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# One Stop Shopping

## The Legend Audio System

BY STEVEN ROCHLIN

**F**or years I've listened to various complete systems (high-end audio's equivalent of a "rack system") by a single manufacturer. I've tried out systems from companies such as Audio Note, Cello, Burmester and Meridian, just to name a few. In fact, a good sum of my personal funds have gone towards Audio Note products. Not only are Audio Note's complete systems very musically satisfying, but so are their individual components.

Those of you who have been reading *Ultimate Audio* since its inception will recall that the Legend Audio room won my highest personal acclaim for best music reproduction system at the San Francisco Hi-Fi '97 Show (Vol. 1, No. 2). And this was above all the other much higher priced systems! Every time I walked past the Legend Audio room, something caused my soul to force my body to enter their room to enjoy the music. In fact, the Legend Audio rig was just about the only one at the show that made me feel this way.

Since then, I have spent a lot of my time not only analyzing and listening to the complete Legend Audio system, but also mixing and matching parts of their system with other non-Legend Audio products in my humble abode. I did this to investigate whether there's a system syn-

ergy and whether the Legend Audio products could stand on their own in a "mix and match" system as well. Like the Audio Note products, the Legend Audio electronics, cables and speakers worked extremely well together as a complete system. Of course, some of the Legend Audio components worked better than others when used with other non-Legend components. Now, sit back and relax while joining me in

**THE LEGEND AUDIO  
ELECTRONICS,  
CABLES AND  
SPEAKERS WORKED  
EXTREMELY WELL  
TOGETHER AS A  
COMPLETE SYSTEM.**

discovering these "hidden treasures."

### A LEGENDARY SYSTEM

Let's begin our adventure with Legend Audio's LAD-L2 preamplifier. This Class A design uses the 6SN7 tube with a maximum output of a whopping 20 volts! The manufacturer's quoted frequency response is from DC to 30 kHz. Needless to say, it should be able to "drive" long cables and virtually any power amplifier on the market.

The LAD-L2 preamplifier consists of two boxes—and rightly so. One box holds the dedicated power supply, while the other box houses the tubed analog preamplification circuitry. I say "rightly so" when referring to the two-box approach because the power supply of any device can affect the electronic signal which carries the music, in either the analog or the digital domain. Both boxes of the LAD-L2 are black with gold-filled etched lettering. Although there's no polarity switch, the unit has three inputs, a tape loop, a mute switch and a volume control.

Legend Audio's monoblock amplifiers, or "The Triode," are also tubed and use a 5AR4/GZ34 tube for rectification, two 12AX7 tubes for input driver (one for each KT90A) and two KT90A tubes per channel in a triode-mode configuration. "The Triodes" develop 40 watts per channel (at 4 ohms) with a frequency response of 10 to 27,000 Hz.

Their speakers are called "The Legend" and are two-way, stand mounted (Legend Audio also supplies a sand fillable stand called "The Unique") minimonitors featuring a Kevlar™ woofer and a Kevlar tweeter. They have a 7" woofer and a 1" inverted dome tweeter. Kevlar tweeters are rarely seen today—most speakers use either a metal-dome or silk-dome design. Needless to say, I was extremely curious about how well this tweeter would "sound." "The Legend" speakers have a rated sensitivity of 89 dB and a frequency response from 33 to 20,000 Hz ± 3 db, yet this speaker also surprised me by working fairly well with my small 8 watt per channel single-ended tube amplifiers!

My pair came in a beautiful walnut woodgrain that immediately won the praise of my lover. As an officer of the 'fashion police,' she rarely ever comments positively on the looks of all the gear that comes and goes here. Yet she's in love with the way these speakers look ("no more ugly



black boxes please, Steve"). Like all system manufacturers, Legend Audio also offers speaker and interconnect cables that they feel will allow for the best performance of their products.

