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EXCLUSIVE

## THE VON SCHWEIKERT ULTRA 55

MBL'S NOBLE N11



TANNOY'S  
REVOLUTIONARY  
XT 6



CLASSY CLASSÉ  
THE DELTA MONO



► JULY  
2020  
\$8.99 US  
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JASON VICTOR SERINUS

# MBL Noble Line N11

## LINE PREAMPLIFIER



During the four years that I've reviewed for *Stereophile*, I've had the privilege of evaluating products from some of the world's best-known audiophile companies: Audio Research, Bel Canto, CH Precision, dCS, D'Agostino, Dynaudio, EMM Labs, Jadis, Krell, Nordost, and Wilson, among others. But one long-standing manufacturer whose exhibits at audio shows invariably in-

spire ecstatic reports, Germany's MBL, has remained outside my purview.

It thus came as a delightful surprise when MBL North America's Jeremy Bryan informed Jim Austin and me that the MBL N11 solid-state line preamplifier (\$14,600) was available for review. Part of the company's middle-level Noble Line of electronics, the N11 differs from the Refer-

### SPECIFICATIONS

**Description** Solid-state, stereo line preamplifier with "MBL Unity Gain," remote control, and MBL SmartLink connectivity. Inputs: 5 pairs single-ended (RCA), 2 pairs balanced (XLR), and option for either phono MC (RCA) or 3rd pair balanced (XLR). Outputs: 5 pairs variable outputs in two groups—(Group 1) 2 single-ended (RCA) + 1 balanced (XLR), (Group 2) 1 single-ended (RCA) + 1 balanced (XLR)—and 2 pairs fixed outputs,

1 single-ended (RCA) and 1 balanced (XLR). Input impedance: 2.3k ohms (CD-In), 10k ohms (XLR-In), 50k ohms (Aux-In), 100 ohms (optional MC-In/internally adjustable). Output impedance: 100 ohms (RCA), 200 ohms (XLR). Voltage gain: For RCA and XLR out, 0dB in Unity Gain, 8dB in Regular Gain. Frequency range: DC-200 kHz (RCA and XLR) for all line-level inputs and outputs. S/N (A-weighted): 123dB (RCA),

117dB (XLR) in Unity Gain mode. THD+N: < 0.001% for all line in and out in Unity Gain Mode. Maximum output: 8V RMS (XLR and RCA).

**Dimensions** 17.7" (450mm) W x 17.7" (450mm) D x 5.9" (150mm) H.

**Weight** 40lb (18 kg).

**Finishes** Black/Gold, Black/Palinux, White/Gold, White/Palinux.

**Serial number of unit reviewed** N10453

**Price** \$14,600. Approximate

number of US dealers: 10. Warranty: 5 years. Manufactured in Germany.

**Manufacturer** MBL Akustikgeräte GmbH & Co. KG, Kurfürstendamm 182, D-10707 Berlin, Germany. Tel: +49 (0) 30 2300584-0. Web: mbl.de. US Distributor: MBL North America, Inc. 217 N. Seacrest Blvd. #276 Boynton Beach, FL 33425. Tel: (561) 735-9300. Web: mbl-northamerica.com

ence Line's 6010 preamp in one key respect: the notion—specifically, designer Jürgen Reis's notion—of how it should sound.

In a series of Skype interviews, Reis explained, "The lines don't differ very much in measurements. In the 35 years I've developed preamps, I've had a lot of experience with different audiophiles. I have spent a lot of time at the homes of Reference Line customers, and I know their taste, how they've constructed their living rooms, and the sound they prefer. The typical Noble Line customer has a different living room and different taste. Therefore, the answer to the question, 'Which is the better preamp?' is, 'The preamp that works the best for you in your room.'"

"I know the sound of every resistor, every capacitor—everything. I know what tonal balance will be created when I mix this with that. So, when I started to develop the N11, I had a sound in my head. I made the schematic, optimized



the layout to measure well, and then began listening and tuning with small parts. I adjusted the capacitor contacts, chose the correct parts for the desired sound, and determined what kind of silk screen on the PCB board would create the sound that would best fit Noble Line target customers.

"Some of my work involved tuning the power supply. It may come as a surprise to learn that you can change tonality without even touching the signal path, because the signal originates from the power supply. The impedance curve of the N11's power supply is absolutely homogenous from DC to 200kHz, which creates a very balanced sound. I also tuned the resistors for the voltage gain, using a mix of carbon and metal resistors to create a neutral balance. There are a lot of preamps that claim to be 'neutral' or 'in balance,' but there are different shades of 'neutral.' If you have a tube preamp, for example, 'neutral' is at a different level than

## MEASUREMENTS

I measured the MBL Noble Line N11's performance with my Audio Precision SYS2722 system (see the January 2008 "As We See It"), repeating some of the tests with a loan sample of Audio Precision's more-recent, higher-performance APx555 system.<sup>2</sup> As advised in the manual, using the front-panel menu, I deactivated all the N11's inputs other than one of the balanced inputs and the unbalanced CD1 input for the measurements. I performed all the testing with the N11 set to its recommended Unity Gain mode and its volume control set to its maximum in that mode, "70." I then repeated some of the tests with the preamp set to apply its maximum gain with the volume control set to "100."

