

Lamm ML1 Power Amplifiers

PAUL BOLIN

In the nearly six years I have been reviewing audio equipment, I have lived with some of the finest gear on the planet. Experiencing components such as the MBL CD system, the van den Hul Grasshopper-IV cartridge, and the Jeff Rowland Coherence II preamplifier has left a lasting impression—and spoiled me rotten. Just as I was starting to fear I'd become jaded and cynical, the Lamm ML1 amplifiers landed in my listening room.

As you uncrate the Lamms, there is nothing to inspire awe or invite speculation that the sound is impressive. The Lamms' physical presence says, "I am purely utilitarian." Your \$20,000 is not buying cutting-edge industrial design; a matte black slab, holding four tubes, three switches, and two meters, with two large potted transformers taking up the back third of the chassis, is all there is to see.¹ On the basis of looks, you could be forgiven for thinking the ML1s are something from a Soviet army surplus sale. As with all of Vladimir Lamm's products, the money is spent on the inside, where one finds the finest parts and careful hand-assembly. The procedure for biasing the tubes is explained clearly in the excellent manual and is a painless process, thanks to the miniature screwdriver supplied and the separately packaged tubes.

Some components need patience, tweaking, and a lengthy break-in to sound their best, but not the ML1s. Fresh out of their crates, they brought something special and rapturous to the listening experience. When it comes to reproducing the space in which music is recorded, and organizing the players within that space, the ML1 is without peer in my experience. The Lamms seem to pry open the soundstage in all three dimensions. Spaces are not just large, they are defined and resolved superbly, and there is the strange, exhilarating sensation of hearing another space imposed on top of the listening room. The first evidence of this came early on when I dug out Traffic's *Shootout at the Fantasy Factory* [Island SW-9323]. My LP is nothing special, an original US pressing circa 1973, mastered at Capitol, and I had

never been particularly impressed by the sonics. Through the Lamms, the title track's soundstage was broad, surprisingly deep, and fully developed. Reebop Kwaaku Baah's congas were sitting two feet outside of the left speaker, an image of great solidity and an unnerving reality. Roger Hawkins' drums were a fully realized kit, not the cardboard cutout I'd been hearing for nearly 30 years. There was an unmistakable separation and delineation of every sound on the record as an individual event with a "real" musician making it happen.

From that point of departure, the Lamms did not send me rushing to play all of the audiophile classics; I was instead inspired to revisit many ordinary-sounding recordings of enjoyable music to see just what the ML1 would reveal. I spent hours rediscovering the joys of music for music's sake rather than as a demonstration tool for audio equipment. Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* [Columbia C2S 841 (LP)] is no more an audiophile recording that the World Wrestling Federation is the Royal Shakespeare Company, but with the Lamms, there is more to be heard of Dylan and his band than with other amplifiers. In "Stuck Inside of Mobile," I was transported with bracing clarity (almost) back to the studio event. The punctuation from Al Kooper's Hammond organ and Robbie Robertson's graceful, dancing lead guitar were revealed as a clinic in complementary, atmospheric musicianship. The fluid, elliptical guitar technique and melodic invention of Be-Bop Deluxe's Bill Nelson were revealed in all of their glory on *Sunburst Finish*



¹ The power tubes are a painstakingly matched pair of original military graded 6C33C-B triodes. This is a big, bulky, ultra-rugged tube originally developed for Soviet avionics applications.

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[Harvest 11478]. The Lamms did not pretty-up the LP's mediocre sound, but Nelson's densely overdubbed embroideries could be appreciated as never before, thanks to the amps' purity.

So how do the Lamms handle the audiophile standards? Superbly. Their astonishing clarity and transparency allow the subtlest of details from the farthest corners of the stage to appear in the listening room unimpeded. The weekend after the horrific events of September 11, I sought refuge in Bruckner's *Ninth Symphony* [Skrowaczewski/ Minnesota, Reference Recordings RR81-CD]. The Lamms sang out Keith Johnson's exquisite recording of Bruckner's grand themes of tragedy and redemption, transporting me in the blink of an eye to the familiar confines of Minneapolis' Orchestra Hall. Skrowaczewski's sensitive, clear-eyed interpretation of the *Ninth* has never sounded so intimate and majestic as through the ML1s. The loudest *tuttis* had a bit of dynamic compression through my Apogeos, which was to be expected, but the completeness of the sound, the natural separateness of image boundaries, and the lack of electromechanical colorations lifted the recording into transcendence.

