

April 2010

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World Premiere

Mystère pa11 Power Amplifier

Delivering the goods!

Review By Anthony Nicosia

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Both the Mystère and PrimaLuna audio lines come from Durob Audio of the Netherlands under the guidance of the Dutch born van den Dungen of AH! audio fame. Mystère is an upscale and altogether different version of the PrimaLuna line with Kevin Deal (Upscale Audio) its United States distributor. Where the PrimaLuna amplifiers incorporate an ultralinear design Mystère produces pentode amplifiers. With its slightly upscale finish and parts upgrading a similar Mystère amplifier will cost you a bit more and sound a bit different than its PrimaLuna counterpart. The design concept behind Mystère products is to bring a high quality tube audio system within the financial reach of consumers making sure fit and finish are above par while keeping setup and maintenance time to the bare minimum. Now that is quite a tall order for any manufacturer but after living with the pa11 power amplifier I must admit, it hit every point dead center. While designed in the Netherlands Mystère products are built in China in an effort to keep the cost of the end product under control. Even though assembled far from their mother company Mystère products are still kept under their strict supervision in an effort to ensure happy customers both for the moment and for some time to come.



Design Features

As soon as it arrived at my door step the sheer weight alone of the pa11 amplifier at forty-five pounds, not counting the additional packing weight, signaled to me that this is not something to be taken lightly (excuse the pun). As for the packing it was extremely well insulated and seemed able to take stress due to normal shipping conditions without as much as a whimper. There is not much worse than waiting patiently for your new gear only to find it damaged and having to send it back for repair or replacement and then to again wait for the next delivery date. No problems here as the way this was packed it was very impressive. Like its predecessor the ia11 integrated amplifier, the pa11 claims an output of 40-watts per channel into an 8 ohm load with 1% total harmonic distortion (THD). While rated at 40-watts per side they sounded a lot larger than I thought they would. With more room to work inside a dedicated chassis, built just for the amplifier section, you get three completely different transformers than those used in Mystères integrated amplifier. These new transformers are designed in an effort to provide efficient power with great depth and punch behind it with the introduction of a little bit of global feedback.

Open up the bottom of the pa11 and you will find a large pi network with high quality capacitors and resistors, no cost cutting here to save money and sacrifice quality. As for the casing itself I found it quite sturdy, especially the heavy bottom plate. The pa11 comes with an elegant high gloss piano lacquer covering all around the unit except for the very bottom. Its front faceplate extends slightly from the chassis and simply has the name Mystère in small lettering displayed in an arch in its center and just below a small blue light to announcing that the unit is powered on. The power switch is conveniently located on the right side panel toward the front unlike some products where the switch is inconveniently placed on the rear of the unit. Trust me here that may not sound important to you upon first reading but try turning off a tube amplifier after a few hour listening session and burning your forearm as you try reaching carefully around to the back of the unit which you placed carefully inside your audio cabinet. Ah yes, now you get the idea.

Also found on both side panels and the bottom plate as well is an ample amount of ventilated slots good for cooling purposes. As we all know amplifiers love air circulation as it helps extend its useful life expectancy. The pa11 comes with a matching high gloss tube cage which also has vented slots in order to help air get to the vacuum tubes inside. Being that my children are older, there are no curious pets in my house and my wife knows better than to touch glowing tubes the cage is a nice touch but something I would not find myself using. Air circulation is great not only in an effort to extend tube life but to enjoy seeing them in all their glory, whether lit up or resting peacefully in a quite cool state until needed. Which is why I would keep my tubes from being placed under the factory cage. Yes I am after all a lover of tubes, large or small, please just give me their warm glow, the mystery of their magical sound and the fun of hunting down the long ago no longer produced (but not forgotten) ancient ones. This amplifier though really does not need an upgrade of tubes.

