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MBL 101E MKII REFERENCE SERIES

The Epitome of Romanticism

Peter Breuning

I'm a longtime concertgoer, albeit at first a reluctant one. I was exposed at an early age to the sound of the live and unamplified instruments of the Philadelphia Orchestra at the world-famous Academy of Music. My father had season ticket seats ten rows back in the Parquet section, better known as the floor, right in front of the stage. I was dragged to concerts when Mom was too tired to go. At first it was like a trip to the barbershop. I would kick and scream, but once in the chair with the feel of the warm clippers and the old-fashioned hand-massager, I would be in heaven.

As those fabulous Philadelphians played, something inside me clicked. I quickly learned to let the music wash over and envelop me and to connect with the 100-plus players working their magic up on the very stage where Stokowski, Ormandy, and Rachmaninoff once stood. Those times flew by, and before I knew it I was ten rows back from Emerson, Lake & Palmer opening for a new British band named “Yes” at a new Philadelphia institution, the Spectrum Stadium. Commander Cody, Jefferson Airplane, and the Grateful Dead would follow soon as my concert-going experiences grew and my musical horizons expanded.

Fast-forward to the day I first heard the MBL 101. The very moment the sound came on I was flooded with visions of the Academy of Music, my dad, my rock concert buddies, ELP, Yes, and the Grateful Dead. All live, right there in front of me. I knew, in a nanosecond, that these odd-looking R2-D2 look-alikes were something special. The more I listened, the more I knew this new loudspeaker design was *revolutionary*.

Imagine a single door leading right into Boston Symphony Hall, La Scala, or the Vienna Musikverein (considered by many to be the finest concert hall in the world). Now dream you have the best seat in the house, as well. Madison Square Garden, ditto. Sydney Opera House? Indeed. Each hall, with its own private entranceway, *in your home*.

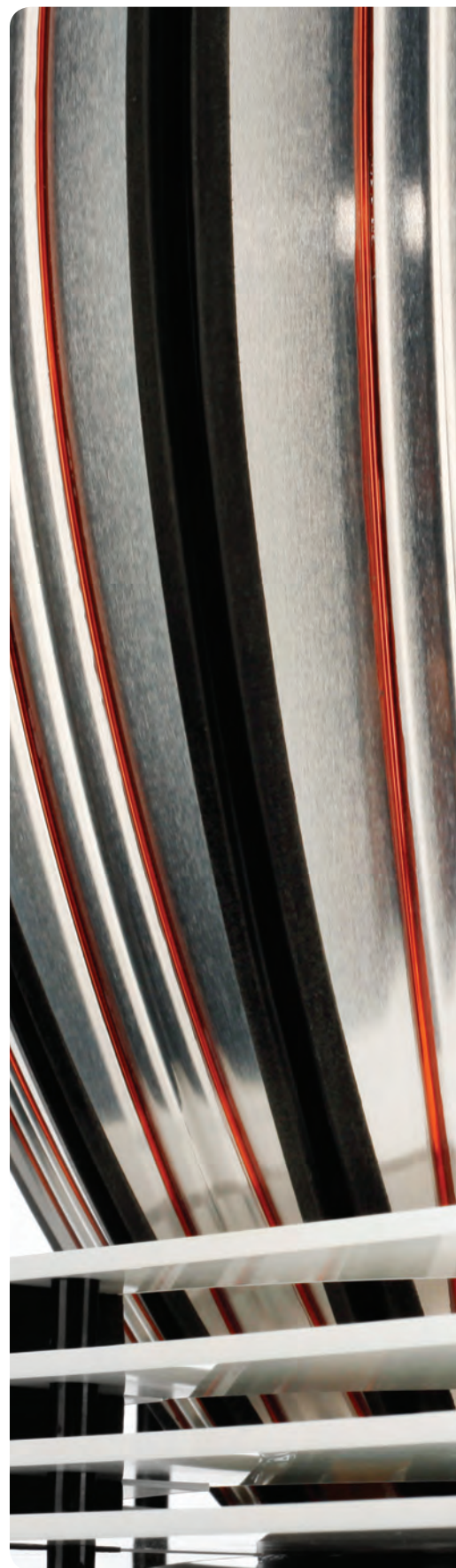
Now for the over-the-top part: Picture dining with Mozart, dancing with Lady Gaga, or entertaining guests with John Coltrane, all through that very same door. Well it can happen, and it does happen to many people throughout the world. The one thing they all have in common is simple; they all own an MBL music-making system.