In Unity Gain mode, the maximum gain for the balanced input to the balanced output was identical, at 0.34dB. The maximum gain for the unbalanced input to the unbalanced output was similar, at 0.59dB. In Gain mode, the maximum gain was 10dB for both sets of inputs and outputs, this slightly higher than the specified 8dB. The preamplifier preserved absolute polarity (ie, was noninverting) with both balanced and unbalanced inputs and outputs. The XLR jacks are wired with

pin 2 hot, the AES convention.

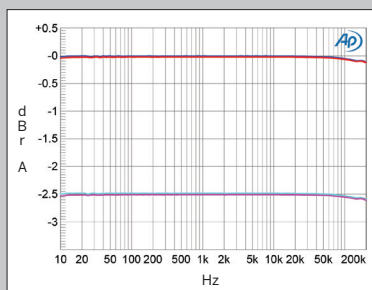
The N11's balanced input impedance is specified at 10k ohms, which was confirmed by my measurements at all frequencies from 20Hz to 20kHz. The unbalanced input impedance for CD1 was low, at 2.3k ohms, but this is again the specified figure. The unbalanced Aux inputs are specified as having an input impedance of 50k ohms—I activated this input just for this measurement and measured 47k ohms from 20Hz to 20kHz. The balanced output impedance was a low 198 ohms, the unbalanced impedance 100 ohms; both values were consistent across the audioband and conformed to the

specification.

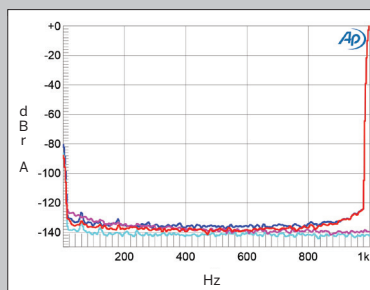
The preamplifier's frequency response in both balanced and unbalanced modes was flat from 10Hz to 200kHz, both into the high 100k ohm load (fig.1, blue and red traces) and into 600 ohms (cyan, magenta). Fig.1 was taken with the N11's volume control at its maximum setting; both the response and the superb channel matching were identical at lower settings of the control. Channel separation (not shown) was excellent, at >100dB in both directions below 2kHz. It de-

1 See [stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision](http://stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision).

2 See [ap.com/analyzers-accessories/compare](http://ap.com/analyzers-accessories/compare).



**Fig.1** MBL N11, Unity Gain Mode, balanced frequency response with volume control set to "70" at 1V into: 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red), 600 ohms (left cyan, right magenta) (0.5dB/vertical div.).



**Fig.2** MBL N11, Unity Gain Mode, balanced spectrum of 1kHz sine wave, DC-1kHz, at 1V into 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red) and with no signal (left cyan, right magenta) (linear frequency scale).



solid-state; it's not better or worse, but it is different. It took a lot of work to find the tonal balance I like a lot that measures well, with low noise, and fits very well in the Noble Line."

"I won't tell anyone that the N11 is the 'best' preamp for their system, but I will say that it matches perfectly with other Noble Line components, and its sound is different than the sound of the preamp section of the Noble Line N51 Integrated amp. The goal is to choose components that work well together to achieve optimal synergy. They don't have to be the 'best' products or all from the same company, but they have to work optimally with your other components, your room, and your taste. This is the biggest challenge for a dealer: To get to know a customer well enough to be able to find the best combination for them."

### "Unity Gain"

A unique aspect of the N11 is its "Unity Gain" feature,



which can be engaged or disengaged easily via the preamp's control panel or remote control. "When you have components whose specifications are within the normal range, e.g., a digital source with an analog feed of around 2V and a power amp that delivers its maximum power around 2V, then it makes the most sense to have a preamp or control unit that works best at 2V," Reis told me. "If you set our preamp to Unity Gain, the music flows the

easiest way, without impediment, from the DAC to the power amp. This gives the highest transparency and lowest distortion."

This is, Reis confirmed in a series of emails, a matter of reducing the preamp's gain so that the signal isn't amplified excessively and then attenuated. With "Unity Gain" activated, a 2V input signal—full-scale according to the CD Standard—results in a 2V signal to the power amp with the N11's volume set to 70. Two volts is close to the input voltage at which most power amplifiers achieve their maximum

### measurements, continued

creased to 80dB at 20kHz, presumably due to low-level capacitive coupling between the channels.

