



Positive Feedback ISSUE 53

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hardware

mystere

ca11 Preamplifier

as reviewed by Robert H. Levi



Brand new from Mystere comes the baby brother of the acclaimed ca21, the quite astounding ca11. With the same features and almost identical specifications of the more expensive ca21, the robust ca11 is a musical tour de force and the poster child for magnificent industrial design. You thought Black Beauty was a horse; now it's a preamp, too! There are only two preamps in the world I would gladly live with under \$2000. The ca11 is one of them.

ROBERT H. LEVI'S
SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS

Sporting 4 6SN7s and a 5AR4, no negative feedback, and a volume control that screams perfection, there is a ton of room for tube rolling and experimentation to max out the ca11. I assembled a perfectionist near field system to test its abilities. The

Marten Bird Loudspeakers,
Marten Duke
Loudspeakers, and REL
Stadium III subwoofer

ELECTRONICS

E.A.R. 324 phono
preamplifier, (2) E.A.R. 890
amplifiers (run as monos),
E.A.R. 534 Stereo Amplifier,
E.A.R. 912 Professional
Preamplifier, E.A.R. 834L
Tube Line Stage, E.A.R. HP4
Headphone Amplifier, Grado
Battery Headphone Amplifier,
and KingRex Headphone
Amplifier.

SOURCES

Analog: E.A.R. Disk Master
Turntable with two Helius
Omega Tonearms. Digital:
E.A.R. Acute III CD player,
E.A.R. Acute 1 CD Player,
ModWright Sony 9100ES
SACD/CD/DVD Player with
Signature Truth
Modifications, Mod/Bybee
Filters and Revelation Cryo
Silver Umbilical. ModWright
Sony 999ES CD/SACD/DVD
Player with signature Truth
Mod and Tube Power
Supply, and Alesis Masterlink
24/96 Recorder/Playback
Deck. Cartridges: Koetsu
Rosewood Signature Phono
Cartridge, London Reference
Phono Cartridge, and Grado
Statement1 Phono Cartridge.
LD: Pioneer DVL 919
CD/LD/DVD Player. Tuners:
Magnum Dynalab MD-108
Reference Tuner, Marantz
10B FM Tuner, Day Sequerra
Reference FM1
Tuner, McIntosh MR71 FM
Tuner, Dynaco AF6 FM
Tuner, and Marantz ST17 FM
Tuner. Headphones: Stax 7t
Electrostatic headphones,
Grado RS1 headphones,
Grado PS 1000 Headphones,
Ultrasone Edition 8
Headphones, and Koss
ESP950 Electrostatic
Headphones.

CABLES

Kubala-Sosna Elation
Interconnects, Speaker
Cables, and Power Cords.
Kubala-Sosna Emotion and
Expression Interconnects and
power cords, Jorma Design
Origo Interconnects and
Speaker Cables. Harmonic
Technology Magic 2
Interconnects, Magic 1&2
Power Cords, Fantasy Power
Cords, Kimber D-60 Digital
Interconnects, Kimber Select
3038 Silver and
Silver/Copper Interconnects,
CRL Silver Interconnects and
Custom WyWires
Interconnects.

ACCESSORIES

Monster Reference 350 Mark
II v2 Power Conditioner,
World Power Wing Revised
Power Conditioner, Tice
Power Block, Tice Clock, and
Audio Prism Quiet Line IIs.
Anniversary Edition Cable

sources were the E.A.R. Acute I CD Player and McIntosh MR71 FM Tuner. The amp was the E.A.R. 534 Tube Amplifier and the speakers were the Marten Dukes. Cables were the Kubala-Sosna Emotion Interconnects and the Elation! Speaker Cables. Power Cords were the Kubala-Sosna Emotion and Elation! AC Cables. One Emotion Interconnect costs nearly twice as much as the ca11. I use the best in connectivity from Kubala-Sosna because I'm not interested in reviewing any inexpensive cable colorations, just the sonic performance of the preamp!

Specifications

Freq. Response: 8Hz - 200kHz @ 47k Ohms
Noise: 104dB A-weighted
Gain: 19dB
Distortion: 0.05% @ 100mV, 0.12% @ 1V
Input Impedance: 150k Ohms
Output Impedance: 592 Ohms
Inputs: 4 pair RCA
Outputs: 1 pair RCA
Tube Complement: 4 - 6SN7 & 1 - 5AR4
Weight: 33 lb (15 kg)
Dimensions: 12.6" x 7.8" x 15.2"

Not many features for \$1795, but there's certainly enough here for the budding audiophile perfectionist with four good sources and a top two-channel system. Turntable jockeys take note: there is no phono stage on board. The tube cage lifts off for tube swapping, and is masterfully constructed. Important: in my opinion, the ca11 sounds best with the tube cage installed at all times. Without it, expect a somewhat thick lumpy sound. With it, you'll hear near perfection with tons of delicacy and agility. In addition, the preamp looks better with the cage in place. This review is based on the unit with the cage installed and no tube substitutions. More on that later.

