

The Audiophile Voice

"...by audiophiles for audiophiles"

Legend Audio LM-Triode Monoblock Amplifiers and LAD-L2 Preamplifier

Peter Breuninger

I am not going to write a cutesy introduction to this review. I am not going to invent new words to describe how the product performed, and I'm not going to tell a story of how I received it on a Wednesday afternoon while the rain tapped lightly on my window as I gently carried the carefully packaged brown carton up the soft carpeted stairs to my cozy listening studio, yada yada, blab blab blab. In other words, I will not insult you with poor writing or little to say, let some other magazine do that. This whole darn business of reviewing audio equipment is way out of control not only with poor and ineffective prose, but (worse yet) with improperly set-up systems or inappropriate (impedance) matching of components. There are no qualifications for a professional reviewer, and I use the word professional very loosely here, most reviewers are not paid for their work (well knowns excluded, Fremer, Tellig, Colloms, etc.). (Editor's Note: Or when they are paid, they generally aren't paid a living wage. E.P.) Another problem is the reviewer with a big ego (surprise, surprise) who likes to bully manufacturers with long loan times and demands of insultingly low "industry accommodation" prices. One reviewer told me with a great pride that he and his reviewing partner liked to see how many years they could keep a piece of equipment; "Kinda like a game," he mused, "we never return manufacturer phone calls and stall returns with every possible excuse." Well, you get the drift...

I am therefore duty bound to say, this is a professional review, written by an experienced audio reviewer who painstakingly insures proper setup and matching of each component under evaluation. If you are new to these pages, please be advised that my reviewing expertise is best with low-powered tube amplifiers and analogue playback devices, in particular reel-to-reel tape recorders and LP systems.

I have discovered over the years that there is no positive correlation between the cost of a component and its performance. What this too often means is that the more you spend on this hobby, the less real return you receive in improved sonics. As an equipment consumer, please check your gullibility at the door when you read about five-figure prices for components that "redefine the state of the art". Most often the state of the art only resides in the reviewer's mind. I'll say this, too, throughout my years of evaluating components, particularly those of the analog persuasion, it's not the individual piece of equipment that's most important, it's the set up and matching with the rest of the system that's paramount.

The Legend Audio design LM-Triode monoblocks and the LAD-L2 line stage are, as you might expect, perfectly matched to one another, and when they are taken as a team, they need no further experimentation except perhaps for some testing of interconnects other than those which are "options" from Legend. In comparison to my reference cables from Crystal, Nordost, Kimber, and Goertz, Legend wire is equivalent or better in "optimizing" a system configuration. Wire is very impedance dependent, I find, and it cannot be judged without differing loads. In one system Kimber optimizes the connection, in another it is Legend. If you simply read reviews and judge wire directly from what that reviewer says, you will be very disappointed if your system differs even slightly in impedance from the reviewer's.

Loudspeakers used for this evaluation were the Classic Audio Studio Standard IIs, a large, squat three-way horn design with a 15-inch bass reflex with all TAD drivers that some consider the best in the business. These speakers are very efficient and easy to drive with sensitivity of 97 dB SPL, one watt, one meter, and with a ruler flat 8-ohm impedance. Source components included the excellent BAT CD player; tables from Walker, SOTA, Thorens, Michell; phono amplifiers from Benz/Lukashack, EAR, and the CAT's phono stage, and cartridges from ClearAudio, Denon, Koetsu, and Sumiko. Of these source components, the BAT CD player and EAR phono amp are the only I don't own outright.