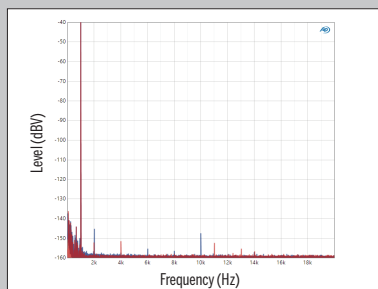
From balanced inputs to balanced output, the MBL preamp offered extremely low noise, with virtually no power-supply-related spurious in its output (fig.2). The wideband, unweighted signal/noise ratio, measured with the balanced input shorted to ground but the volume control set to its maximum in Unity Gain mode, was a very high 93.4dB, left channel, and 97.5dB, right, both ratios ref. 1V output. Restricting the measurement bandwidth to the audioband increased the S/N ratio to an extraordinary 112.6dB

for both channels, while switching an A-weighting filter into circuit further improved this ratio, to 114.4dB! Repeating the S/N ratio measurements in Maximum Gain mode, with the volume control set to "100," degraded these ratios by 2–3dB, but in either mode, this is the quietest preamplifier I have encountered. I fed the N11 a balanced 1kHz tone at 10mV and averaged 16 captures calculated with a 1.2M FFT length, the longest offered by the APx555. The FFT bins all lay below –117dB, referenced to the low signal level (fig.3), which again is extraordinary.

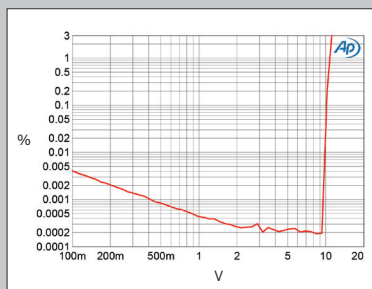
Fig.4 plots the percentage of

THD+noise in the N11's balanced output into 100k ohms. The THD+N is very low between 2V and 9V. (It rises below 2V output, due to the fixed level of noise becoming an increasing percentage of the signal level.) Neither the N11's balanced nor unbalanced output clips (ie, when the THD+N reaches 1%) until a very high 10.5V. Reducing the load to a punishing 600 ohms reduced the maximum balanced output level to 8.1V (fig.5), which is still much higher than will be needed to drive a power amplifier into clipping.

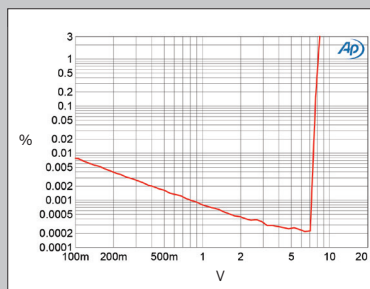
To be sure that the reading was not dominated by noise, I measured how the N11's distortion changed with fre-



**Fig.3** MBL N11, Unity Gain Mode, APx555 measurement, balanced spectrum of 1kHz sine wave, 20Hz–20kHz, at 10mV into 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red) (linear frequency scale).



**Fig.4** MBL N11, Unity Gain Mode, balanced distortion (%) vs 1kHz output voltage into 100k ohms.



**Fig.5** MBL N11, Unity Gain Mode, balanced distortion (%) vs 1kHz output voltage into 600 ohms.

power: max-in = max-out, or vice versa, depending on your perspective.

While 2V is the CD Standard, many digital source components have full-scale output that's as much as several volts higher—and yet most preamps have *more* gain than the N11 with Unity Gain activated, which means more attenuation is needed to achieve the optimal volume level. “By unnecessarily reducing the level and then amplifying it, dynamics and resolution are lost, while noise and distortion increase—factors that one desperately wants to avoid with high performance, high resolution systems,” Reis told me. Of course, the N11 can also be used, with Unity Gain on or off, with source components that don't adhere to this standard—just reduce or increase the volume setting to compensate—but in that case, the system is less than perfectly optimized.

A system with standardized input voltage and Unity Gain mimics systems used in mastering studios—first by better exploiting a system's available gain and second by allowing output levels to be calibrated. “When you set a stereo system at the same volume level as a mastering system, a unity-gain preamp will bring you the closest to what the mastering engineer heard,” Reis told me. “In my mastering setup, I follow the guidelines set down by Bob Katz in his book, *Mastering Audio: The Art and the Science*. Each channel should measure 83dB average; this is the level where, when music is played back, it sounds as it sounded during a mastering session conducted by a certified mastering engineer.”<sup>1</sup> In

such a system, if the track you're listening to has a dynamic range rating of DR14<sup>2</sup>—very wide—the peak signal level will be 101dB, which is also optimal.<sup>3</sup>

### In the green room

Some may not consider my opinions on visual aesthetics worth the price of beans—especially with beans being hoarded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Be that as it may, when it perches on the top left shelf of my Grand Prix Monza rack, the N11's unique black-and-silver profile cut a handsome figure in the company of dCS's Rossini DAC, Clock, and CD/SACD Transport; EMM Labs' DV2 integrated DAC; Roon's Nucleus+ with the HDPLEX linear power supply; two Nordost QX4 noise suppressors; and AudioQuest's Niagara 5000 power conditioner.

