hear it dimly leaking through in the background. Between the 5011 and the Kharma MP150 amps, the noise floor has never been this low.

The mbl 5011 has the high-tech, contemporary look of modern materials and design. It has a serious, no-nonsense aspect about it—not quite severe, but definitely masculine looking—which most people found attractive. The choice of materials reflects the price point: everything is finished to a high standard, if not luxury class.



The built-in footers worked very well. I tried some TAOC TITE-35S footers and it did increase definition, but the built-ins gave images more solidity. A set of Harmonix RF-66ZX footers did their acoustic tuning thing, almost sounding like some valves had been added.

A couple of minor complaints: I had both a plastic and the metal remote (optional).

All functions are said to be accessible from the front panel or via the remote, but if you mute it from the front panel, you have to again use the front panel to engage it: it won't work via the remote. Sometimes the remote's volume adjustment was unresponsive: it would take a few tries to engage. Both remotes need some work to get the kinks out. Also note the volume display occasionally indulges in auto-stimulation, where the last digit changes slightly even though you haven't touched anything. Don't be concerned: this is because it uses an analog potentiometer, not a digital one. And the very large, front-mounted volume control had a feel like the tuning knobs on FM tuners of yore—the mid-level ones, not the ones with the silky, flywheel mechanism.

Conclusion

Had I a test bench available, I bet the mbl 5011 preamp would come through with flying colors. It is linear across its wide bandwidth, with no suckouts, and no swells, and has excellent treble integration and consistent quality and feel up and down. It has no discernable distortions, no hint of grain or glare. And it is by far the most full-bodied pre I've encountered, with fleshy images and all the weight and support you've dreamt about late at night. Dynamics are scary good. Soundstage width is excellent; depth and height are good.

Its top-notch resolution is tempered by a slightly warm, smooth and dark tonal balance, which allows it to avoid being labeled analytical. And that doesn't exhaust the mbl's strengths: throw at it what you will, you won't cause it to lose composure; its headroom seems to be unlimited.

It gets the big picture very right: there are *no* major issues. But there are minor ones. If you move up significantly to residents of the Statement Class, like the fully tubed

Audio Note Japan M77, or the hybrid Lamm L2 Reference, you will hear what's missing—the ultimate resolution of subtleties and nuances that dwell in the realm of timbre, texture and articulation, in the roundness and 3-D sculpting of images that tubes can do.

This guy is a category killer. If your rig is in the A league, but shy of the rarefied, and much more expensive realms, I'm sure you won't find better. With the mbl 5011, you get a very high percentage of what's to be had from the best there is. **Marshall Nack**

5011 preamplifier

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