

Home Audio Equipment Review



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Legend Audio LAD-L2 Line-Stage Preamp

by Ken Micallef

Legend Audio Design of California is a new-ish company turning heads, twisting ears, and kicking much butt in the zap! boom! bang! world of high-end audio. This robust manufacturer has consistently taken awards for its entire audio line (speakers, DACs, preamps and power amps), including being named a *SoundStage!* LIVE Standout Room at HI-FI '99, three *IAR* awards at HI-FI '98, plus being voted among the best sound of the HI-FI show for three years running in *Stereophile*. Is there a Legend in the making? Read on.

At the heart of this tale lies the Legend LAD-L2 preamplifier and its dark twin, the Legend power supply. Unpacking the two similar-sized pieces from their double-boxed carton, I also found two heavy-duty dedicated power cords and a DC cable that connects the pair (via balanced jacks). The latter unusual-looking cord reminded me of something you would find on an iron, only fatter and more sturdy. Lifting the power supply out of the box was not an easy task, it's a heavy sucker at 25 pounds. A flip of a small toggle switch on the rear of the power supply lights up a red eye on the front of both units.

Cosmetically, this is one of the dullest combos around. Preamp: slightly oversized front plate, flat-black finish, two big gold knobs (one marked CD, tuner, aux; the other volume), two toggle switches for tape monitor and mute functions. Ditto for the power supply, without front-plate controls. Legend Audio hasn't spent their mutual-fund money on the looks of this \$4495 unit. Nope, all the goods are in the inside.

Loosening the Allen bolts on the wraparound preamp lid and peering inside, I was instantly enamored of this baby. Tubes! The LAD-L2 is a dual-mono design with a separate NOS CHS Sylvania 6SN7 for each channel (more on this particular tube later). Point-to-point wiring is another feature of this hand-crafted, high-quality unit. That Legend Audio supplies the unit factory equipped with NOS tubes is pretty surprising. The actual works for each line stage



Review Summary

Sound Offers "a commanding focus, and a very realistic, palpable, up-front quality that consistently put me in the third row"; bass is "enormously detailed and present with emotive slam"; "broad, layered soundstage" and longer-lasting transients that sometimes sound "a little wispy and light."

Features Only basic features and no balanced inputs or outputs; supplied with NOS tubes; separate power supply.

Use Ken found that Tungsol and different Sylvania tubes improved the sound; rather large for some equipment racks.

Value Competes handily with the heavy hitters of the tube-preamp world and bettered Ken's "giant-killer" Audio Note M2.

are hidden in two sealed metal boxes, each sitting on four tiny rubber feet. Remember, they are *inside* the metal casing walls of the preamp. We're talking serious isolation for each channel here. The rear of the preamp houses heavy-duty RCA input/output jacks. Looking inside the power supply was less thrilling; just the usual circuit boards and such. But hey, I'm no tech head.

Welcome to the Thunderdome, baby!

My rig is crammed in two racks (Standesign, Salamander), so the bounteous Legend power supply had to sit upright on the floor. And the LAD-L2 is so wide, too wide for my rack actually, that I had to caddy-corner it in to make it fit. (It measures 19 1/2"W x 9 1/2"D x 4 1/4"H, 18 pounds.) Not very attractive to have the preamp sticking out like a big elbow wart, and a real pain in the butt to connect source components at a neck-breaking angle, but it does the job.

My ever-evolving rig consists of Audio Physic Virgo speakers, 100-watt Cary SLM-100 monoblocks (wired for triode by Kirk at Cary), Thorens TD166 turntable, Sumiko Blue Point cartridge, Rotel RQ970 BX phono preamp (the Legend lacks a phono stage), Muse Model Two DAC, Genesis Digital Lens, Theta Jade transport, Placette remote volume control, and an Audio Note M2 preamplifier (upgraded with point-to-point silver wire by Blackie Pagano at Tubesville). Speaker cables and interconnects are primarily JPS Labs Superconductor+ series, along with original Superconductor. The fine folks at Legend also supplied me with a pair of their own VI interconnects, but I preferred the JPS Super+. The VI was wonderfully spatial and imparted lush transients, but it killed the immediacy and slam the JPS Super+ divulged. But I review too soon!

My Audio Note M2 preamp is a giant-killer, having bested the many preamps, both solid state and tube, that I have owned or reviewed over the years. A simple silver-wired, single-6SN7-tubed and valve-rectified work of art, the M2 has an attractive piano finish, gleaming gold knobs and is consistently musical. OK, I know that is bad form for a critical gearhead to say something like that. The equipment only lets the music through, unfettered and hopefully untouched, right? Whatever. The Audio Note preamp makes sweet music sweeter; Pat Metheny's soaring guitar runs more effortless and detailed; John Bonham's bloated bass drums even more titanic; and John Lennon's biting, bracing voice more haunting. The M2's drawbacks include its thin metal casing and flimsy RCA jacks. But sonically, it smokes.

The LAD-L2 on other hand is built like a tank, has exceptional dual-mono design, and the tubes fit nice and tight. And you don't have to adjust the bias of the tubes; just pop 'em in and go. The external power supply makes for even less chance of possible interference between signal and power sections. The preamp is essentially just a housing for the signal portion. And guess what? All this separation and attention to isolation seems to pay off -- this is an exceptionally quiet unit.