Besides its Unity Gain option and unique remote control (round, heavy, well-considered), the N11's features are decidedly up-to-date. Its front is dominated by a 5" color TFT display, easily read from 12' away, that can be used

1 Many readers know that the ear's sensitivity depends on frequency—pitch—and that this dependence varies with volume. So the tonal balance of music sounds different at different volume settings.

2 Reis is referring to the “crest-factor” dynamic-range scale from the Pleasurize Music Foundation and implemented by MAAT—not the D128 standard whose ratings are displayed, for example, in Roon. MAAT has a tool you can buy for measuring this dynamic range, at [maat.digital/drmeter](http://maat.digital/drmeter).—Editor

3 Ideal calibration of volume-vs-input level also depends on having an ideal combination of amplifier gain and loudspeaker sensitivity.—Editor

quency at 2V output. The THD+N percentage was extremely low throughout the audioband both into 100k ohms (0.0004%, fig.6, blue and red traces) and 600 ohms (0.0005%, cyan, magenta traces). What is unusual about this graph is that the very low THD+N percentage doesn't increase toward the top of the audioband, which implies that the N11's circuit has an extremely high open-loop bandwidth.

I examined the spectrum of the distortion at the same balanced output level (fig.7). Although the second, third, and fifth harmonics can be seen, these are still below -120dB (0.0001%), which is close to the

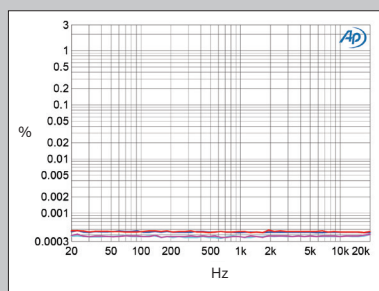
residual level of these harmonics in my Audio Precision SYS2722's analog signal generator. I repeated the spectral analysis with the APx555 system, whose signal generator features even lower distortion: the second harmonic lay at -130dB in the left channel, -136dB in the right; the third harmonic lay at -135dB in both channels; and the fifth harmonic lay at -128dB in both channels. I offer these results for completeness's sake; these levels are so extraordinarily low that they are of academic interest only.

Tested for intermodulation distortion in balanced Unity Gain mode with an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones at

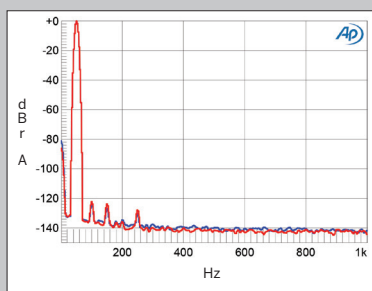
a peak level of 2V, the second-order difference product at 1kHz lay at just -136dB, and the higher-order products all lay at or below -126dB (fig.8). Commendably, these products didn't rise at the same level into 600 ohms.

I concluded my measurements of the Benchmark LA4 preamplifier in the January 2020 issue<sup>3</sup> by writing “Benchmark's LA4 is the widest-bandwidth, widest-dynamic-range, lowest-noise, lowest-distortion preamplifier I have encountered.” Its performance on the test bench reveals that MBL's N11 now takes that crown.—John Atkinson

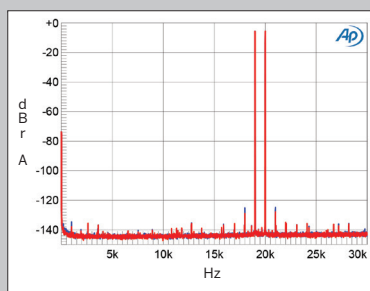
3 See [stereophile.com/content/benchmark-la4-line-preamplifier-measurements](http://stereophile.com/content/benchmark-la4-line-preamplifier-measurements).



**Fig.6** MBL N11, Unity Gain Mode, balanced distortion (%) vs frequency at 2V into: 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red), 600 ohms (left cyan, right magenta).



**Fig.7** MBL N11, balanced spectrum of 50Hz sine wave, DC-1kHz, at 2V into 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).



