

STEREO

# STEREO

MAGAZINE FOR HIFI • HIGH END • MUSIC

## A Streetcar Named Desire

What else is high-end but the breathtaking experience, the paradox-come-true of enhancing the quality of top-caliber electronics to a point where you forget all about the technology? We boarded MBL's mega-system on a trip to hi-fi-paradise, where the final destination is a streetcar named desire.

by Matthias Böde

A lot of things sound good, some even sound outstanding. And then there are those rare moments that are profoundly touching, the ones that prove, just like an honored promise, that you are not chasing after an illusion but that the fulfillment, the satisfaction, the end of the search for that exhilarating sound really do exist. For me, too, those moments are rare that shine over from beyond the magical boundary between the sheer pleasure of hearing and the realm of the absolute, that draw the attention of every single nerve cell and push aside all other distractions. These moments are gifts. And those bearing them are not easily provoked.



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I'm always starting out afresh, however, looking for something that comes close to the flagship sound system from MBL, which I already have to thank for a number of extraordinary ear candy experiences under a range of different conditions. And what could be nicer than sharing these with others? Of course you don't need to look very long for a demonstrator when this system or parts of it are, for example, registered for the World of HiFi.

This touring exhibition, which we have now been holding for eight years and has at some point surely also passed by your neck of the woods, enables me to repeatedly experience and observe the kind of "revelations" referred to at the start. Just recently, for example, those of a young enthusiast, who had already sat riveted to his seat at Saturday's demonstration at the Grand Hotel National in Lucerne and couldn't help returning on Sunday to the flagship 101E Radialstrahler omnidirectional speaker, freshly revamped by the Berlin manufacturer.

He had picked out a spot in the middle of the second row, which admittedly boasts ideal listening conditions, and, with his eyes closed, immersed himself in the actual performance, completely detached as it was from the sound-generating elements of the 360° sound converter.

I sneaked a glimpse of him, registered his inner focus and wondered what would be likely to really give him a "kick". Diverging from my planned program, I tried out the Mitt Hjerte Alltid Vanker compilation, a superb achievement in terms of music and recording quality that was released to mark the 30th anniversary of Oslo's Kirkelig Kulturverksted record label.

At the start of the recording, which boasts an almost hypnotic effect on first-class systems, a female solo voice is singing in a room whose dimensions we can imagine only thanks to the authentic sound. Our friend obviously enjoyed this contrast resulting from the presence of the singer and the echo subsiding deep within that room.

What he didn't know about was the presence there of a large,

mixed choir that suddenly bursts full-on into an elegiac melody and was captured so accurately that it flows over like a warm summer breeze. At this moment, the young man's expression became contorted. In a mixture of delight and overwhelming emotion, he pulled his eyes shut, as if trying to hold back the tears. I thought: got ya! But the combination of extremely moving music and heavenly sound quality really was beautiful enough to make you weep.

This little story underlines once more the paradox that hi-fi ultimately consists in increasing the technical aspects to a point where they make you forget about the technology and shorten the distance between the original performance and its reproduction in every respect.

Not only in terms of sheer quality, with a minimum of the information lost, but also regards time. An excellent sy-

stem is a time machine that generates immediacy and an authentic feel, even when the performers are no longer in the land of the living. In 1955, ten years before his death, Nat King Cole made a studio recording of "Stay As Sweet As You Are" as a homage to his then 5-year-old daughter Natalie. And to this today, he still worships her childlike charm bet-

ween the 101Es as if performing live. The half a century that has passed between the recording and reproduction is erased, as if it had been blown away. The magic defies the years.

MBL really stepped up a gear in order to pull off this minor miracle. In addition to the Radialstrahler speakers, whose styling

alone grabs your attention, it is above all the huge 9011 power amps with their bucket-sized transformers and capacitors as well as the armada of 24 power transistors which will not shy from any challenge.

They demand our respect, as does the 6010 D pre-amp. The blue digital display on its thick front panel,

configured via the thick button on the right whose movement resembles the consistency of a spoon in a honey pot or, alternatively, via remote control, is deceptive; it boasts a real potentiometer instead of the often customary resistor banks.