Attending a concert is one of life’s greatest pleasures. Going out, enjoying a fine meal, a glass of wine. Then strolling over to the hall, seeing the people, and finding your seat. Waiting for the lights to dim, the anticipation... you know *that* feeling. When the show starts, you’re instantly mesmerized by the performance, the music, the sound. It’s overwhelming and it’s wonderful. In the snap of a finger you lose yourself in the concert experience. It’s not just the music; it is the sound, scale, and scope of actually being at the hall or arena. There are few things in life that equal this, and fewer yet that you can actually own for yourself to use and enjoy *anytime* you desire.

Experiencing an MBL system is all this; it’s a personal concert hall experience each and every time you listen. It’s not a lifestyle product; it is life itself. And it is epitomized by the MBL 101E MkII, perhaps the most believable *music* transducer man has yet devised. The newest edition of this loudspeaker from German stalwart MBL takes audio reproduction to a higher and more majestic level than any transducer before it. The MBL 101E MkII does what no other loudspeaker can do; it takes your favorite artist or orchestra and “presents” them to you with the romantic realism of a live event.

If you sample all of audio, you will find many schools and thoughts of aesthetic ranging from the sublime of the single-ended triode to the exactitude of the studio monitor.

Walkürenritt, better known as “The Ride of the Valkyries,” occurs at the beginning of Act III of *Die Walküre*, the second of the four operas by Richard Wagner that make up *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. In my view, this (about) eight-minute orchestral “song” musically and emotionally embodies the pinnacle of romanticism. Wagner’s use of song and theme or leitmotif was unique. He created a new technique where music and song were used to denote a character or emotion or event. Leitmotif adds an additional dimension to operatic production. It’s the crowning achievement of the Romantic Movement (musically), that cultural about-face to the Age of Enlightenment, and also a revolt against the “new science” of nature embodied by Darwinism. Its tentacles are deep-rooted in art, music, and literature. It’s a statement of reaction to change and it paints its protest of the highest degree through the art of Richard Wagner. Romanticism is big and bold and a reflection of the vividness of life.



MBL 101E MKII REFERENCE SERIES

What Wagner's leitmotif is to romanticism, the MBL Reference Series is to high-performance audio; MBL adds a new dimension to audio performance. If you sample all of audio, you will find many schools of thought and aesthetics, ranging from the sublime of the single-ended triode to the exactitude of the studio monitor. Bits and pieces of the MBL listening aesthetic can be heard in the Harbeth or British-style of audio as well as the multiple-driver Wilson Alexandria Series II or the Scaena. MBL takes a little of this and a little bit of that and then serves it back,



perhaps as a protest, against any one school of engineering design. The result is a pure “absolute sound” experience.

TAS Executive Editor Jonathan Valin (JV) coined the ingenious three-listener concept. You remember: the fidelity-to-mastertape listener, the sounds-good (to them) listener, and then the “true”-to-concert-sound listener (this publication’s founder, Harry Pearson’s “absolute sound” standard). The hallmark of HP’s concept is to reproduce “live and unamplified” instruments in space. As JV so correctly points out in his Magico Q5 review (Issue 214), this listener “type” has a tough time when challenged with what the “real sound” of Jimi Hendrix’s Stratocaster or Lori Anderson’s electric violin is. Speakers that reproduce absolute-sound experiences are not known as ideal transducers of amplified instruments.

In yesteryear we had the Infinity IRS V as the statement product that attempted to bridge this gap. It sure sounded “good” and offered up a believable concert experience, but when it came to realistic accuracy of

MBL 101E MkII REFERENCE SERIES

timbre and mastertape-like truth, it fell flat on its face. It had *too much* of its own sound. It also suffered from another problem: The IRS was huge. Standing almost seven feet tall, weighing close to a ton, with four separate speaker towers, it not only dominated the room, it *was* the room. Nonetheless, in many ways the IRS was and remains a holy grail of “absolute sound” loudspeakers. Its reproduction of concert-hall realism and overall “good” sound were incomparable. Many will concede it was the 1980s and 1990s standard of reference.