**Fig.8** MBL N11, balanced HF intermodulation spectrum, DC-30kHz, 19+20kHz at 5V into 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

in place of the remote to access the menu, display options, and control basic functions. Also on the front panel are a standby button and six “smart keys”—function buttons—three on each side of the display. These easily depressed buttons—in the sense that they don’t require much force, not that they have a tendency to be morose—can, among other things, activate or deactivate inputs and outputs, set maximum volume at power-on (50 is the default), restore factory defaults, turn Unity Gain on and off, and mute or unmute. As your hand approaches the N11, a sensor automatically switches the screen from playback mode to interface mode and displays the settings available with the soft keys; otherwise, the screen displays the volume level, which input is activated (RCA or XLR), which outputs are deactivated, and whether



**“I know the sound of every resistor, every capacitor—everything. I know what tonal balance will be created when I mix this with that.”**

pair for a moving-coil phono cartridge or a third XLR pair; the review sample had the XLR pair. Five pairs of variable outputs are divided in two groups, each with a mixture of RCA and XLR. There are two fixed outputs, one RCA and

Unity Gain is engaged.

On the rear, the N11 has five pairs of RCA (single-ended) inputs, two pairs of XLR (balanced) inputs, and one set of inputs that can be, optionally, either an RCA

## MBL CHIEF ENGINEER JÜRGEN REIS

**JÜRGEN REIS**, 59, whom John Atkinson respectfully describes as “an engineer’s engineer,” joined MBL in 1982, when the company was three years old. After improving the original MBL preamp, he designed MBL’s first three-way speaker system, the MBL 101, in 1986.

As Reis’s work continued, he found time to sing baritone/bass in the award-winning Hanover Choir, play guitar in a rock band, and serve as a recording engineer. With time for only one serious recording project per year, he currently records the superb ensemble Concerto Köln for Berlin Classics. For fun, he also records local orchestras, including “Orchester im Treppenhaus” (Orchestra in the Staircase).

“Listening to real instruments while you set up the microphones is a totally different story than listening at a mixing desk,” he told me. “If I set up the microphones in the wrong position, I can mix endlessly and still not get a good result.” The parallels with optimal system setup are clear.

► **I already have dCS Rossini and EMM Labs DV2 DACs with excellent volume controls in my all-digital front end. What are the advantages of adding a preamp?**

**Jürgen Reis:** If the output stage and

volume control of the DAC are a perfect match for the amps, you do not need an analog preamp in between because you cannot beat a perfect match. But since you do not know, I hope that the design of the N11 matches the amps very well. I know that the N11 matches the D’Agostino Momentum monoblocks very well, but I haven’t heard the Progressions long enough to know if the N11 will work as well with them.

If the tonal characteristics of the components match and balance each other, then the sound is more fluid. For example, if you have a power amp that is a little bit shy in bass and you compensate with a preamp that pushes bass a lot, you create a balanced sound, but you lack some fluidity. If both have the same characteristics, then they match better together. That’s what a good preamp can do.

► **Do most people use the N11 with other MBL gear?**

**JR:** Yes. But it’s fine for you to use it in a different system because you are experienced with setup. If you have a system that, over the years, you’ve tuned to the sound you like, there will not be any addition that will give exactly what you want without retuning. You must play a little bit with cable or threads or feet to find a new balance. It’s difficult

for me to write a step-by-step guide of what to do, because unless you’ve experimented in advance, you have no idea what the tonal characteristics are for each component you add or change. You must change piece by piece.

► **Could you elaborate a bit more on how you develop and tune your components?**

**JR:** I begin with a sound in my head. In the case of the N11, the sound was different from the Reference Line, different from our Corona Line, and different from the [previous, now-discontinued] Noble Line. Then I use my knowledge to create a schematic that I think will work, put this into a printed circuit board, and conduct first measurements. When I am happy with the measurements, then I begin to listen and “tune” the parts. I use different types of resistors and capacitors from different manufacturers. I also tune the isolation of the internal cabling and adjust how it’s laid out. Then I remeasure and continue the process until I am happy with the specs and the sound.

► **Given my reference components and 16 × 20 × 9 room, do you see me as a Noble customer or a Reference customer?**

**JR:** In between. You have a Reference-

one XLR. There's a ground terminal for a turntable, two MBL SmartLinks (for other MBL products, which I didn't have), an Update interface (which I didn't use), and your basic fuse bracket/IEC inlet/power switch. The top has an illuminated circular logo that doubles as a brightness control for the display. It's all laid out well and makes sense.

Because my two reference DACs, dCS's Rossini DAC/Clock combo and EMM Labs' DV2 integrated DAC, have very different sonic presentations that evoke different emotional responses, I used both in this review. For the Rossini, I chose Map 1, 2V output, and the recommended filters for each resolution; for the DV2, output was set to high. Both DACs' volume controls were turned all the way up to get them out of the way. A Nordost Valhalla 2 USB cable carried signal from the Roon Nucleus+ to the DACs; from there, I went balanced Odin 2 to the N11, then balanced out to my D'Agostino Progression monoblocks.

### Tuning up

If you haven't read the sidebar yet, please do, because it will shed light on what follows.

While assembling my reference system, I've discovered that the options available to me for fine-tuning sonics involve switching between different-sounding 1) gray and silver balls in the Grand Prix Apex feet that support my rack,

2) cables, and 3) equipment supports.