The pa11 comes standard with four EL34's and four 6SN7 tubes all current production runs made in China. When I had my 300B SET mono block amplifiers they also used 6SN7 tubes to drive them and strangely enough the tubes I upgraded into were the same tubes found here, so I know they sound good. As for the EL34's while not being familiar with these particular ones they certainly had a very nice appearance in that they were a bit fatter than standard EL34 tubes found in many amplifiers and they sounded just fine to me. All these tubes should last awhile, be easy to find and not cost a lot to replace whenever the need should arise. Novices to tube equipment seem to worry about how long a tube might last, let me say please do not concern yourself with that as I have seen some last longer than many of my friends marriages, both first and second. Actually the owner's manual states that the 6SN7 signal tubes should last about 10,000 hours each. If you figure an average listening time of two hours a day that would equate to five thousand days of usage or a little more than thirteen years. As for the power tubes, the EL34's, they typically have a shorter lifespan with about 2000 to 3000 hours being average. When first opening the box you will notice that the tubes are already placed in their sockets so one need only remove the Styrofoam encasing surrounding each one placed there to protect them during shipping. Do that and you are ready to go.

But wait, what about tube biasing? Surly I must read the manual and carefully bias each power tube to get the maximum enjoyment from my new toy. No sorry people, this is a self biasing unit and needs no such effort on your part as it does it all itself, constantly as the music is playing through the use of their Proprietary Adaptive AutoBias circuit. Want to tube roll, go ahead, all that is required is to remove the old tubes from their socket and replace them with your new ones, it is as simple as that (but please heed the warnings found in the owner's manual first). You do not even have to buy, and to pay more for, matched power tubes as the self biasing circuit takes care of all that. Moving around to the back of the unit there is to my delight an IEC connector so one may play with different power cords in an effort to coax a bit more out of the design if you would like. The mains fuse is located just below the power cord socket in case needed, although I never had the need to touch it during my time with the review sample. The standard cord is of the 16awg variety and very robust looking for a factory power cord. All my comments were taken from the perspective of using the factory supplied cord only. RCA inputs are gold plated and loudspeaker terminals are of both the four and eight ohm versions, another nice touch. Looking at the bottom of the pa11 one sees that it is not necessary to purchase additional isolation devices on which to rest the amplifier as it has three cones, points facing down, already installed. Again, convenient and cost saving to the new owner as they do not need to purchase optional isolation devices.

A Look Inside

As is my custom to look within products for review, the inside of the pa11 was a pleasure to behold. After removing the solid weighty bottom plate one sees a layout that appears carefully planned and well organized. Point to point wiring abounds and high quality parts can readily be found. It certainly was nice to view the inside of the amplifier finding it to be as neat and beautifully designed as the outside of the pa11. After seeing the insides of many older Dynaco kits assembled and soldered by end users in what appeared to be their very first attempt with kits it was nice viewing a quality professional layout and wiring. Attention to detail was everywhere both inside and outside the pa11. While all this is really nice to see and to talk about the real essence of the value of an audio product is in how it sounds. This is a push-pull pentode amplifier meaning that it is necessary to have two tubes per channel with one for each half of the electrical signal wave, where SET amplifiers use one tube per as each handles the entire wave alone. With a push-pull pentode design you get a good deal more power but a little more of the odd-order harmonics and the amplifiers tend to sound better at higher volumes. Tube products tend not to measure well when compared to their solid state counterparts yet their following of loyal patrons could care less as long as they enjoy what they are hearing. So off went the pa11 to be placed next to my Placette passive preamplifier and to sit on top of my Salamander audio rack. Placed there the two neatly layered rows of four tubes each could be enjoyed as they glowed in the dark recesses of my room during long late night listening sessions.



In an effort to isolate the effect of the pa11 on my system it was first matched with my own Placette passive preamplifier with which I am quite familiar. While it was sent to me with its matching ca11 preamplifier I choose not to initially play the two unfamiliar pieces together until after the pa11 power amplifier was first evaluated in the familiar territory of my home audio room. Keeping in mind its price of \$1995 and wanting to pair it with equipment the average end user might select off came my expensive power cords and loudspeaker cables as well as an Audience power conditioner used strictly for amplifiers. Reasonably priced Kimber Kable 4TC cables were used for the loudspeakers and PS Audio xStream Resolution Transcendent interconnect cables throughout, with the factory power cord plugged directly into a PS Audio powerport wall socket. Loudspeakers were my Legacy Focus 20/20's later switching over to Polk Audio SDA-SRS's.

