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The Audio Critic

Critic represents the personal findings and judgments of the Editor and the Staff, based only on the equipment available to their scrutiny and on their knowledge of the subject, and is therefore not offered to the reader as an infallible truth nor as an irreversible opinion applying to all extant and forthcoming samples of a particular product.

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Mark Levinson Is Clearly on Top Again: The New Generation of MLAS Preamplifiers

Publisher's Note:

Some of our subscribers still don't seem to understand that the cover date on a Bulletin isn't our official designation of the day you're supposed to receive it. Unlike the commercial magazines, we don't postdate each issue to make up for the amount of time it takes to print it, presort it for second-class mail, feed it through the post office channels and get it delivered to your mailbox.

Even so, the gap between cover date and delivery date should become smaller and smaller with each Bulletin as we continue to debug our biweekly printing and mailing system. If you're receiving all issues in their correct numerical sequence, and if the interval between deliveries settles down after Bulletin 4 or 5 to a fairly regular two weeks, you can assume that you're being serviced as intended, regardless of cover dates. When everything is working smoothly, second-class mail is almost as fast as first class, at least according to the United States Postal Service.

Our Canadian and overseas subscribers, however, appear to be somewhat more difficult to phase into our new mailing system than was anticipated. We beg your special indulgence until we iron out all the little snags; meanwhile we may have to cluster your Bulletins two or three at a time in one envelope to keep you apace with our domestic subscribers, although we certainly didn't plan it that way. We won't neglect you, in any event, no matter what obstacles the PO thinks up next.

We sincerely hope that this will be our last commentary on the uninteresting subject of mailing and deliveries.

In this issue:

Preamplifiers: Mark Levinson ML-6A and ML-7....	1
Tonearm: Technics EPA-100.....	2
Records&Recording: Sheffield Lab 8.....	3
Reference Systems	3
Box 392: Letters to the Editor.....	4

As we've pointed out before, Mark Levinson has carved out a very precarious niche for his company. If it turns out that a particular piece of MLAS equipment is the world's finest, the natural reaction within the audio community is, "Well, I should hope so—for that kind of money anything but the best would be a rip-off." And if another maker comes out with something better for less money, the *raison d'être* of MLAS is gone, since even a very close second place is obviously untenable at the world's highest prices. Where the loftiest excellence is a nonnegotiable obligation and any lapse from it a total disaster, there must be some sleep lost at night, and indeed the company has had its share of problems. With recent refinancing and entirely new business management, things seem to be headed in the right direction again.

For the above reasons (and also as longtime, albeit sometimes grudging, admirers of Mark Levinson's quixotic stance in the face of commercial marketing realities), we take considerable satisfaction in reporting that, at least in preamplifiers, MLAS is unquestionably at the summit again. At this stage of the inflationary cycle, however, that piece of intelligence may be of significance only to oil sheiks and cocaine dealers.

Preamplifiers:

Mark Levinson ML-6A & ML-7

Mark Levinson Audio Systems, Ltd., 131 Leeder Hill Drive, Building 261, Hamden, CT 06517 (or PO Box 6183, Hamden, CT 06517). ML-6A mono preamplifier, \$5500 the pair (with L2 low-gain phono modules) or \$6000 the pair (with L3 high-gain MC phono modules). ML-7 stereo preamplifier, \$4000 (with L2 modules) or \$4500 (with L3 modules). Separate L2 modules, \$380 the pair. Five-year warranty. Tested ML-6A #4671 and #4672, owned by The Audio Critic, and two different samples of the ML-7, on loan from dealer.

Our interim report on the ML-7 in Vol. 2, No. 3 (our last magazine-size issue) already held out the possibility that this might end up as our top choice among preamps, regardless of price, but of course we hadn't reckoned with the ML-

6A. Let's first of all define the differences between the two models.

Both the ML-7 and the ML-6A use exactly the same RIAA-equalized phono circuitry and the same line amplifier, representing Tom Colangelo's latest and most highly refined ideas on low-level voltage amplification. Both use the same self-contained power supply, the PLS-154. There the similarities end. The ML-7 is a stereo preamplifier with full switching and control facilities (except tone controls). The ML-6A is a complete and independent mono design with only two controls on its front panel: a 3-way phono/off/line switch and a volume control, so that the signal path is virtually hardwired from input to output. A stereo front end made up of two ML-6A's thus has two PLS-154's, i.e., twice the power supply of the ML-7, and each channel is totally isolated from the other in its own separate metal chassis. Furthermore, the additional elbowroom available per channel permits considerably more power-supply bypassing in the ML-6A than in the ML-7, as well as a different and even more effective grounding configuration. Tom Colangelo believes that neither your power supply nor your grounds can ever be good enough.