I can only switch the balls in the footers of a 200lb double rack loaded with heavy equipment if I hire weightlifters from my gym to help me out; evaluating on the spot and making further switches is quite chancy. Switching cabling can produce profound sonic changes that make it difficult to figure out what is causing what and require me to start from scratch to establish a new sonic baseline. Hence, when new equipment comes my way, it's most practical to switch *footers* until I find the combination that works best.

Before the review began, I had Nordost Sort Kones (mostly Titanium) under most front-end equipment and noise/power products, and Ansuz Darkz T2S resonance support feet with optional Titanium balls under the HDPLEX linear power supply, Roon Nucleus+ music server, and D'Agostino Progression monoblocks. As for what I tried once I began listening closely to the N11's interaction with my reference system, it's time to get . . .

### Taking the stage

As I began listening, I kept in mind a recent email from Ned Kuehn, whom I met at the 2019 Florida Audio Expo. Kuehn, who played in both band and orchestra in his youth, wrote that he'd recently tried the Benchmark LA4 pre-amplifier and discovered that its "detail, depth, decay, and

## MBL CHIEF ENGINEER JÜRGEN REIS (CONTINUED)

customer character, but your digital front end and cable tell me that you're more like a Noble Line customer. It's not about the price of the cable; it's about the sound. For you, I would mix it a little bit up, with maybe a Noble Line preamp and cable that would better integrate it in your system. If you had the Reference preamp, you might need to change the rack or feet a bit to match your taste.

I've had a bit of fear that you've set up your system and maximized your sound with a preamp that has, for example, a gain of 8dB or 10dB. In that case, even if my preamp is "better," the Unity Gain feature will not satisfy you. You may have to change something such as the feet to generate the sound that will make you happy.

### ◆ Do you tune your products with specific cabling, footers, and power conditioners?

**JR:** For product development, cables I've known for a long time is a fixed variable that I do not want to change, because I know how those cables sound. I mostly use Wireworld Eclipse for speaker and interconnect cabling. Regardless of whether there is "better" cable out there, I know the Wireworld Eclipse sound very well, and it works all the time, at every show, in every setup. For digital cables, I use mostly

AudioQuest Diamond for USB, SPDIF, AES, and LAN. Again, it works very well at every show and every setup.

Ultimately, cable choice depends on the room, the taste, and the racks. When I visit a customer and talk to them about their taste, I listen to some music, evaluate their room, and am then able to recommend a cable upgrade that matches their wants and needs.

I like the Finite Elemente Emperor rack a lot—it provides a good foundation—but the choice strongly depends on taste, room, and cabling. I also use the rounded-tip RDC cones from Clearlight Audio; their composite granulate is stable but not resonant. If I want a bit softer sound, I use Mpingo Discs from Shun Mook.

Every MBL product uses double-shielded transformers. Unless someone's AC is not stable, I would start without power conditioning. We have electrostatic shields in our components to prevent common mode coupling and electromagnetic shields to prevent differential mode coupling. All our products are measured to withstand HF frequency and do not radiate HF noise. But many/most customers either have different products in their setup or have some electrical disturbance that a power conditioner can help. They have to try and decide.

### ◆ As a recording engineer, do you find that the preferences and predilections of conductors and musicians and audiophiles match what you are trying to achieve, or do the preferences diverge and require compromise?

**JR:** I've had lengthy discussions with conductors because of what they feel and how they hear. To achieve the right tonal characteristics, we have to speak a lot. Musicians create some emotions in their brain or body, and they want to experience these same emotions during playback. Because listening to real musicians triggers different areas in the brain than listening to phantom sources [speakers or headphones], good engineers have to engage in some trickery to help the brain feel similarly. The sound isn't the same from an acoustical standpoint, but you have to convince the brain that it's similar.

I rarely make compromises in dynamic range—the worst I've ever done was on a death metal recording with a dynamic range of 11. If you look at mass market pop and rock, you will not find a dynamic range of 11; most mass market productions have DR around 5 or 6. Mostly, I stick with mastering engineer Bob Katz's suggestions in this regard. When people ask me to record, they know I do not make compromises in dynamic range. ■





dimensions” transported him to the recording venue and bettered what he heard when he relied exclusively on the dCS Vivaldi DAC’s volume control. Kuehn’s email inspired some of the dialogue with Reis that appears in the sidebar; it also impelled me to investigate in what ways the MBL N11 might alter and improve the sound delivered by the volume controls in the dCS Rossini and EMM Labs DV2 DACs.

Using the Rossini DAC/Clock and the N11 to listen to one of the more challenging test tracks in my collection—challenging for listener and system—the first movement from the San Francisco Symphony’s digital-only release of 12-tone master Alban Berg’s *Three Pieces for Orchestra* (24/192 WAV, SFS Media SFS0070), the N11 lent a subtle warm-and-velvety cushion to the sound. This effect proved to be consistent no matter the source material. On Marianne Crebassa and Fazil Say’s recording of Debussy’s *Chansons de Bilitis* from the album *Secrets* (24/96 WAV, Erato 564483), the N11 brought out the warm core of every note.