The six-month review period intersected with a singled-ended amplifier survey for another magazine and thus offered many combinations for the Legend line stage and multi comparisons for the Legend LM-Triode monoblocks. It is rare to have so many amplifiers (15) to mate with a linestage and to compare with one another. Please be advised that the amplifiers in the single-ended survey included the best in the world. Single-ended triode (SETs) amplifiers are the most expensive per watt amplifiers available and the most difficult to match to a loudspeaker. SET power out puts rarely go over 10 watts and their output impedances are many times higher than push-pull amplifiers. What this means is that the Legend LM monoblocks were up against the stiffest competition in the top echelon of a far greater performance category. Yes, everything you read about single ended amps is true. They have better detail, more natural transients, far more acoustic envelope, multi-dimensional timbre recreation, and most importantly, no sonic enjoyment barriers. But unless you have heard single-ended system done right, you will not understand. I can write any word I choose, paint any acoustic picture imaginable, and conjure up the actual Genie from Aesop's fables to grant you my very own personal sonic experiences, and you will fall miles short of the getting "it." The only way to experience "it" is to live with "it." You cannot visit, you cannot eat, you cannot touch, you cannot see, you cannot smell, and most of all you cannot hear "it" in one listening session. Now that I've elevated the SET experience to unobtainable through the written word, let me tell you the Legend the LM Triode mono blocks are the only amplifiers in my experience that come asymptotic to "it." So to begin...

Legend LM-Triode Monoblocks

These Legend amps are 40-watt workhorse reference amplifiers that allow mortals to sip from the cup of the Single-Ended Gods. Yes, my ears are over sensitive to crossover notch distortion, an unavoidable roadblock imposed on the listener by splitting the musical analog into two separate and distinct halves that unite again at the output transformer. Perfect matching never occurs, Humpty Dumpty never becomes whole, and that tinny little microscopic mismatch appears as a distortion. You may not know it as a distortion for you may have never experienced reproduced sound without it. It is no different from living without eyeglasses. You become accustomed and you adapt, but these are simple human survival tricks, mind you. Survive to procreate, that's the biological job assignment. Listening to music not only passes the time of life, but enriches our living experience to strengthen the individual and to improve the race. It may take a little thinking and dot connection to get my drift, but this business of music creation, and ours of recreation, is nothing short of survival of the fittest. Suppose that we men are happier, more adjusted, we are not then more appealing to the opposite sex, and thus more apt and able to reproduce? Would you women rather reproduce with a wino or concert pianist? See, all this music listening is good, and if we can make it easier with fewer barriers, the better for the race.

If you are rolling your eyes, just think back to the early days when the man with the keenest hunting aim was exalted and honored with the tribe's most desirable female(s). Today, we hunt with our heart, to elevate our existence. The culture we live in offers survival safety-nets of food, shelter and medicine, so our needs become wants and our time and physical-plus-mental energy is spent elsewhere. It is with this thinking that we honor those who bring us happiness; the more happiness they bring, the more we honor them. I bow then to honor the simplicity of the Legend Triode monoblocks—simple in result, with more musical bounty, more emotion, and greater happiness, which together equal higher sexual advantage and diminished selection of our adversaries. Damn good things to say about an amp before stooping to the usual pap audiophile jargon....

Jargon, what is it? Nonsensical or incoherent utterance or the specialized or technical language of a group or profession. With audio, it's usually more of the former masquerading as science and hence allowing the participants an exclusionary club to exercise their ignorance.

So let me say, and I do so with the utmost of ignorance, that the Legend Triodes offer the best continuous musical presentation possible this side of singled-end triodes. That's right, continuous, a stupid word, created by a stupid collective to describe the level of musical involvement and how long it is sustained. This Legend hammers you with emotion, not letting up until the conductor finishes the sermon. Yes, this is the most involving and musical amplifier of this genre I have yet to describe. Low-powered push-pull is better than high-powered push-pull minus notch distortion. So by simple reasoning, the Legend Triode will let the music in better than any higher powered tube amplifier. If you buy my reasoning, the Legend Triode mono blocks far surpass the \$89K Jadis 800 due to fewer signal reassembles. But, but—you must have somewhat sensitive speakers to get this musical allowance. I suspect any speaker rated over 88-dB SPL efficiency, with higher than a four-ohm minimum load, will open the door to the Legend's excellence.