Everything about the MBL components is heavy, solid and sturdy, i.e. as if made to last forever. Just lifting the all-aluminum lid of the CD drive of the 1621, mounted on a cushioned chassis with its sound-isolating gasket ring, is a tactile delight. It is a shame that, as with almost all components of the super-high-end range, there is ultimately so little on this system to fiddle with, precious few knobs or dials. Among the numerous technical highlights of this range, it is of course the three-way Radialstrahler kicking in above 90 Hertz that really stands out, distributing the horizontal sound energy evenly in every direction. It has just been fitted with a new mid-range driver with a Kapton voice coil carrier instead of the previous one made of alumi-

**The most heartfelt listening sensations are gifts that you cannot ask for. With MBL's top line, however, you can almost take them for granted.**



num, in order to maintain its velvety presence at high levels as well.

The system uses thin strips of aluminum for the bass range and strips made of carbon fiber (a world first) for high frequencies, and boasts an unbelievably natural reproduction quality that is compact and at the same time wonderfully relaxed and sophisticated. It is among the best that I have ever heard in this league, and need not fear comparison with either the glorified magnetostats of a large Genesis or tweeters with sphere caps made of Beryllium or even diamond.

Compared to the smaller MBL speakers with Radialstrahler drivers for the mids and highs, the 101E once more profits substantially from its conspicuous "melon", which ensures an unrivalled homogeneity of reproduction right down into the bass range. While in itself also outstanding, the compact 121, for example, does not come close to reaching this seamless coverage.

That said, the latter also de-

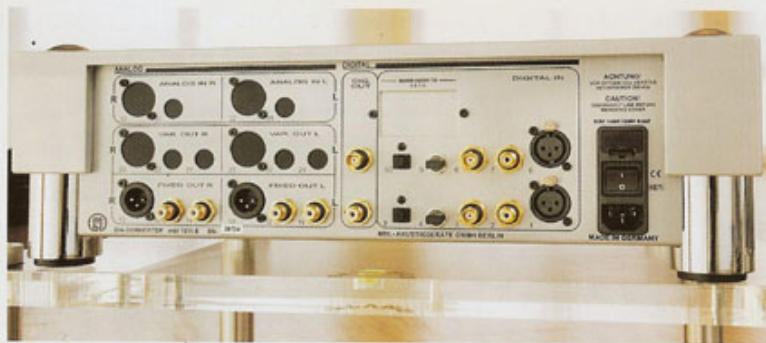
**Farewell to volume jumps. Level controllers for the inputs prevent nasty surprises when switching.**



monstrates the Radialstrahler's impressive level stability. Anyone who hears the breathtaking dynamic range displayed by the orchestral pieces on the Tutti sampler from Reference Recordings, for example, can enjoy an in itself precisely

defined, always composed and practically compression-free sound, from the subtlest touches on the flutes to the full onslaught of all the instruments together; here, the absence of stress and urgency is perhaps the most important factor. Not even prohibitive volume abuse can stop the 101E playing on without a care in the world. The latest revamping of the "E Class" of the 101 model (originally launched in 1979) also involved improving the bass range, whose modified 30-inch chassis sits in an enlarged bandpass housing with two enhanced reflex openings, thereby giving it more speed. This is easy to perceive with, for example, the drums that introduce the fortissimo sections of Jacques Ibert's Escala and reverberate powerfully down in your stomach.

The result is a bass range optimally adjusted to the light-footed agility of the Radialstrahler; the ou-



standing feature of this bass range used to be the still impressive potency that also fills large rooms with ease, rather than unwieldy grip. But watch out: we make the common mistake of judging the system too much by the loudspeaker. When the system sounds great, there's a tendency to say: "great speaker". If the impression made is less positive, we say: "lousy speaker". It is the speaker that is always "to blame". As well as being unfair, this also flies in the face of all logic. After all, in order for the 101E to be able to present its unrivalled mix of airy openness and smooth, deep timbre, these qualities first have to be provided by the other elements involved. And this is exactly the case here.