Luckily for us, we live in “today.” The reference products available to us are truly extraordinary. Colorations have been reduced to the point of near elimination (witness any Magico or the Coincident Pure Reference Extreme). We can now have that same absolute sound cake and serve it on a mastertape-like plate. In other words, we can have a live, unamplified instrument in real space experience and then go right into Madison Square Garden and “feel” a chest-pounding rock concert—all while “seeing” back through to the mastertape. I’m not going to suggest the MBL equals the Magico Q5 in mastertape realism, but I will stand firm in stating that the MBL will exceed the Magico in “sounding good” almost all the time (even when the instruments aren’t particularly well or accurately recorded) and mimicking a concert hall experience each and every time (even when the concert isn’t particularly well or accurately recorded).

Back to that first day MBL experience... the new speaker not only filled the room with the intensity and impact of an Infinity IRS; it also charged the room with a never-before-heard three-dimensional realism. I was in awe. The inventor, Wolfgang Meletsky, was standing off to the side smiling when he saw my face light up. He knew I “got it.” That first MBL 101 went where no other loudspeaker went before; it turned your room into a concert hall.

Oh, it had issues and was far from perfect. There was an annoying electronic haze surrounding each instrument, and it had a chuffy “one-note” bass. You could hear the loudspeaker’s ports as they pumped the air in and out, exaggerating certain frequencies and deviating from flat response (or truth).

Surprisingly, the Radialstrahler units were conceived with a deck of playing cards. The designer was “toying” around with a card, bending and flexing it between his thumb and forefinger when the idea struck. Why not design a loudspeaker drive-unit based on this flexing principle? Further, why not design it with the “playing cards” in a circular configuration and the magnet above or below—thus creating a new type of driver, a direct substitute for the traditional loudspeaker’s round forward-firing cone? The resulting wavelaunch is accomplished throughout a true 360 degrees—a spherical launch that embodies all dimensions. Like Wagner, employing libretto, music, and visual art into a single “greater than its parts” aesthetic, the MBL takes loudspeaker design to a new and unique level. No other loudspeaker sounds like an MBL, just as no other composer sounds like Wagner.

Melezky and another engineer (Bienecke) started the company thirty-two years ago. Soon after, a third engineer (Lehnhardt) was brought in to make the innovative design work in actual use and production, thus the name “MBL.” Challenges continued, and a new and gifted engineer Jürgen Reis was hired in 1985 to assist the company’s founders with all MBL product designs. Reis is the engineering brain trust of MBL. He designed the carbon-fiber tweeter and employed new materials for the lower midrange unit. He brought the original idea to production levels and it came to market as the MBL 101. In 1996 Reis added a subwoofer and it became a 4-way design with the 101D designation. His refinements have placed MBL at the top of the high-performance luxury-audio market. As happens with many successful companies, the founder exited in 2009 (“exited” is a venture-capital term for “sold”), and Reis remains as the company’s Chief of Engineering and Development. The new owner Christian Hermeling has “raised the bar” for Reis and challenged him to make the best speakers that money can buy. No cost-cutting allowed. No overseas parts. Only the best German-made or German-sourced components can go into today’s MBL products. In fact, MBL, in an effort to improve distribution, opened its own North American company to distribute its products.

Obviously, much attention was placed on improving the low-frequency reproduction of this already outstanding loudspeaker.

The speaker under review is the newest version of the MBL 101E MkII. It was shipped directly from the AXPONA Atlanta show with less than 100 hours use and break-in. Along with the speaker I received a full MBL Reference Line system of electronics with which to test and review the loudspeakers. The MBL Reference Line is MBL’s cost-no-object gear. It is designed for the listener who demands the best of the best. There are two loudspeakers in the Reference Line: the \$70,500 101E MkII, and the \$263,000 101 X-treme. The X-treme is effectively a doubled up 101E in an MTM-type configuration with separate woofer towers. JV reviewed the X-treme in Issue 189, declaring it one of the world’s great loudspeakers. I’m an MBL 101E owner myself, so what you read next is based upon five years of MBL listening experience.