We must admit a strong and long-standing philosophical aversion to what we call the platinum sledgehammer school of audio design, in this case exemplified by taking an already astronomically priced superpreamp, making it significantly less versatile and flexible, as well as physically more cumbersome, and adding a \$1500 surcharge—all in the name of perfectionism. On the other hand, we must also admit that even the "basic" ML-7 is sonically superior to any other preamp we've tested so far, except (you guessed it) the ML-6A, which sounds even better. We can't allow our abstract principles to get in the way of our actual observations. Whether the ML-6A concept could have been physically realized and packaged with greater elegance and cost-effectiveness will have to remain a moot point, as will the more general consideration of value per dollar as regards either the ML-7 or the ML-6A. The fact is that no other maker has so far put on the market anything comparable to these units, not just in sonic accuracy but also (and especially) in tender loving care of construction, leaving us without a valid reference point as to "fair" price for this kind of craziness. It must also be pointed out that other top-notch preamplifiers, such as for example the Robert Grodinsky Research Model Four, can be improved in imaging and definition by hooking up two units simultaneously, leaving one channel unused in each.

What are the audible points of superiority of the new Levinson models over our previous reference selections? The most obvious is their neutrality; they just disappear when inserted into a chain of reference-quality components. The ML-6A disappears without a trace; it has no discernible signature, not even that ever-so-slight thickening of the lower midrange introduced by some of the finest and costliest preamps. By comparison, the ML-7 gives just the barest hint of an electronic intermediary, verging on the imperceptible. Having been exposed to this level of refinement in the playback of familiar program material, we can now hear with some difficulty an elusive overlay (or maybe underlay) of electronic smeariness in the sound of the RGR Model Four, our previous favorite and still by far the finest preamp at an affordable price (\$650). Since the latter's long suit is the handling of dynamic peaks, the Levinson units are clearly as good or even better in

that respect, and their focus is just a bit superior. The ML-6A is absolutely uncanny in its rendition of spatial information, creating almost a holographic effect with properly microphoned recordings; the ML-7 can only be awarded a strong second place on that count, as the difference is distinctly audible.

Overall, the virtues of the ML-7 and ML-6A consist mainly of all the undesirable things they *don't* do, thus being very difficult to nail down in descriptive words. Let's just add, therefore, that their behavior on the lab bench is absolutely exemplary; there isn't a thing we can fault in them as to RIAA equalization, square-wave response, channel separation, overload characteristics—you name it. For example, they pass Bob Grodinsky's dynamic headroom "torture test" (see Vol. 2, No. 3, p. 23) with aplomb. Our usual little measurement quibbles are simply not applicable in this case.

Please note that all of the above comments apply to the use of the L2 low-gain phono module, driven from the Cotter MK-2L transformer. Our experience with the L3 high-gain module that accepts MC cartridges without a step-up device has been limited and not entirely positive. The L2 was set for 38 dB of gain (44 dB is the other available setting) and 50K ohms input impedance (825 ohms also available).

One more thing. It remains our conviction that a heavy-duty broadcast-type step attenuator with coin-silver contacts is the right volume control for price-no-object preamplifiers. The continuously variable control favored by Mark Levinson just isn't in the same class. Not that we can point to any compromises in measurable performance or sound quality as a result, but what will happen after five years of heavy use? Our impression is that even though price was no object, the cachet of the low-profile Mark Levinson Look wasn't negotiable, and those big fat attenuators won't fit into a box with only 1½ inches of internal space between the top and bottom panels. Thus does perfectionism become subordinate to image in the disorienting climate of high-end audio. Or so it seems.

Tonearm:

Technics EPA-100

Technics by Panasonic, Panasonic Company, Division of Matsushita Electric Corporation of America, One Panasonic Way, Secaucus, NJ 07094. Technics R&B series EPA-100 Universal Tonearm, \$380. Tested sample on loan from manufacturer.