Turning to one of the many fascinating albums I’ve had neither time nor space to review, *Clytemnestra* (24/96 FLAC/Qobuz, BIS-2408) from soprano Ruby Hughes and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales under Jac van Steen, I was first seduced more by the colors of voice and orchestra than by Hughes’s overwrought performance of Mahler’s *Rückert-Lieder*. In that music, Hughes touched me less than Janet Baker, Kathleen Ferrier, and Jamie Barton do in theirs. But in Hughes’s performance of Berg’s *Altenberg-Lieder*, the beauty of music and sound, the plethora of colors, and the fullness of the bass drum won me over. The N11 brought me to the heart of the musical experience and enabled me to hear the subtle differences of interpretation, dynamics, and color that are the portals to the truth behind the notes.

*Clytemnestra* was the first disc I used to experiment with the N11’s Unity Gain setting. The experience certainly changed when Unity Gain was engaged—the soundstage moved farther back and, while perspective was clarified, it

felt as though the sound was less open and had lost a bit in transparency and bass. When I removed the preamp from the chain and relied exclusively on the Rossini’s volume control, the recording felt more open and expansive. Was the perspective conveyed by the N11’s Unity Gain setting actually *more true* to the source, and had I just become accustomed to what the Rossini produced on its own? That seems to be the implication of Jürgen Reis’s comments in the sidebar. More experimentation was in order.

Sticking with classical vocals, I turned to hi-res files of a recording I’d recently reviewed for the print edition, *Ludwig Von Beethoven: Lieder • Songs*, from baritone Matthias Goerne and pianist Jan Lisiecki (24/96 WAV, DG 4838351). The N11’s sound with Unity Gain turned off was just wonderful—open, warm, and extremely transparent, with a sparkle to the piano that contrasted with Goerne’s magnificent voice and made me want to listen more and more. The N11 clarified subtle tonal differences and the myriad overtones and undertones of Goerne’s voice while rendering the piano more lustrous. What was even more significant to me than the N11’s touch of warmth, sweetness, and velvety polish was how it pulled me deeper into the performance.

Once again, though, the switch to Unity Gain seemed to make Goerne a little less accessible, as though he was standing behind a thin translucent screen.

After indulging in the extended love scene from Verdi’s *Otello*, on the new recording from tenor Jonas Kaufmann, soprano Federica Lombardi, and the Orchestra and Chorus of the National Academy of Santa Cecilia conducted by Antonio Pappano (24/96 WAV, Sony 611967), I listened only to material from the great big wonderful nonclassical world.

Gazing at choices in “Records to Die For,” from *Stereophile’s* February 2020 issue, and reviews in a number of issues, I noticed “Naima (Take 1)” from John

**Above:** The MBL N11 in its natural environment, with two Noble Line siblings and the Radialstrahler 111 F.



Coltrane's new 1964 recording, *Blue World* (24/192 WAV)—thanks to the folks at Universal Music Group for this one—"They Say It's Wonderful" from *John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman* (24/48 MQA/Tidal), "I Could Write a Book" from Sonny Rollins's *Our Man in Jazz* (16/44.1 FLAC/Tidal), and the title tracks from John Paul White's "The Hurting Kind" (24/96 FLAC/Qobuz), The Brandt Bauer Frick Ensemble's *Mr. Machine* (16/44.1 FLAC/Qobuz), and Sun Ra's *Sun Song* (16/44.1 FLAC/Tidal). (The musical interest of the Sun Ra easily trumps its sonics.) Into the mix I threw a fascinating, exceptionally haunting, airy, and revealing new-music track from a choral recording by Morten Lindberg: Kristin Bolstad's "Mellom skyrene," performed by Stemmeklang on *Tomba sonora* (2L-155, 24/352.8 MQA/Tidal). I also indulged in audio engineer Jim Anderson's recent gift of the hi-rez version of Patricia Barber's *Higher* (24/352.8 WAV, AS0171), the CD version of which was our "Recording of the Month" for September 2019.

Listening to these tracks over and over, as I switched back and forth between the Rossini solo and Rossini plus N11, confirmed several things. While the N11 is extremely revealing of subtle details and brings a lovely, glowing sweetness to recordings I find seductive and ideal for long-term listening without fatigue, its Unity Gain feature, with *this* DAC, reduced color saturation, richness, and transparency—*unless* I switched footers under the Roon Nucleus+ server/streamer and the HDPLEX linear power supply. Indeed, even after trying some of the eight types of footers available to me—I didn't bother with footers that I knew wouldn't work—I could never get the sound precisely right.