The heart of all MBL loudspeakers is the use of proprietary and patented Radialstrahler 360-degree drive elements. “Radialstrahler” translates from German to English as “round spotlight,” an apt description of the MBL surround-like listening experience wherein instruments appear “spotlighted” in all three dimensions within your listening room. In the 101E MkII, the Radialstrahler units are deployed for the lower-midrange frequencies, midrange, and high frequencies. Traditional woofers are used for the lowest frequencies in these and all MBL loudspeakers. The lower midrange has been nicknamed “the melon” because of its shape, which is like and about the size of an actual watermelon. [See *Jonathan Valin’s review and factory tour in Issue 189 for a full technical exposition of the Radialstrahler.* —RHJ]

The 101E MkII utilizes its three Radialstrahler units to form a vertical array. The tweeter sits on top above the midrange, which in turn sits above the lower midrange “melon.” The entire array is attached to the low-frequency enclosure housing traditional woofers. The MkII revision includes newly designed bass drivers and stronger internal cabinet-bracing. The crossover was completely redesigned to address not only the new bass unit/drivers but

MBL 101E MKII REFERENCE SERIES



also to better integrate the tweeter with the midrange unit. The result is superior low-frequency extension and pitch definition. On bowed acoustic bass you can really hear a difference between the MkI and the MkII. There is also less of a “one-note” character to the low end. This is a substantial improvement over the MkI. In fact, if I blank out my mind, I would think that these are two speakers from two different companies—that’s how profound the difference between the new MkII is over the MkI in low-frequency reproduction. I am a firm believer in the hypothesis that if you get the bottom end right with the lowest possible coloration, the frequencies above it will be reproduced more accurately. There are new rings surrounding the bass ports, as well. Obviously, much attention was placed on improving the low-frequency reproduction of this already outstanding loudspeaker.

The high frequencies also better integrate with mids on the MkII. I believe the top is somewhat less “hot” on the MkII. This took a little a time to get used to. I like a full frequency response even if it includes a little overextension on top. The MkIs offered up a huge “openness” in the upper frequencies that I found appealing. The MkIIs are a little softer on top and better integrate with the midrange. This results in a more accurate portrayal of how an instruments sounds in real life. In other words, it tips the MkII more into the mastertape-type listener camp. The MBL will never be a Magico or a Coincident Pure Reference Extreme, but it’s

now flirting with attributes these mastertape-type speakers excel at. I see from photos that the grille has been redesigned as well. (I never took the grilles out of their boxes with the MkI, so why should I have bothered with the MkII—hardcore audiophile that I am?)

The MkII stands about two inches lower than the MkI. I believe this adds to the improvement in driver integration, as each driver is closer to the others. I got some flack from a member of my listening panel for using the (worn-out) term “more of a single cloth” when describing the MkII, but it’s true. The speaker is now more of a “single transducer,” instead of being a sum of its parts.

As noted, the system I tested the 101E MkII in was a complete Reference Line setup including the massive and mind-bogglingly powerful \$53,000 (each) 9011 amplifiers in a monoblock configuration. These monsters put out 840 watts into 4 ohms and 1390 watts each into 2 ohms. The 101E MkII’s rated sensitivity is 82dB, one of the lowest-sensitivity loudspeakers on the market. This means you need lots and lots of power to drive them.

The two other MBL Reference Line components included the \$28,700 1611F D-to-A converter, and the \$26,500 6010 preamplifier. When set up between the piano-black 101E MkII loudspeakers, the all-black MBL components screamed unadulterated luxury. These products transcend mere audio components. They have established a new product category in the world of extravagant consumer-audio products. I invited several listening companions over, and the first words out of each and every mouth were: “Oh, my God.” The striking beauty of the system was breathtaking in itself. Listening to the system, as you may guess, was a life-altering experience. As mentioned, I am an MBL 101 owner but not a full Reference Line owner. This was the first time in a familiar listening room for the full MBL “kit” for this listener.