The volume control is a fixed-position step-type control with a ladder of resistors, one for each detent on the control. This is a fabulous way of maximizing volume control integrity and volume repeatability. There is no remote control. Even my \$11,500 reference preamp uses a stand wiper-type volume control, so it fascinates me to see it on the under \$2000 ca11!

So far, so good.

The Sound

The ca11 would not have turned my head no matter how well built and original it might be, if it did not perform like a world champ. Give it 100 hours of play time, and then sit back and enjoy the glory of high-end sound. The highs sparkle with generously served up ear candy. The mids are colorful and agile with delicacy and textural nuance galore. The bass is solid, defined, and deep. Imaging is realistic and focussed. The ca11 is very close to neutral and just a bit sweet. Colors are harmonious and full of you are there reality. Depth perspective is top notch and backgrounds are blackest black... almost like a passive line stage.

Overall definition is excellent, and may be improved just a bit with judicious tube rolling. Vocals are mellifluous and realistic. The better your ancillaries and front end gear, the more this baby delivers. Not wet or dry, it's almost spot on neutrality never quite makes you aware of whether tubes or transistors are on board... except, no transistor preamp would ever sound this realistic at this price point, in my experience.

Built in China, but designed and managed by European designers, Mystere has truly built a winner. Listening to Miles Davis' Kind of Blue on the Sony Blu-Spec CD from Japan was as emotional an experience as I can remember. Mile's trumpet soars. Coltrane's power is second to none. Cobb's drums lead. You'll listen with fresh ears

Cooker 2.5, Winds Stylus
Pressure Gage, Bedini Ultra
Clarifier, VPI Record
Cleaning Machine 16.5.
Audio Magic's Quantum
Physics Noise Disrupters,
Marigo Mystery Feet,
Townshend Seismic Sinks,
Furutech Demag, RSC
Sound Panels and 16 inch
Bass Trap, and Shunyata
Cable Lifters.

through the ca11. It's "You are there!" fun, for sure.

Hearing my favorite reference CD from Yarlung Records, Dialoghi, featuring cello and piano, the ca11 gave up the smallest amount of textural information compared to my more expensive references. The cello was rich and solid with lots of boxiness and air. The Steinway was bell-like and delicate, with woody overtones. Nice.

Margareta Bengtson, *Where the Midnight Sun Never Sets*, CDSOL-MB0001, was sexy and warm. She was in the room and captivating as usual. Cymbals were particularly perfect, with that wonderful blend of brass and silver that those high-tops can yield. Loved the slide trombone on this CD; this is the perfect vocal CD to use as a reference disc.

The new *Britten's Orchestra* from Reference Recordings, RR120 CD, is an amazing test disk for the ca11. The flutes and piccolos just sparkle with air and beauty. The violins are layered, and are sweetly textured. The horns are powerful and jarring. The bass fiddles are sonorous and fun to hear and feel. What a killer CD. Well done Professor Johnson! No wonder it was nominated for a Grammy!

Tube Rolling

I spent a bit of time playing with tubes on the ca11. Here's my advice. For most listening in most systems in the \$10,000 price range or less, the ca11 as supplied is just fine. Now, my speakers are \$8500 in my near-field system, so I was able to benefit from some changes. I liked a NOS 5AR4 replacing the supplied Mystere branded tube. I found a Mullard or RCA tube (you can buy a good one used) brought out even more definition and richness with a bit more textural information. The stock tube is a bit brighter, so it may compliment your speakers better than it did my ceramic tweeters on the Marten's.

I found the front pair of 6SN7s are more important than the rear pair. I loved a pair of Amperex NOS [expensive] tubes in the front positions, stock in the rear spots. Try US made 6SN7s, too. Hard to predict the outcome, but 95% of the time you use NOS, you will get some improvement over modern tubes. I tried new Sovtek, JJ, Ruby, and EH 6SN7s, but the stock tubes always sounded either best or about the same. The fun in tube rolling is in the doing...so enjoy.

Conclusion

A mighty European design hand combined with deftly executed Chinese metalwork has produced the ridiculously inexpensive ca11 Preamp from Mystere. This is only the second preamp I've found under \$2000 that can be considered high-end; this one's built like a Sherman tank. It's also a piece you might see at MoMA in New York, it's that beautiful. Sonically, it has the kind of earthy, delicious, highly detailed sound audiophiles crave. What a deal!

At only \$1795, I can offer only one piece of advice. If the ca11 is a comfortable purchase for you price-wise, don't hesitate to buy it. The ca11 has my highest recommendation! Robert H. Levi

ca11

Retail: \$1795

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