The 'Tube Sound' Experience

Before discussing the sound of the pa11 and its effect on music it is important to understand that the amplifier itself, even with tubes, was ultra quiet. Having been known to chase noise in my system for hours or even days in an effort to drive it from my review room it was nice to hear the pa11 sitting there so quietly. There are many songs on the CD *Queen Greatest Hits* [Hollywood Records 2061-62465-2] that bring back memories some of which you might not even remember that Queen performed unless you are an avid fan yet remember hearing on the radio nevertheless. With the song "Killer Queen" the pa11 showed what was to be a prevalent trait with this amplifier, a generous and strong mid-range presence where vocals were prominently displayed in full glory. Soundstage width was very good as the purposely whimsical manner of the performance within was clearly evident. As with good tube gear it had a strong disposition to make one "feel" the moods and emotion of singers quite clearly and to connect with the emotional impact of the song. During "Fat Bottomed Girls" mid-bass was tight and strong yet retained its quickness and was never fat or ill defined and felt like a champion at lower mid-bass performance where it could compete with many solid-state setups.

Within *The Look of Love* [Verve 314549 846-2] CD Diana Krall sings "Dancing in the Dark" where she adeptly plays the piano as well. Here her piano has a nice three-dimensional sound, the trademark of a good tube amplifier, as the instrument also displayed a true sense of size. Her vocal presentation gave intimate up close effect giving the illusion of a small club setting with Diana Krall performing not far from your table. The sound of Christian McBride on bass playing in the background was easily heard and with a good sense of being full or rich sounding. The London Symphony Orchestra had a nice layering effect of musicians within and meshed quite well with the overall performance in general as the imagery within the soundscape was focused and never smeared together. On "Cry Me A River" the pa11 rendered a nice sense of decay to her voice which resulted in that sense of aliveness to it that one expects and loves to hear with good quality tube equipment. You could hear her vocal cords vibrate as she makes her way through the musical scale to create an intimate effect with each song. Of further note was the performance of Russell Malone on guitar as the pa11 made the chords come alive by adding a true sense of timbre to the instrument.

Not only was this amplifier from Mystère good with female vocals but when listening to Randy Travis on *Old 8 x 10* [Warner Bros. CD 9 25738-2] his magnificent baritone voice came through with the richness one expects when hearing him sing. I liked the pa11's ability to sound good at relatively modest volumes and when the sound level was raised music and vocals took on a greater sense of realism bringing great joy to the musical event unfolding before me. In this same vein while playing Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Requiem in D Minor, K.626* (unfinished) symphony (completed by Franz Xavier Sussmayr) SACD form [BMG 82876 58705 2] at the louder levels the performance took on a greater sense of depth and height as the pa11 allowed music to flow through my loudspeakers with unbridled freedom from constraint. One could feel the spacious ambience of the theater as layering of vocals in the chorus were clearly laid out before you and individual singers had a silent sense of space around their voices. All said this was a great performance and the pa11 never failed to achieve the measure of success necessary to convey this to the listener as a feeling of being lost within the musical event overcame me.



Moving onto Chick Corea *Return To Forever* [CD Polydor 827 148-2] with the flute, played by Joe Farrell, on "Captain Marvel" was reproduced with a nice sense of ease and realism that brought joy to my listening experience as the pa11 with its full tube ensemble displayed a realistic timbre for this wind instrument. The soundstage, while full with electric piano, percussions, vocals and flute, never seemed congested or confused as the amplifier handled performers with apparent ease. The Mormon Tabernacle Choir's, *Silent Night* CD [CBS Masterworks MK 37206] performed with the Columbia Brass and Percussion Ensemble Jerold Otley Directing, one felt the opening chime of bells created by the instrument called the Tubular bell to exhibit a very nice shimmering effect in the upper frequency range. As the choir sang, first one section, then adding a second and finally a third there was a sense of the portrayal of a live performance envision before me. While the soundstage spread wide left to right one was still left with an intimate tube presentation of sitting close to center stage and nearer to the artist on hand. Good tube amplifiers do this and the pa11 is one such component.