I set the speakers in an equilateral listening triangle in room number one. (Please see my listening room configurations on AVGuide.com in the Forums section under Reviewer Background information. You’ll see a diagram/pictorial of my rooms—the Bozaks were, of course, removed.) The massive 9011 amplifiers surrounded the 6010 preamplifier. With just about any recording, in that millisecond before the music starts, a huge holographic soundfield enveloped the room. I had never heard so much low-level atmospheric detail on any system before. The room was charged with it. It created a profound sensation of spatial realism on my first test recording, the exceptionally well-recorded Dudamel performance of the Stravinsky *Rite of Spring* on Deutsche Grammophon that I mention in my Lamm ML2.2 review. The bass thwacks were beyond belief as the walls of the listening room melted away. I was being *MBL’d* and I loved it. After settling into the atmospheric abilities of the system I began experimenting with numerous test tracks ranging from Ricky Lee Jones to Lori Anderson to Kronos Quartet. This MBL “full metal jacket” Reference system was like no other system I’ve ever heard. The impact and enormous size of the acoustic space were frankly beyond belief.

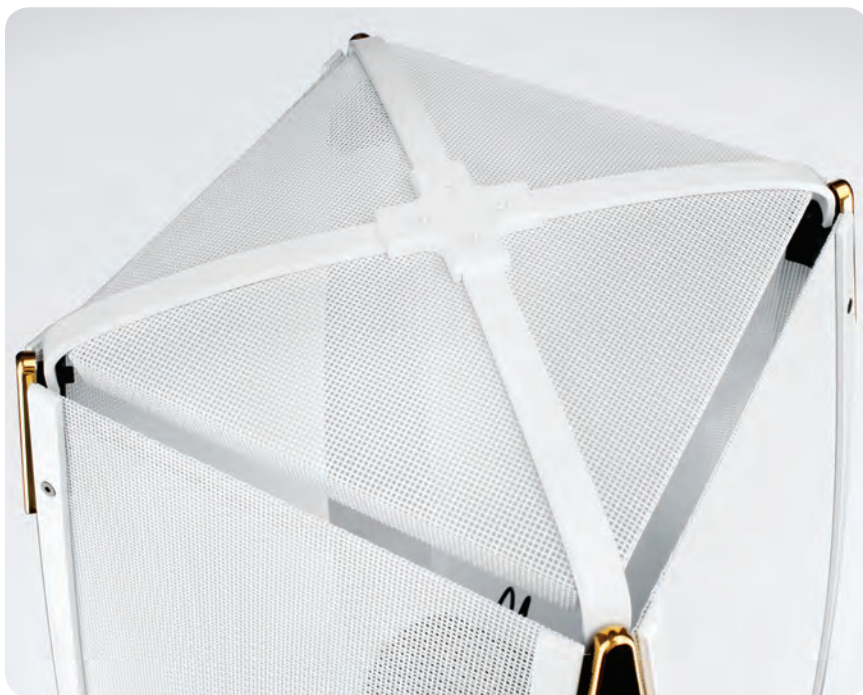
Laurie Anderson’s *Homeland* CD is a disc I’ve played multiple times on the MkI’s. It offers multitudes of enveloping sonic landscapes. It’s captivating and fun at the same time. Anderson is indeed a master of computer music-programming. She pioneered many vocal-programming techniques; in fact, many people think that she sings with a male partner when in reality it’s her voice lowered in frequency and delivery-speed via custom computer-modeling. She’s at the top of her form on her *Homeland* CD, and the track “Falling” will demonstrate the outstanding room-charging ability of the MBL 101E MkII. It begins, innocently enough, with Anderson singing, “Maybe if I fall, maybe if I fall asleep they’ll be a party there.” Her voice hangs in the center of your room in its own three-dimensional pocket. It’s as if she’s standing there, right there, singing through her digital processor, directly in front of you. Suddenly a haunting soundscape enters your room with an ominous soft gong pinging across the vast soundstage. You are lost in it. Your mind is grabbed by the presence and the power of the contrasting digital images. It’s goosebumps galore. Then the electronic bass keyboard enters and explodes across the lower half of the stage with the haunting soundscape intertwining through it. Through this mix Anderson laments: “Americans unrooted, blowing with the wind, they feel the truth, if it touches them.” You mind is lost in your own memories of 9/11 or the economic nightmares facing someone you know. She personalizes it through song, mood, and “sound,” and the MBL 101 delivers it in all dimensions to you... in your own personal concert.