As explained in Vol. 2, No. 3, our methods of turntable and tonearm testing are currently undergoing an "agonizing reappraisal," with the hope of new (or at least valid) insights emerging in **The Audio Critic Handbook** toward the end of this year. This period of vacillation shouldn't prevent us, however, from publishing our considered opinion of outstanding new products we've tried, such as this beautiful tonearm.

The EPA-100 is a curved tubular tonearm made of tita-

nium, a metal that combines lightness and mechanical strength (hence its use in aerospace vehicles) plus relative acoustical deadness. A special nitridation treatment that deposits a thin layer of titanium nitride on the surface further enhances these properties. The gimbal suspension is made with ruby ball bearings, against which the pivot shafts are held tight by coil springs. This is a very sophisticated pivot suspension, resulting in extremely low friction and, to our probing fingers, zero wobble. In addition, the balance weight incorporates an elaborate and broadly adjustable "dynamic damping" system that looks to us like a more refined version of the Dual antiresonant device we described in Vol. 1, No. 4. The VTA is adjustable during play, and the very nicely damped headshell incorporates a cursor that helps to index the overhang alignment.

Without passing judgment on this design approach before our criteria are absolutely firm, we can report that the EPA-100 sounds absolutely gorgeous, quite in the same class with our reference tonearm, the Win Laboratories SDA-10, which has a few advanced features the Technics arm doesn't share. The EPA-100 isn't magnetically suspended or dynamically balanced; on the other hand, it doesn't cost \$1000, either. We haven't been able to listen to both arms with the same cartridge on the same turntable, but we suspect that there won't be a sonic wipeout of either one by the other when we make that comparison. And that makes the EPA-100 an excellent buy at today's prices.

Again, we want to remind you that this isn't one of our definitive wring-'em-out test reports, but if you're looking for a reference-type tonearm that's a good buy, you don't need to wait for further documentation.

Reference Systems

Reference A (the best we've tested so far)

Quad electrostatic loudspeaker with **Janis W-1** subwoofer; **Octave Research** power amp with **Janis Interphase 1A** bass amplifier/crossover; **Mark Levinson ML-6A** preamp; **Fidelity Research MC-201** moving-coil cartridge with **Cotter MK-2L** transformer; **Win Laboratories SDC-10** turntable with **SDA-10** tonearm.

Alternative substitution at a huge saving: **Fourier 1** full-range speaker.

Reference B (best sound per dollar)

Fourier 1 full-range speaker; **Amber Series 70** power amp; **Robert Grodinsky Research Model Four** preamp; **Marcof PPA-2** pre-preamp; **Fidelity Research MC-201** moving-coil cartridge; **Kenwood KD-650** turntable/tonearm; optional **Platter Matter** turntable mat and **Cotter B-2** isolation platform.

Low-priced substitution at a proportionate sacrifice in sound quality: **DCM QED** speaker.

Records & Recording

As you may have gathered from our previous comments, we're desperate for a good demo recording of a large symphony orchestra but haven't found anything we're completely thrilled with so far. In a pinch we pull out the record below, which we probably shouldn't have ignored when it first came out, since its virtues far outweigh its flaws.

Sheffield Lab

Prokofiev: Excerpts from the Ballet, Romeo and Juliet. Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, Erich Leinsdorf, conductor. Produced by Lincoln Mayorga and Doug Sax; engineered by Doug Sax and Bud Wyatt. Sheffield Lab 8 (made in 1977-78).

We've mentioned the overbright and edgy quality of Sheffield Lab direct-to-disc recordings before and believed this album to be a prime example, along with the Wagner record made by the same forces at the same time. Now that we have moving-coil cartridges, step-up devices and preamplifiers that can deal with the most taxing levels of high-frequency energy without distress, we must revise that opinion somewhat. The high string passages on these records have an overwhelming first-row kind of sound, to be sure, but they no longer burn the ear when played through the very finest equipment. The MGM studio acoustics also contributed to the initial impression of glassy hardness, but we can't expect all recordings to originate from the world's greatest halls, and in all other ways the recorded sound here is in a class by itself.