Oh, I cannot forget to say, the Legend has an immense soundspace and captures the full recorded acoustic from a warm but natural perspective. Character-wise, yes it's warm, but never annoyingly so. If you take the plunge from solid-state gear to tube, this is the amplifier of choice to deliver what tubes are best at—sound space rendition, capturing trailing harmonics, and three-dimensional imaging. Downsides? They'll take time away from other activities because you will be belted into your listening chair for far longer sessions. And, yes, if you like your bass tight, dry and artificial, you'll be disappointed. But then, go back to the Spectrals or Krell or Adcom or whatever and see how long you listen.

Legend LAD-L2 Preamplifier

First off, this is not a preamplifier, it's a line stage. I borrowed the EAR phono stage, and hot-rodged the Convergent Audio Technology (CAT) preamp to listen to "music." Wow, this is a one great line stage, one that equals or surpasses the CAT Mk III in musicality and plain old "I'd rather use this" for music listening. Whatever pace is, this guy has it (I still hate the word pace, it means nothing to me but to "put all together"). Rich, big and real; those are only three words but they are the best three I could find to describe the Legend. I mated it to over a dozen of the finest single-ended amplifiers, and it opened the door to more music than the CAT, a little blurry in the lower octaves and not as crystalline as the CAT's upper reaches, but nonetheless, the Legend never interfered with the music. Its warm character was more preferred to the cool CAT for every day listening. And let me say, the Legend's look and silky feel humiliated the CAT's cold, clickity and notchy controls. I love the bronzy gold volume control—it's smooth and rich and simply bespeaks luxury.

The LAD-L2 is a two-chassis unit and will need additional shelf space. The power supply is connected by detachable umbilical cord unlike the CAT and has the same refined look as the control unit. This is one sexy package and the only line stage I have ever hesitated about sending back to the maker. If I had more space and if it had a phono stage, I would have bought it. Attributes for audiophiles include the deepest soundstage yet offered in my new listening room. There's a chesty and wholesome lower midrange, thick with life, and teeming with emotion, no thinness whatsoever. It easily handles explosive dynamics and riveting micro transients (there is no such thing as micro dynamics, dynamics are dynamics—do not let the neologisms in vogue in other magazines blind you to musical realities). Instrumental timbres are true and easily identified through a very fine grain lens. Overall character is dark, but very pleasing, and to this listener desirable for everyday playback material. If all you do is play audiophile CDs and LPs, go get yourself a cool and overly analytical linestage to pinpoint subway sounds and wall material. If you're a music lover, mate this LAD-L2 to your solid-state behemoth and you will listen to more music in a week than you previously did in a month with that SS preamp you now have for sale in an e-bay auction.

The Legend L2 is of music reference quality and is deserving of my highest recommendation. It is warm and honorable to the music without losing attention-grabbing detail. In this lofty price range, the Legend offers exceptional ergonomics, Lexus-like sonic refinement, and the highest level of musical involvement. Mate this preamp to the Legend LM-Triode monos, and you'll have a blockbuster combo that will give you years of satisfaction and bring pangs of envy from your solid-state buddies.

Note

Legend LM-Triode Monoblock Amplifiers and LAD-L2 Line Stage Preamplifier, \$5495 per pair and \$4494 each, respectively. Legend Audio Design, 2430 Fifth St., Units G&H, Berkeley, CA 94710; phone 510/843-2288, fax 510/843-3298, website www.legendaudio.com.

Reprinted by permission of The Audiophile Voice © 1999 Guts & Elbow Grease Publishing Ltd. 215 Glenridge Ave., Montclair, NJ 07042 Subscriptions are \$30.00 for one year or \$55.00 for two years within the United States; Canadian subscriptions are \$39.00 for one year and \$65.00 for two years. Overseas subscriptions are \$66.00 for one year. Please make payment by check or money order in U.S. Funds. We do not use credit cards so as to help keep our overhead low. Send payment to: The Audiophile Voice, P.O. Box 43537, Upper Montclair, NJ 07042