MBL 101E MKII REFERENCE SERIES

Another test of the power and glory of the MBL is Kate Bush's excellent double CD set *Aerial*. The track "Pi" will stagger you with the MBL's ability to detonate and explode live music's dynamics right in your room. Bush, like Anderson, relies on much electronic keyboarding with lots of *arpeggio* programming. Unlike Anderson, Bush records more actual instruments like strings or guitar alongside her (less-manipulated) voice. She layers and weaves these instruments throughout her signature electronica-based mix. The *arpeggio* bass line is what grabs you here with the chorus singing above it. The MBLs do not disappoint; the interplay between the bass line and the "he loves his numbers" chorus is spread across the stage in a tremendous holographic effect. The bass itself reaches down to the center of the earth. These speakers deliver real 20Hz–20kHz frequency response.

Perhaps Lori Anderson is a better spokesperson than this listener to sum up the MBL electronica experience. Back to the *Homeland* CD and the track "Another Day in America." Anderson takes the bat out and swings it with her "man voice" right in your face—her electronic violin opening barely preparing you for the size of the Anderson "man voice" exploding through the MBLs across the front of your room. Her lamenting libretto is captivating. You are no longer listening to high-performance audio; you are listening to electronic poetry. It's not mastertape pure: You cannot see into the actual digital mastering layers like you can through other outstanding speakers. It's more lifelike; it's more "there," just like the front row seat at the Annenburg Center, years ago, when Anderson's eyes locked upon mine as she sang songs off her *Bright Red* album. We connected, as she sang to me... the artist singing to an audience of one. That's the heart of the MBL experience. There's nothing like it in the world of audio.

Loudspeakers that have the ability to crush you with huge dynamic swings and room-busting soundstaging are not known to excel with acoustic music—be it symphonic, chamber, or vocal. It's that old dichotomy: A speaker for classical music is



not a speaker for rock-and-rolling, and vice versa. Unless you've lived with an MBL you would be quick to read "from" reviews and show reports that the MBL thing is all about spatial reality and sonic holography and not so much about instrumental tonal accuracy. This is one of those the great audio misunderstandings, along with the assumption that MBLs need huge solid-state amps to "get up and go." I'll address the latter first and then expand upon the former later.

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Four-way dynamic loudspeaker

Driver complement: Radialstrahler 360-degree tweeter, midrange, and lower midrange; 12" cone subwoofer in ported enclosure

Crossover frequencies: 105Hz, 600Hz, 3.5kHz

Crossover type: Linkwitz-Riley 4th-order

Frequency response: 24Hz–40kHz

Sensitivity: 82dB

Impedance: 4 ohms

Power handling: 500W continuous, 2200W peak

Dimensions: 16" x 67" x 18"

Weight: 176 lbs. each

Price: \$70,500

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Digital source: MBL 1611F, D to A converter, Sony Vaio Desktop, Emu 1616 soundcard.

Analog Source: Goldmund Studio/T3F arm, Wyetech Ruby P-1 phono stage, Phase Tech P-1G low output moving coil cartridge

Preamplifier: MBL 6010

Power amplifier(s): MBL 9011 in monoblock configuration

Speaker cables: Tara Labs Omega

Interconnects: Tara Labs "The Zero"

Power Cords: Tara Labs "The One"

Accessories: VPI Turntable Stand, Sound Anchor amplifier stands (MBL 6011), Stillpoints with Risers, Walker Valid Points.

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I've tested and mated numerous amplifiers to the MBL 101E ranging from classics such as the Threshold SA1 to various Krells, Rowlands, and others. One day I decided to mate a 200Wpc Conrad-Johnson Premier One to the MBLs. I thought that this would be a no, no. But, it was a match. In fact, the MBLs locked into the c-j better than they did with several of the solid-state behemoths. I then tried the new Bob Carver "Cherry Sevens" (they are cherry red in color) and, bingo, another match.