We prefer the Prokofiev disc to the Wagner because an accurate rendition of the Wagnerian orchestra appears to be beyond the capabilities of present-day stereo technology, whereas the simpler textures, timbres and balances of Prokofiev yield to the Sheffield treatment quite readily. The dynamic range on this record is simply stupendous, equaled only by 30-IPS master tapes in our experience. Direct-to-disc advocates would have a potent argument even if they had no other example available. The bass is incredibly powerful but in balance with the rest; transients are super clean; the delineation of inner detail is close to perfection from top to bottom. There are really only two things we would have preferred differently chosen by Sheffield: the hall and the microphones. B & K 4133's would have tamed those fierce strings much more successfully.

The performance of this highly attractive, colorful score is perhaps not as imaginative and meticulously inflected under Leinsdorf's baton as it was in the 1973 Maazel/Cleveland recording on London (Decca); the music doesn't quite sing and dance and soar the same way. On the other hand, it must be remembered that each side here is an uninterrupted direct-to-disc take, which always requires a certain caution and deliberateness on the part of the conductor, since small corrections can't possibly be spliced in and starting all over again from the beginning costs a fortune. Even so, the Los Angeles Philharmonic plays beautifully, and the Sheffield sound is a whole era ahead of the Decca.

—Ed.

Box 392

Letters to the Editor

Contrary to the impression of a number of subscribers, we haven't excluded from our new format the possibility of publishing long letters and long replies in this column. For a letter of truly exceptional editorial interest, we would gladly consider an extra foldout page (i.e., pages 5 and 6) that would still leave the normal amount of space for our reviews. So far, however, all of the long letters we've received have been technical arguments and criticisms based on simple errors and oversights on the part of the letter writer. Rebutting these would be about as interesting as correcting a wrong address. Letters published here may or may not be excerpted, at the discretion of the Editor. Ellipsis (. . .) indicates omission. Address all editorial correspondence to The Editor, The Audio Critic, Box 392, Bronxville, New York 10708.

The Audio Critic:

Having been a subscriber to *The Audio Critic* since the first issue, I'd like to point something out that I think we could learn something from.

In your very first issue, you rate the

Dahlquist DQ-10 very highly. In one place, you point out that "its midrange may still be surpassed by the Quad, by a narrow margin, but overall the Dahlquist lets through more information." In later issues, the DQ-10 is bested by the DCM Time Window and other speakers.

Now, in your last old-style issue (Vol. 2, No. 3), you state that the Quads are the most transparent and neutral speakers tested so far—they must at this stage be quite a bit ahead of the DQ-10's. A contradiction does not necessarily exist here—the Quads may have improved, and/or you may be using better equipment to test them than in the past, as your yourself point out.

The point of all this is the following: where do the DQ-10's stand today? As a matter of fact, it might be a good idea to institute a policy of reviewing over again certain products that were once rated highly but have not been mentioned for some time.

Sincerely,
Larry Paul
Baldwin, NY

You're very kind to allow the possibility of no contradiction in this matter. Actually, we don't deserve such consideration. We should never have attributed to the DQ-10 any significant point of superiority over the Quad. They aren't, and never were, in the

same class. It's just that our reference system and our speaker evaluation program were at a rather rudimentary stage of their development when we published Vol. 1, No. 1. We're ready to admit today, four years later, that it took us several issues to get our whole act together. (See, for example, our retraction in Vol. 1, No. 6 of the negative statements originally made about the Janis W-1 subwoofer in Vol. 1, No. 2.)

In the context of our more advanced listening tests and measurement methods of the past three years or so, the Quad comes off as an incomparably more accurate speaker than the Dahlquist. The latter can play louder, to be sure, but lets through less information. Its Motorola piezoelectric horn tweeter is a downright horror, and several other aspects of its design are quite questionable by our present standards. What we expect of a \$1000-plus pair of dynamic speakers these days was explained in detail in Vol. 2, No. 3.

Unfortunately, reprints of our four-year old Dahlquist review are still being handed out in some audio stores. We didn't foresee that possibility at the time we gave Dahlquist, Inc., our reprint authorization. The review should have been retired at about the same time as the campaign literature of the Ford-Carter election.

—Ed.

How to Subscribe: For 24 biweekly Bulletins (one year's worth) plus *The Audio Critic Handbook*, send your check or money order in the amount of \$30 (U.S. and Canada) or \$36 (overseas) to The Audio Critic, Box 392, Bronxville, New York 10708. (All payments from abroad, including Canada, must be in U.S. funds, collectable in the U.S. without a service charge.)

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