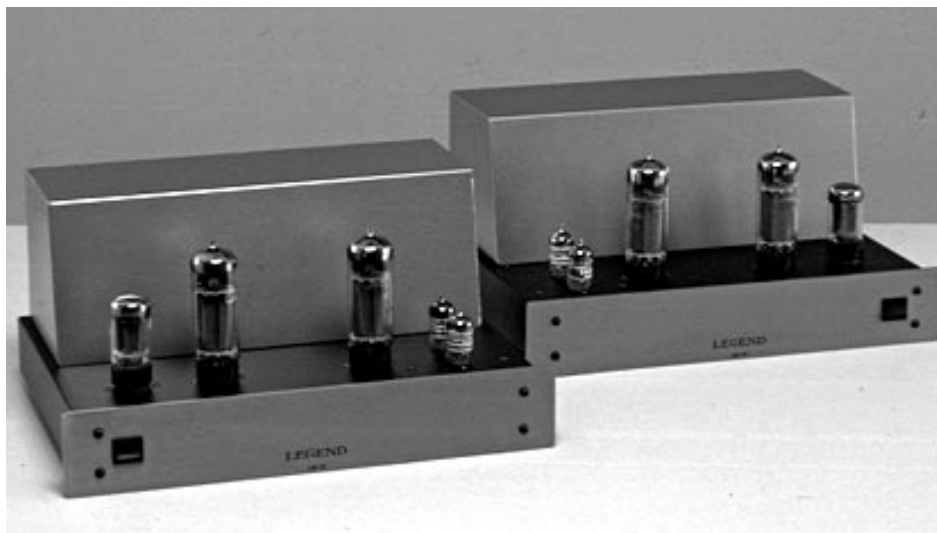
On this note, I must add that the Legend Audio speaker cable is very large, not unlike those of the upper line Kimber Kable, MIT, Transparent or Monster Cable Sigma. Unlike some of the other companies' bi-wire speaker cables, Legend Audio's set uses a totally separate cable for the upper and lower frequencies. They suggest that to get the best synergy you should use their special speaker cables. As it turns out, Legend Audio sells their lower frequency speaker cable to the general public, and it actually covers all frequencies; their special upper frequency cable is only sold to those who have purchased the Legend audio products.

#### PUTTING THE SYSTEM THROUGH ITS PACES

One of the first things that grabbed my attention about this system was how well these diminutive minimonitors could play bass notes! We're not talking deep pant flapping, room quakin', window pane shakin' bass, yet properly recorded cello and bass guitar were fleshed out amazingly well. Some other smaller speakers can do this too, yet "The Legend" also reproduced very defined and articulate, yet musical, lower frequencies. This was especially evident during the bass lines on one of my fave funky 'n' fresh '70s wah-wah music 180 gram vinyl pressings, *Green Caterpillar* (Three Blind Mice TBM-39).

While all these bass lines were happening the midrange was also fast and clean; this could be partially due to the very rigid yet lightweight Kevlar cone material. I must admit, this was the first speaker in my home with a Kevlar tweeter, so it was interesting to hear just how good the highs are, compared to all the aluminum, silk soft dome and paper tweeter designs that have resided here.

Usually I find that metallic dome tweeters seem to sound, well, a bit metallic. Great for Kraftwerk, bad for orchestral works. Soft silk-dome tweeters are my usual preference for their smoothness and lack of upper frequency harshness and grain (maybe all my time in Britain has affected me this way?). Yet the apparent speed of upper frequencies reproduced by



## LEGEND AUDIO'S LAD-L2 PREAMPLIFIER WAS SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL

the "The Legend's" Kevlar tweeters were really impressive. It's possible that my love over the years for the smoothness of silk soft-dome tweeters comes with a certain cost—the possible reduction of Superman speed and the Invisible Man transparency.

Up to this point, I have only discussed the speakers, yet this is also a true testament to how well the other components reproduce music. After all, this is a full system review. Of course, speakers and room interaction have the largest effect on how well a system reproduces music.

As for that "audiophile" stuff, like imaging and soundstaging, "The Legends," like all high quality minimonitors, easily beat many of the much larger floor standing designs. Here is where a little time, patience and experimentation with the speakers really paid off. I found that the sweet spot in my listening room was about 37" from the side walls and 45" from the rear wall (measuring from the center front of the speaker). This spot in my room gave the best lower frequency support while reducing certain depressions and augmentations within the lowermost frequencies. Toe-in seemed to be best when I could just barely see the inner side of each speaker.

And now for the bad news: Things weren't as pristine in the crucial midrange as I wished they would be in the Legend Audio system. The system sounded very good, yes, yet I couldn't help feeling that a

tube change or something would solve this problem. After trying various tubes, I rapidly realized that the amplifier was actually holding back the rest of the system. Then my phone rang. It was Ray Leung, the consultant of the Legend Audio gear, calling to tell me that the amplifiers had been updated. He wanted me to send back the pair being reviewed and he would replace them with the latest models. So while the amplifiers were gone, I decided to play with a few of the 300B-based SE amplifiers in this system, like the Wavelength Audio Cardinal and Audio Note's Meishu.

Surprisingly enough, the speakers were able to play at very good levels! Acoustic music reproduced at realistic volume levels sounded great (save full tilt classical). Only during the really rowdy times, like when I got into my Tchaikovsky's 1812, Chemical Brothers, Led Zeppelin, Rush, Stevie Ray Vaughan and just plain ole' full home parties, that there obviously needed to be more power behind these speakers. The midrange was absolutely wonderful! Gone was the small amount of haze. The highs were even a bit sweeter and the whole system took on a more musically enjoyable reproduction, versus being a bit more on the harder, less smooth side when driven by Legend Audio's "The Triode" amplifier. This was possibly due to the effects of the rightly famous Western Electric and even better JJ 300B tube offered by VAC. (Side note: You 300B lovers should really check out the new JJ tube. Staggeringly good stuff here!)