I then did the unthinkable, I tried the 18-watt, vintage, tube Eico HF-81. It ran out of steam fast on the Grammy Award-winning Cleveland Quartet's fine performances of the Beethoven string quartets, but the sound was balanced and not marred by an impedance mismatch. As we know, the frequency response of a loudspeaker/power-amplifier pair can be affected by the amplifier's output impedance. The higher the output impedance of the amplifier, the more essential the matching of the speaker becomes (the speaker should have a flat impedance curve). You've read reviews that accuse speakers of being muddy or rolled-off on top when, in fact, the speaker was not the culprit; the amplifier match was. Tube

amplifiers have higher output impedances than solid-state amplifiers. On paper, the MBL's severe sensitivity problem would prohibit you from thinking "tube amp," but in practice it was *all systems go* for thermionic amps.

Back to the other myth: MBLs are speakers for rockers and turn-it-up power-music listeners (I plead guilty here). There is no doubt that the MBL sound is well-suited to these listeners. The flip side is that the new MBL speakers cater to the serious classical music listener as well. The MkII's better driver integration and bass response provide an overall more accurate sound that classical lovers and lower-volume listeners can now enjoy. The MkIs liked to be cranked up, the MkIIs, less so. And that's a good thing.

Listening to Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra from the Ormandy Original Jacket Collection demonstrated the finesse of the new MBL sound. The basses and cellos that begin the opening movement were clear and concise; they sounded more "real" due to a lessening of low-frequency coloration and port chuffing. When the violins enter you are drawn more into the sensation of live instruments in space in front of you. By the time the trumpets trumpet, you are not listening to the sound, you are listening to real trumpets. This is something MBL 101E MkI owners will understand. Often, during my classical listening sessions I would become overwhelmed with the sound and the holographic imaging and not the illusion of *real* instruments. Certainly, the MBL MkI was captivating musically, but realistic timbre with mastertape purity? I'm not sure those are the terms I would use. Now, with the MkII you get more *because you get less*. That is, more realism due to less coloration. Jürgen Reis has reduced the speaker's "color" while maintaining its holographic abilities. That folks is very cool.

This is the essence of the new MBL listening experience: tonal reality combined with that patented MBL three-dimensional imaging. The speaker was, and still is, explosive in dynamics but now there is more timbral realism due to less coloration and far improved driver integration. I've heard many world-class loudspeakers do certain things right such as timbre, mastertape purity, or soundstaging, but not as many things as the new MBL. The MBL 101E MkII is one of the great artistic and engineering achievements. It will take your breath away. **tas**



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ADVANCED AUDIO TECH TALK



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MBL Akustikgeräte's products (such as the X-treme Reference System) are designed by a team of talented engineers. Chief Developer Jürgen Reis has been responsible for shaping the acoustic imprint of all MBL products for nearly thirty years. Time and again MBL has developed jewels of sound whose naturalness and synergy far exceed those of any established standards. For all employees at MBL, technically sophisticated circuitry is just the first step in a long journey of listening and research in the quest for the perfect audio component. Guided by long experience as a musician and sound engineer, Jürgen knows that in the world of natural sound, with its multilayered patterns and interwoven structures, there are dimensions that lie beyond anything he learned in electrical engineering textbooks. Development of MBL products can only be concluded when the act of listening to music transcends the technical and blossoms into a highly emotional experience.

MBL products are manufactured in our own factory outside Berlin. To build a tweeter capable of reproducing every nuance of natural sound - and this component serves as an example of every product we produce - MBL had to strike out in new directions and pursue them through to their ultimate consequence. When we found no tweeter on the market capable of performance we knew was possible, Jürgen invented our own carbon-based Radial Tweeter - a true masterpiece of engineering and craftsmanship. It takes no less than twenty-one hours before even a single MBL radial chassis has completed all its stages in the production process. Vertical integration at MBL is one hundred percent because only in our own factory can we build such high precision components to our exacting standards. Obviously we could save a great deal of money and effort if we took a standard dome tweeter that comes off a sub-supplier's mass production line at the rate of nearly one a minute. But if we did, we'd be depriving you of the enjoyment of too much sonic bliss.

MBL products are distributed in North America through a new subsidiary company, MBL North America, Inc., which is designed to bring you service commensurate with MBL performance. Please visit our website or contact us for further information on the MBL experience, whether for a single component, Radialstrahler speaker or a complete MBL system.

MBL North America, Inc.

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