### The last act

With a knowing nod to Captain Picard, the time had come to engage the very different-sounding EMM Labs DV2. In my system, this DAC may tone down treble brilliance and sound less open, but it delivers stronger, tighter, more awesome lower midrange and bass. With only a little tweaking of footers—I switched to Nordost Titanium Sort Kones under the HDPLEX LPS that powers my Roon Nucleus+ music server/streamer, external USB hub, and the final Sonore opticalModule—MBL's N11 preamp seemed an ideal match. Engaging Unity Gain provided the best bass control I'd ever heard from my system, save when I used the far more expensive D'Agostino Momentum HD preamp (\$40,000), which in my opinion deserves a Product of the Year award. The N11's Unity Gain also toned down the noisy top ends of some recordings, making for easier listening. Tonalities were spot on, the range of colors varied and intriguing, and the listening experience a joy.

"God, does the N11 help a lot," I scribbled in my notes, as listening was unfortunately coming to an end. Sorry for the very late walk, doggies, but Daddy has work to do.

A day later, during one of the check-in calls that so many of us have been making during the COVID-19 pandemic, a long-ago neighbor from East Oakland mentioned her fondness for Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven." After finding a hi-rez remastering of *Led Zeppelin IV* (24/96 MQA/Tidal), I marveled at how the DV2/N11 combo enabled me to feel how tactile the guitar sounded and clarified the textures of overlapping instruments. "Just perfect," I wrote in my notes, after I had turned my phone toward the Wilson Alexia 2 loudspeakers in a vain attempt to transmit a fraction of what I was hearing. "I've never heard Led Zeppelin sound this good at audio shows. The drum entrances are so exciting,

## ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

**Digital sources** dCS Rossini SACD/CD transport & Rossini DAC & Rossini Clock; EMM Labs DV2 DAC; Roon Nucleus+ music server with linear power supply; Linksys routers (2), Small Green Computer Sonore opticalModules (2), TP-Link gigabit Ethernet media converters plus multi-mode duplex fiber optic cable (2); Small Green Computer/HDPLEX four-component 200W linear power supply (3); external hard drives, SSD USB sticks, iPad Pro.

**Power amplifiers** Dan D'Agostino Master Systems Progression monoblocks.

**Loudspeakers** Wilson Audio Specialties Alexia 2.

**Cables** Digital: Nordost Odin 1 & Odin 2 & Valhalla 2 (USB) & Frey 2 (USB adapter), Wireworld Platinum Starlight Cat8 (Ethernet). Interconnect: Nordost Odin 2. Speaker: Nordost Odin 2. AC: Nordost Odin 2 & Valhalla, AudioQuest Dragon HC, Kimber Palladian.

**Accessories** Grand Prix Monza 8-shelf double rack & amp stands, 1.5" Formula platform, Apex footers; Nordost QB8, QX4 (2), QK1 & QV2 AC power accessories, QKore 1 & 6 with QKore Wires, Titanium and Bronze Sort Kones, Sort Lifts; AudioQuest Niagara 5000 power conditioner & NRG Edison outlets & JitterBugs; Tweek Geek Dark Matter Stealth power conditioner with High Fidelity and Furutech options; GreenWave AC filter; Ansuz Darkz T2S resonance support feet with optional Titanium balls; Stillpoints Aperture panels; Resolution Acoustics room treatment; Stein Music Super Naturals, Signature Harmonizers, Blue Suns/Diamonds, Quantum Organizer; Bybee Room Neutralizers; Absolare Stabilians; Marigo Aida CD mat.

**Room** 20'L × 16'W × 9'H. —Jason Victor Serinus

and the music sounds really fabulous when everything gets going." That led me to turn to the 2011 remaster of another classic, Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (16/44.1 FLAC/Tidal or Qobuz). Yet again, I fell in the love with the N11's warm smile, which in this case was enhanced by Unity Gain's smooth-and-warm presentation, superbly controlled bass, and low-range clarity. While I'm not convinced that there's a bright side to everything, the N11 shone a light during the dark days of the pandemic and delivered week upon week of listening pleasure.

### The ovation

As a preamp designed and tuned to mate perfectly with other MBL Noble Line products, the N11 preamp's intrinsic sonic signature brought a velvety smooth, subtly warm, and immensely pleasurable finish to the sound of both my reference DACs and made listening a joy. It proved a better fit for one DAC than the other.

The N11 preamp's Unity Gain feature affords it a flexibility and potentially perfect synergy that many other preamps lack. In my system, however, its effects were DAC and setup dependent. With one DAC, it left me wondering if it was moving me closer to or farther from what recording engineers and artists hoped I would hear; with the other, it left me wondering if it was exactly what I had needed all along to achieve ideal system synergy.

The N11 could very well be a performance you never want to end. It's a looker, for sure, one whose presence in my system I already miss. ■