The mysterious Von Gaylord

I attempted to get more tech info on the Legend LAD-L2 as the manual gave no clue to parts or construction. I spoke with Legend consultant Ray Leung, who was revealing. All Legend gear is the brainchild of a mysterious German designer by the name of Von Gaylord, whose day gig finds him inventing high-tech medical equipment. Von Gaylord attends no shows, and is a bit of an iconoclast. Even Mr. Leung says he is very cautious in Von Gaylord's presence. Such is the nature of the artist.

Vampire gold jacks are used throughout the LAD-L2, premium point-to-point silver wiring is by Legend, capacitors are a combination of oil-filled and electrolytic, and transformers are

custom built. The volume control is by ALPS. The suspension for each enclosed line-stage module consists of two rubber-brass rings per side.

Bring on the fright

I powered up the LAD-L2 and left it on for a few days to settle in fully. The first thing I noticed immediately upon slipping in a disc was the low end. The M2 provides a warm, cushy bass, but is not in the same league as the LAD-L2. Not only was the bass of the LAD-L2 tighter, but with acoustic bass work, such as Steve Rodby on Pat Metheny Group's *Imaginary Day* [Warner Bros. 46821], the low end was enormously detailed and present with emotive slam. This remained the LAD-L2's most outstanding quality. The low end is astounding, offering a quality of spatial relief and articulation that I have never heard before in the preamps that have come my way. It made the Virgos hefty low end (provided by four cross-firing 6" woofers) a joy to hear, record after record. Bassist Victor Bailey's *Low Blow* [Zebra 44020] offers every sort of bass reproduction, from picking to plucking to thumb-popping, with excellent production and punch. The LAD-L2 reproduced it all with exceptional focus and clarity. Even something like Ringo Starr's tom fills on "A Little Help From My Friends" sounded more resonant and punchier. With the LAD-L2 the whole of The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's* [Capitol CDP 46442] is broader, deeper and more detailed than with my M2. Sigh.

The LAD-L2 also did well with vocals and in the midrange area. Diana Krall, Tom Petty, Buena Vista Social Club, and rising trip-hop star Dot Allison were all sumptuous and closer to the real thing, front and center in my listening room. The LAD-L2 conferred a broad, layered soundstage apparent even in my small Manhattan apartment. Transients lasted longer, but at times sounded a little wispy and light. This wispy quality could impart a thin sound to cymbals, and occasionally, a brittle sheen to transients. But the entire sound presentation was very well focused and weighty. This is a solid presentation with a commanding focus, and a very realistic, palpable, up-front quality that consistently put me in the third row, CD after CD. Classic CDs like Miles Davis' *Kind Of Blue* [Columbia/Legacy CK 64935] and *The Blue Note Collection: The Avante Garde* [Blue Note 96384B], revealed the lushness of Davis (with a nod to the remastering process), and the inherent defects of the early '60s Blue Note sessions. Alternately, the Euro new-lounge fare of French duo Air sounded accurately synthetic, with big loping bass lines and serene synth parts.

To tube or not to tube

The only bugaboo with the LAD-L2, besides its clumsy width, is its tube compliment. As I stated earlier, that a manufacturer even bothers to include NOS tubes in a new unit is laudatory. So the criticisms given here are only to point out that you can do better than the tubes supplied. The chosen tube, the Sylvania 6SN7WGT, was recently reviewed by *Vacuum Tube Valley* as sounding "very clean, dry and [with a] 'military' sound. Sibilant highs...but extremely fast." This would account for the infrequent brittle or shiny sound I heard on various recordings, especially new rock records (OK, that is another article!). Tungstons (my personal faves, black or brown base) made the sound smoother, but perhaps less detailed. RCA 5692s added enough brassy panache to light up the room. Older '50s-era Sylvania's (top getter, black base) seemed the perfect compliment, and are generally cheaper than the RCAs or the Tungstons, usually around \$20 apiece on rec.audio.tube. Not as super-sounding at the extremes, the '50s Sylvania's took away the somewhat brittle high end, while the bass was still taut.

Now after spending \$4495, you might say "Why should I spend more cash on fancy tubes?" Well, you don't have to change a thing. Keep the supplied tubes in and the LAD-L2 will still sound fabulous, top to bottom. But you are an audiophile, and you do have that bug, admit it.

And with a preamp like the LAD-L2 you owe it to yourself to do some tweaking. You'll be glad you did.

A moment of silence...AAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!

Yes, the Legend LAD-L2 killed my giant-killer. It created the greatest amount of detail I have heard, excels at bass articulation, weight and speed, and is vividly lifelike. It offered a quality of presence, muscle, and natural room-filling focus that I found irresistible. The LAD-L2 is so easy on the ear, it's hard to stop listening. To use a worn-out analogy that works, listening to music through the LAD-L2 was like letting a wide shaft of light into my two-room New York flat.

If I had the change, the LAD-L2 would be mine. In the meantime, the M2 will do just fine. But my rig will never be *quite* the same.

...Ken Micallef

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Legend Audio LAD-L2 Line-Stage Preamp

Price: \$4495

Warranty: Three years parts and labor.

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