It is this ability that makes the Lamms so extraordinary. They materialize musicians in the listening room. There is a gravitas, a groundedness, a sheer centered and weighted density to each image, that makes recorded music astonishingly convincing. The three-dimensional quality is so great, you feel you can walk into the soundstage and stroll among the musicians. Each player and singer has enough "elbow room" to blossom separately into the recording acoustic, but the clarity of the individual parts never muddy or obscure the gestalt. The amps' ability to individualize details makes ordinary recordings compelling, and compelling recordings utterly enthralling. In parallel with this is the amplifiers' breathtaking transparency, which is particularly audible on ensembles. On Duke Ellington's *Indigos* [Columbia CS 8053 6-eye] and the Bach *Orchestral Suite in C* [Richter/Munich Bach Orchestra, Archiv 2564 051], each musician's contribution is a separate and autonomous thing, but the sense of wholeness is all the greater for it. This is an amplifier for those who love the inner voices of music's fabric—counterpoint through the Lamms is spectacular. A primary reason for this is the amplifiers' almost freakish inter-transient silence. The ML1 is, subjectively, the quietest tube amplifier I have heard.

Nothing is ever smeared or obscured with the Lamms; the listener can choose to focus on one instrument or voice and effortlessly follow it throughout a piece, but can just as easily relax and let the whole of the event wash over the room. The layering of the brass and sax sections during their respective entries in *Indigos*' "Solitude" is a perfect example. The Duke's gently lit piano enters, appropriately solo, to state a couple of ruminative verses; then the sax and brass sections sidle in so subtly, they're nearly subliminal, surrounding Ellington's piano. When the band kicks it up a gear and launches the middle verses, the Lamms respond



with glowing, burnished timbres unmistakably suffused in the vast, lush ambience that was Columbia Records' New York recording studio—that special sense of specific place that these amplifiers do so superbly. In "Mood Indigo," the contrast between Shorty Baker's muted trumpet introduction and the band's entrance is fascinating. Baker and the rhythm section are obviously playing in a large space, but trumpet, bass, and drums playing softly do not fully define it. Then the band arrives, led by the woodwinds, and the full ambience of the room is suddenly, though gently, illuminated, even though the music remains at a *mezzo* level.

This may be partly owing to the tonal character (or lack thereof) of the ML1s. They have perhaps the best low bass I have heard from a tube amplifier. There may be a bit of extra bloom in the lowest frequencies, but the depths of pipe organs, electronica, and orchestral music are solid, with no roll-off or woolliness. Pitch definition and differentiation are superb. Bass guitars and kick drums are singularly distinct from one another, in this respect rivaling the very best solid-state amps. But authority lives in the mid-bass. Many components, not just electronics, make the mid-bass lean to increase perceived detail in the lower midrange. This is common enough, in part because it is difficult to get the mid-bass correct, and because its opposite, a slight rise in this part of the spectrum, is grossly audible. The Lamms neither add nor subtract energy in this crucial band. The result is an especially carefully controlled power and forcefulness that make other amplifiers sound washed out and wimpy by comparison.

At this level of price and performance, any spectral deviations in the midrange are unacceptable. The most concise description of the Lamms' performance here is that they are as lifelike as the source material allows them to be. They are not just transparent, they have an arresting purity in the midrange. Compared to some fine pentode-based amplifiers, the Lamms are lacking something—a slight haziness in the upper midrange. These amplifiers do not "clean the windows"; they fling them open and let the fresh air into the room.

The top octaves are balanced, extended, and have sterling detail resolution. Side- and back-wall reflections are never lost, as you might conjecture from their exceptional ability to reproduce space. There is, though, a fine scrim of darkness up top, similar in character to the Atma-Sphere MA-1 Mk II.2s (review, Issue 127). Both the Atma-Sphere and the Lamm are triode-based designs, and virtually every

such amplifier I have heard has had this characteristic to some degree. As with the Atma-Spheres, the Lamms' darkness is slight and does not subtract from treble detail and extension.

The Lamms' treble character sparked some disagreement between me and a couple of my regular listening friends. They heard the Lamms as darker and cooler than I do, even through the Apogeos, which are neither dark nor cool. One commented that, while the Lamms do everything right, they sound "scientific" rather than "emotional." I agree with this criticism in kind, though much less so in degree; after several months of listening, my ears tell me that the Lamms' neutrality and lack of "sentiment" allows music to be heard with fewer audible characteristics of the intermediary than almost any other component. It would be an overstatement to say that where most amps are candied oranges, the Lamms are "fresh from the tree," but the analogy is apt.