Another example was the Philip Glass *Solo Piano* CD [CBS MK 45571] where I found myself swept away within the mood of the music to an environment that gave a sense of being inside the confines of a small library in ones own personal dwelling. This up close presentation of performances is what one expects from tube equipment and as the tubes themselves warmed up the greater this overall feeling was portrayed by the pa11. When listening to transistor amplifiers one sometimes hears the term 'glistening fatigue' to describe the point where one turns off the music as a result of an over abundance of odd-order harmonics, yet good tube amplifiers displaying more even-order harmonics then odd tend to take one well into the darkness of night where the listener succumbs rather to the lateness of the hour than anything else. While listening to The Rolling Stones, *Let It Bleed* [SACD /Hybrid CD abkco 90042] with my Universal player playing the SACD version, I found myself sitting back relaxing to experience the complex soundscape before me with all its various musicians and singers within. As the chorus sang the words "You can't always get what you want but if you try sometimes you find you get what you need". That was how I felt with the Mystère pa11 as it delivered most of what I would desire from a component. Great tube strengths with the ability to bring spaciousness and aliveness to the event while yielding excellent mid and upper frequency response on a solid bass platform. So when you look at those much more expensive amplifiers out there, and there are plenty, do not feel you are missing much as the pa11 is really all that you need, delivering most of the goods at a modest price point.

There Is More!

While you can buy the pa11 and not have to fuss with setup and maintenance or upgrades of any kind, you could decide to try certain things if you like. As a reviewer it was hard not to try something, even though I felt it was great just the way it came from the factory. I decided not to play with tubes but instead switched in and out certain power cords, interconnects, power conditioners and loudspeaker cables before finally settling on just one really good set of interconnects which gave me the results I was seeking. Simply adding two pairs of Cardas one meter Musician's Reference interconnects at \$690 each to connect both amplifier and CD player to my preamplifier helped transform the pa11 into one I would not hesitate to mix with components comprising a twenty or twenty five thousand dollar system. Take what comments I have made so far and say it more strongly as these new interconnects created a layer of texture to the music that was not revealed before but rather had remained hidden. With simply spending a little money on interconnects the performance level of the amplifier was raised to reveal its true capabilities.

Switching Loudspeakers

Moving the pa11 into my home theater room they found a spot hooked up to my Polk Audio SDA-SRA loudspeakers while still using the same preamplifier, CD player, interconnects and loudspeaker cables in order to make a direct comparison easier. The Polks each contains eight 6.5" trilaminate-polymer drivers, one planar 15" sub-bass radiator and four 1" Silver Coil polyamide dome tweeters. The following is an excerpt from a 1985 Polk Audio promotional literature. "The use of 8 small active drivers coupled to the large 15" sub-bass radiator results in extraordinarily tight, quick and three dimensional mid and upper bass combined with low and sub-bass capabilities which are staggering (clean output at 25 Hz exceeds 100dB)."

With the Polks being less efficient and harder to drive than my Legacys in addition to their clean low bass output, this was what I was searching for to put the pa11 up against. In steps Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Troubles *The Real Deal Greatest Hits Volume 2* [Epic/Legacy 88697 22629 2] with "Love Struck Baby", a song certainly to get one off their chair and dancing with the right system. With these less efficient loudspeakers the pa11 was able to be driven harder and that is where the lower bass response really started to kick in making this song come alive. Kevin Deal, the Mystère United States Distributor, even recommended for me to hook them up with 88dB or even some 86dB efficient loudspeakers. Unfortunately I did not have on hand at the moment.

Still album after album was played with the Polks and the pa11 never failing to deliver a nice tight bass response. Going back now to the Queen CD of, *Queen Greatest Hits* [Hollywood Records 2061-62465-2], this time with "We Will Rock You" an ever popular song at sporting events one got a good sense of a large crowd stomping their feet as the pa11 rocked my room and presented me with some quality lower bass response. This push-pull pentode amplifier enjoyed being driven hard allowing it to display more in the way of a powerfully defining bass while also strengthening up mid-frequency response giving vocals even more of an alive presence than before. It was a joy to spend the rest of the evening cranking up the music as I explored this new tube amplifier from Mystère with its attractive looks, ease of use and powerful output.

Thoughts In Summation

The Mystère pa11 tube power amplifier is indeed an incredible product. Novices to tube equipment will find its ease of setup and maintenance appealing. You need not buy isolation devices (three cone feet already included and installed), a cage to protect the tubes (comes as standard equipment) a thick removable factory power cord (robust 16awg PC included) or any devices to bias power tubes (it is a self biasing unit). Sporting high quality capacitors and resistors, plus three redesigned power transformers, all put into a gorgeous high gloss piano lacquer finished chassis gives you a very appealing high quality audio product. If you want to take your first foray into a tube designed amplifier then hop on board the Mystère bandwagon where you need not do much more than to open the box and insert the pa11 into your existing system. Even if this is not your first visit to tube amplification the pa11 need not be regarded as an entry level product as it delivers the real goods here. Just hook it up to a high-end quality system and off you will go to being one happy audiophile. Do not forget to try the Mystère matching ca11 tube preamplifier which was designed to go with it. If you want to hear my impressions on that winning combination [read my ca11 review](#) in *Enjoy the Music.com* also in this same issue.

