

January 2004

Follow-Up Review Lamm Industries ML1.1 monoblock power amplifier Paul Bolin

The original Lamm ML1 monoblock power amplifier was one of those components that seemed to bewitch everyone who heard it. It worked its spell on Jonathan Scull in the May 2000 *Stereophile* (Vol.23 No.5), and sent me into raptures when I reviewed it for *The Absolute Sound* in 2001. Hearing the news that it had been upgraded and renamed the ML1.1, I couldn't help but wonder just what Vladimir Lamm had found to improve.



The answers surprised me. While making access to the plate fuses easier doesn't seem like much, the ML1 had required you to remove the amp's bottom cover, and that was a big hassle—not that I've ever had *anything* go wrong with a Lamm amp, other than a power tube conking out on one ML1 I reviewed. Other external changes include a simplification of the bias/balance procedure, the addition of some very welcome handles on the back of the amp, and a significant upgrade of the binding posts. The ML1.1 lists for \$22,690/pair, or \$2700 more than the ML1.

Like the ML1, the ML1.1 is based on two 6C33C-B triodes used in push-pull operation for a power output of 90W, but some significant changes have been made. Lamm has upgraded the power transformer to accommodate 230V mains operation—and the output transformer, already a singular strength in the ML1, has been revised, though exactly how is not disclosed; Vladimir lets out only the minimum amount of insider information about just how he works his magic. The effect, according to Lamm's white paper, is improved bass performance.

The PC boards are now made of superior, tighter-tolerance materials said to improve both reliability and sound quality. The net effect,

according to Lamm, is “a bit more natural sound reproduction in low-frequency region, as well as in midrange/upper-midrange region.” I immediately noticed that the ML1.1 seemed heavier than I remembered the ML1 being—I suspect that those transformers have been seriously beefed up.

I listened to the ML1.1s in a variety of system configurations, but most evaluative listening was done with the Aesthetix Io Signature phono stage, Halcro dm10 preamplifier (used as a line stage), and Legacy Focus 20/20 and Focal-JMLab Nova Utopia Be loudspeakers.

Line-level cables were mostly Acoustic Zen Silver Reference, and speaker cables included Siltech LS-188 Classic, Shunyata Andromeda, and Nordost Valhalla. I used Acoustic Zen Gargantua II, Shunyata Anaconda, and Siltech SPX-30 Classic AC cords on the Lamms themselves.¹ Tough duty, I know, but someone has to do it. The Rives Audio PARC signal processor arrived partway through my auditioning and promptly took care of a couple of nasty room resonances.

When I hear of a favorite component's being revised, I always hope that the Hippocratic oath—“First, do no harm”—has been honored. The ML1.1 retained all of the things that made its predecessor such a compelling amplifier: extraordinary image density and palpability, combined with a thrilling and immediate sense of “thereness.” On Coldplay's “Clocks,” from *A Rush of Blood to the Head* (CD, Capitol CDP 40504-2), the Lamms supplied a scrumptious and enfolding soundspace that had exceptional spaciousness and solidity. Coldplay's “Green Eyes” is one of the more affecting love songs I've heard in recent years, and the ML1.1s let the song's plainspoken emotions connect with touching honesty. Speaking of immediacy, Paul Weller's acoustic guitar and voice on the Jam's immortal “That's Entertainment,” from *Sound Affects* (UK LP, Polydor Deluxe POLD 5035), was a slice of heaven, with an enormous amount of air and space around the vocals; and oh, those lilting backing voices trailing away so elegantly...

Lamm's claims of improved bass performance were absolutely on the mark. The ML1 hadn't offered much to complain about, but the ML1.1 had a tightly defined sock down low that I don't remember from the earlier version.

¹ See the “Associated Equipment” sidebar in the Legacy Focus 20/20 speaker review elsewhere in this issue for a complete listing of equipment.

"Boing Boom Tschak," from Kraftwerk's *Electric Café* (LP, Warner Bros. 25525-1), had lightning bass transients that were utterly free of overhang or sloppiness. The punch and drive of the bass and drums on "Hit Me With Your Rhythm Stick," by Ian Dury and the Blockheads (UK LP, Demon X-Fiend 69), kicked major booty and boogied like a maniac. Acoustic bass instruments also benefited from the new Lamm's tender ministrations. Cellos and basses on Paul Paray and the Detroit Symphony's version of Bizet's *Carmen Suite* (LP, Mercury SR-90001) had an especially full-bodied and lifelike size and scale, and the timbral definition was superb. The new transformers made their presence felt most assertively here. Midrange and treble also seemed subtly improved. Though audio memory is short-term, I couldn't help but think that the ML1.1 sounded faster than the ML1. There was a bit less of the fine, dark scrim on the top octave than I've heard from the M2.1 and ML1, and the sonic benefit was a decided

improvement in quickness up top. The ML1.1 had transient snap, most noticeably on acoustic and electric guitars—in this it rivaled the Halcro m58, which is unequivocally at the head of the class. The huge soundstage captured on the *Carmen Suite* was fabulously detailed in all dimensions, and evenly illuminated from front to back and from side to side. Every instrument possessed an uncommonly high degree of presence and harmonic opulence, and reverb trails were long and lush. Of all the recordings I auditioned the ML1.1s with, none more perfectly exhibited the best of what they could do than Bill Evans' *Quintessence* (LP, Fantasy F-9529) and The Weavers' venerable *Reunion at Carnegie Hall* (LP, Vanguard VSD 2150). The gentleness and intimacy of the Evans allowed me to wallow in Ray Brown's impeccable bass work, Evans' Debussy- and Ravel-derived harmonic progressions, and the peerless drumming of Philly Joe Jones. Kenny Burrell's guitar and Harold

Land's tenor sax were effusively mellow and involving, and the ML1.1s' combination of holistic spatial presentation, rhythmic precision, and harmonic truthfulness made for a veritable seminar in jazz. The Weavers LP allowed the Lamms to strut their nearly unparalleled mastery of large space and excellent resolution of low-level detail. Every voice was focused and fixed with textbook clarity and solidity, whether solo or in ensemble—and yes, the layered depth of the crowd singing along on "Goodnight, Irene" was unsettlingly realistic. ultichannel got nothin' on two ML1.1s, at least with this LP. Lamm Industries has managed to improve what was already one of the world's finest amplifiers, and has done so in ways that are musically meaningful and, as a result of the ergonomic refinements, easier to live with. I can only reiterate what I said in my review of the original amplifier for *TAS*: If 90W is enough and you can afford the ticket, there may be no finer amplifier in the world.

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