The choice of "scientific" as a critical descriptor is ironic. Vladimir Lamm does not voice his components via listening tests, unlike many other manufacturers. He designs his amplifiers to accommodate his mathematical theories of how human hearing operates, which he elaborated in his Ph.D. dissertation at Lvov Polytechnic University in the former Soviet Union. In his view, if the circuit is exactly made in accordance with his theory, using the highest quality, tightest tolerance parts, the resulting component will be *right*. I don't, however, recommend pairing the Lamms with an analytical or lean speaker.

When a tube in one amp failed, I had to speak with Vladimir Lamm about replacement procedures.² During our conversation, I asked him whether the ML1s would drive my Apogee Duetta Signatures. After asking about the speakers' load, he thought and said: "Why not? It might be interesting for you to try it, and you cannot hurt the amplifiers."³ The results were, within the ML1's power reserves, off the charts. Ninety watts or no, the Lamms, partnered with the fabulous Krell KCT line stage, took me to a level of musical verisimilitude well beyond anything I have previously experienced in my listening room.

I did not punish the Lamms by playing the *Gladiator* soundtrack on the Apogeos at the pants-pressing levels obtainable from the Manley Labs Neo-Classic 250s, but they were able to cleanly reach viscerally satisfying loudness on Bruckner's *Ninth* and Roger Waters' *In the Flesh* [Columbia C2K 85235]. The ML1s' limits on the Apogeos were reached with the cannon-like bass-drum detonations on *Fanfare for the Common Man* [Reference RR-93CD]. But their inability to drive a low-sensitivity speaker to roof-shaking levels on orchestral dynamite is hardly an indictment. This isn't a pairing likely to occur anywhere in the real world and is not what the amps were designed to do. With less volcanic fare, such as Diana Krall [*The Look of Love*, Verve 314 549

846-2], the Patti Smith Group [*Easter*, Arista AB4171 (LP)], or the Bruckner, the combination was supremely seductive and exhilarating. The title track of the PSG album was revelatory, with somber drums and funereal Hammond organ underpinning Smith's surrealistic fantasy of Rimbaud touched by the divine on a long-ago Easter Sunday. Thanks to the Lamms, Smith's closing recitative over massed vocals, with counterpoint from chimes, organ, electric guitar, and bagpipes, was spine-tingling, with every element part of a deliriously ecstatic whole. Moments like this are the entire purpose of messing with high-end audio in the first place.

While the Lamms come closer to what I regard as musical perfection than any other amps I have heard at length, they are not devoid of character. There is that slight darkness in the treble. Nor do the ML1s have quite the quicksilver reflexes of the Atma-Spheres, though they never lagged on major dynamic swings. Beyond that, I could find little to quibble with. The ML1s' most likely drawback for those able to afford them is that they produce only 90 watts per channel. However, their ability to work successfully within their limits with my Apogeos proved that these amps should be able to handle almost anything. Still, they would probably not be the ideal choice for low-sensitivity speakers with punishing, S-shaped impedance curves.

This is an amplifier to refresh the depths of the spirit and reinvigorate the sense of wonder that comes with one's first exposure to great sound reproduction. If 90 watts is enough for your space and your speakers, and your pockets are deep enough, you might well conclude, as I have, that there may be no better amplifier to be found. 

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

Lamm Industries
2621 East 24 Street, Brooklyn, New York 11235
Phone: (718) 368-0181
www.lammindustries.com
Price: \$19,990/pair

SPECS

Tube Complement: 1 x 12AX7/ECC83; 1 x 12BH7A; 2 x 6C33C-B output triodes
Power Output: 90 watts

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Sota Cosmos turntable; Graham 2.0 arm, Shinon Red Boron cartridge (van den Hul rebuild); Audio Aero Capitole upsampling CD player; Krell KPS 28c CD player; Jeff Rowland Cadence phono pre-amplifier, Coherence II and Synergy Ili line stages; Krell KCT line stage; Apogee Duetta Signature, Silverine Sonata and Coincident Super Eclipse speakers; Nordost Quattro-Fil and Valhalla interconnects; Nordost SPM Reference and Valhalla cables; CPCC Top Gun power cords; Top Gun Super Power Block; Ultra DynaFeet, Aurios Media Isolation Bearings, Shun Mook Iso Qubes, Tube Resonators, Nordost Pulsar Points, Solid-Tech Feet of Silence

² Lamm requires dead tubes to be returned to the factory so that the reason for the tube's failure can be determined. Thanks to comprehensive record keeping, new tubes will be well-matched to those originally fitted to the amplifier.

³ The Apogeos are a uniform load in terms of impedance, but they like power, though I have had success pairing them with Audio Research's 100-watt VT100 and the 145-watt Atma-Sphere MA1 Mk. II.2.