If the people at Mystère did not think of everything they sure thought of a lot more than one would expect for the low price the pa11 is being offered at. This is the type of product that could very well make your first introduction to tube amplifiers a positive one and entice you so much with its charms that you might be content enough to keep it for many years to come growing along with you and your system. No question here this amplifier definitely "Rocks".

The Listening Environment

The review room is eighteen feet eight inches long by thirteen feet wide with the loudspeakers and equipment kept on the short wall. The cathedral ceiling starts at eight feet and slopes up-wards to thirteen feet at its peak in the middle spanning across the short length of the room for the full thirteen feet width. The hardwood floor has a nine by six foot oriental rug lying down the long ways facing toward the system placed dead center in between, yet not under, the listener and the review equipment. The room has no doors but there are two openings. One opening is in front of the right loudspeaker giving access to the hallway while the other is behind the listening position which opens to a formal dining area.

The room is treated with three floor standing acoustical panels, one behind each loudspeaker and one in front of the fireplace (although I have been known to move them), while all audio equipment is located in a Cherry Synergy Twin S30 Salamander audio rack against and in the middle of the short wall. I have two power conditioners which plug into a PS Audio Power Port receptacle located behind the audio rack. I also use two Blue Circle Audio MKIII Power Line Pillows one on each of two outlets on the long walls next to and behind each loudspeaker. The loudspeakers are located about six feet seven inches from the rear wall measured to their front panel and twenty one inches from the room's side walls to the middle of their front panels. The loudspeakers are placed twelve feet apart forming a triangle with the listening position that is also angled at twelve feet from the center of the front of each loudspeaker to the center of the listening position. In the corner of each short wall behind them are Klipschorn loudspeakers which are also sometimes used when reviewing audio gear. If the Klipsch loudspeakers are in use I would then reposition the three acoustical panels to slightly behind the listening position one to the left, the other to the right with the third being placed in the opening leading to the hallway just right of the right loudspeaker.

Review Equipment

Mystère ca11 Preampfier
 Placette Passive Preampfier
 Samsung HD-841 CD/SACD/DVD Audio universal player
 Loudspeakers: Legacy Focus 20/20 and Polk Audio SDA-SRA
 Acoustic Revive RPT-2 Ultimate Power Distributor with Mr. Cable "Musician" power cord
 PS Audio power port receptacle
 Two Blue Circle Audio Mk III power line conditioners

My Ratings

Please take into consideration that the equipment under review is being measured in my room, with my equipment and heard through my ears. As always you should be the final judge as to what works for you in your environment and measured against what traits you value most. The following was how I rated the equipment based on a rating system that does not take in to consideration the cost of the product, until the very last question, "Value For The Money". Before that all products are rated against others in its category, regardless of financial considerations with a highest rating of 5.

Tonality	
Sub-bass (10Hz - 60Hz)	
Mid-bass (80Hz - 200Hz)	
Midrange (200Hz - 3,000Hz)	
High Frequencies (3,000Hz On Up)	
Attack	
Decay	
Inner Resolution	
Soundscape Width Front	
Soundscape Width Rear	
Soundscape Depth Behind Speakers	
Soundscape Extension Into Room	
Imaging	
Fit And Finish	
Self Noise	
Value For The Money	

Specifications

Type: Vacuum tube stereo amplifier
 Frequency Response: 4 Hz to 80 kHz (+/-0.3dB)
 Power Output: 40 wpc stereo @ 8 Ohms with 1% THD
 Noise < -90dB
 Gain: 26db (20x)
 Distortion: 0.2% @ 1w and 1% @ full output power
 Warranty: Two year-limited on parts and labor, 6 month on tubes
 Weight: 45 lbs.
 Dimensions: 320 x 370 x 200 mm (LxWxD)
 Price: \$1995

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