#### THE JEWEL OF THE LEGEND AUDIO SYSTEM

It soon became obvious during this mix-and-match feast that Legend Audio's



LAD-L2 preamplifier was something very special. In fact, it sounded better than my long-standing favorite Audio Note M2 phono, all silver wired unit! Unfortunately, the LAD-L2 preamplifier comes sans phono section—so I recruited various tubed and solid-state phono stages for analog duties. Sure, some components edged out the Legend Audio products, but they were more

**THE LEGEND  
AUDIO SYSTEM IS  
DEFINITELY ON  
MY VERY SHORT LIST  
OF FULL SYSTEMS  
TO AUDITION.**

than twice the price! In fact, even the Legend Audio cabling was quite impressive—yet my favorite pick still went out to

the Audio Note AN-Vx silver interconnect, or the new Kimber Select all silver goodies. (Check out the Kimber Select cables, but make sure you really burn in the speaker wire.)

The Kimber Select offers more harmonic integrity and better clarity—at almost double the cost. On the other hand, The Legend speaker cable was very impressive indeed for the money! The Legend Audio bi-wire run served as a natural fit for their speakers and also worked quite impressively with many of the other horn-and-cone speakers here.

Over the years I have found that speaker cabling can make a big difference. Sometimes a cable that works great with one pair of speakers might not work as well with others. As always, try before you buy (or insure a 30-day money back guarantee). Ultimately I chose the Legend IV speaker cables (\$2,400 for the 10-foot pair), because of their synergy with the rest of Legend Audio system, over the Kimber KS-3035 (\$3,350 for the 8-foot pair). Yet when used with other speakers, the Kimber generally edged out the Legend IV. As I said,

when it comes to speaker wire, or wire in general, it's trial and error, my friends.

As a complete system, the Legend Audio products handled broad dynamics very well while reproducing a good deal of tonal rightness and harmonic integrity, even when the going got tough. Very solid imaging is reproduced between the speakers too (and I do mean *solid*!) Musical notes come and go very quickly while also offering a good amount of air and hall sound. Not the ultimate as other "reference" systems offer, though these other "reference" systems cost multiples more. For instance my Audio Note Ongaku "reference" system fares better (but can you say 'over \$100,000'?). For the money, I personally prefer this system much more expensive two-channel systems, judging from what I have heard at other people's homes and in manufacturers' showrooms.

Getting a bit more specific, the new Legend Triode amplifiers are much more transparent than the earlier model—and my main complaint, the lack of smoothness in the mids, is greatly resolved. While really good 300B-based amplifiers like the

Wavelength Audio Cardinal and the Audio Note Meishu still get my nod, they can lack the ultimate power needed to drive the Legend speakers.

#### PUTTING THE SYSTEM TOGETHER

The real winner, the cream of the crop, the king of the hill, the master of all he surveys here (when used separately in a mix or in a matched system) is the Legend Audio LAD-L2 preamplifier. The speakers and wire are also worth investigating, if you are in that kind of shopping mood.

One thing I didn't mention in the description at the beginning is that Legend Audio actually "pots" virtually the entire signal path of the passive components in the preamplifier. In other words, all of the passive parts in the preamplifier are actually situated within a smaller box inside the larger, outer preamplifier housing! This is a unique yet well-done approach, which keeps any vibrations from adversely affecting the preamplifiers' very small signal circuitry. In fact, the preamplifier is so good that it has taken a more permanent place in my humble system over my favorite

Audio Note all tubed silver wired M2 (of course I'm dying to hear what the Audio Note M3 sounds like, let alone their hand-made Japanese pre-amplifiers).

The Legend audio system is definitely on my very short list of full systems to audition. The person behind the Legend Audio "sound" surely has a very impressive set of ears. So go ahead and enjoy the music! ☺

► Legend Audio Design, 2430 Fifth St., Berkley, CA 94710 Tel.: (800) 783-7360. Fax: (510) 843-3298. Website: [www.legend-audio.com](http://www.legend-audio.com). Designer: Von Gaylord. Speaker size: 14" x 14" x 12" (height x width x depth). Prices: "The Triode" amplifier: \$5,495/pair; LAD-L2 preamplifier: \$4,495; "The Legend" speakers: \$3,999/pair; "The Unique" speaker stands: \$745/pair; Legend VI Mk. II Bi-Wire speaker cables, set of four cables (12' pair): \$4,800; Legend VI one meter interconnect RCA ends: \$975; 1½ meter interconnect as above: \$1,267. Warranty: Lifetime on cables, one year for all tubes and five years on all units.