I've seen and heard so many MBL speakers over the years that I now have a definite impression

**The 1611 D/A converter features plenty of contacts and options for analog inputs as well as a regulated output.**

of their character. There is a natural sounding sonority and a glowing colorfulness running like a thread through the line here.

These characteristics are already exhibited by the 7008 full-range amp (reviewed in STEREO 4/03), while the 8011M mono power amps tested in issue 6/01 likewise display a similar standard of style and diction.

Nobody need be afraid here about getting involved in an over-analytical sounding quality or one with even just a hint of lightness. On the contrary: despite brilliant trebles, there is always warmth, almost an internal glow in the reproduction.

Weaknesses at the deep end are a completely foreign concept for the MBLs. Perhaps this is also the reason why the amps, contrary to their often moderate measured output, seem considerably more powerful, at times indeed monstrous.

I shall never forget the afterno-

**The MBL units are available in "Arctic Silver" or black. A new addition to the family is the 101E's little sister, the 111E (prices start at Euro 19600/pair), featuring omnidirectional speakers for the mid-range and high frequencies as well as side-mounted woofers.**



**High-end systems are time machines that lend the fleeting experience of sound a timeless dimension.**



The heavy hinged lid of the toploader drive in the 1621 provides the CD tray with optimum sound insulation. The wide gasket made of rubber is a big help here. A puck holds the disc firmly in place.

plies to Lucerne as well, as what thrived there in all its splendor is, as it were, already fixed in the genes of the smaller amps as well as the source devices.

on I spent at a friend's place, during which we fuelled up his Martin Logan Clarity on the 7008. Now, while the slimly built hybrid electrostat is certainly no club sound system, we did create tremendous volumes with the combination, with the right force and without any nasty surprises. Where does the 7008 manage to generate so much controlled beef? A dream team, which I also have to think of when I encounter an MBL system. The same ap-

## Technik & Sound in Perfect Harmony

**The people at MBL know that specs are important but are not everything. It's not what you play but the way that you play it.**

The striking acoustic profile of MBL machines is down to the work of both company chief Wolfgang Meletzky and, importantly, head designer Jürgen Reis. For around 23 years, the two have comprised a team following the same ideas regards sound. This is why they prefer, for example, similar circuitry concepts and components. Long-term qualities are a priority here, not the initial enthusiasm that

rapidly falls flat. That said, the components do, of course, also have to be technically flawless. The development process as such involves a constant interplay of technical modifications and acoustic tests. And the listening part is becoming increasingly important, as Jürgen Reis is happy to admit: "A lot of things can only be gauged by the ear. The catalogue figures for capacitors, for example, are nothing more than a technical specification that says practically nothing about the sound of the device in question. An extremely low-resonance CD drive means that the acoustic enhancements cannot be measured in the digital signal either." The fact that a lot of suppliers have



Bucket-sized transformers with matching capacitor banks supply the total of 24 power transistors of the 9011 super-amp, which are mounted on huge heatsinks.



Three transformers (left) feed the various components of the 1611 D/A converter (bottom). There are sophisticated voltage regulators everywhere (below right).



## WHAT IS MBL?

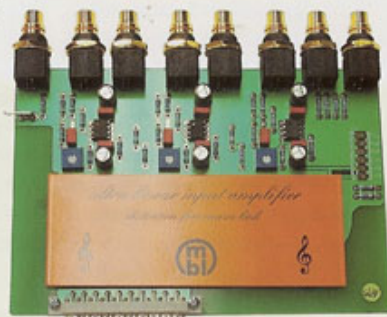
When Wolfgang Meletzky (pictured) founded MBL in 1979, the German hi-fi industry was in decline. Grundig, Saba and even Telefunken found themselves being squeezed out by Asian rivals. Today, Asians comprise the most loyal and enthusiastic clientele of the engineer. MBL has a workforce of almost 50 employees, who design and manufacture the entire product range on the 22,000-ft<sup>2</sup> premises in Eberswalde. MBL is represented in many other European countries and the US, and in the latter even has its own distributor.



And why am I telling you all this? In order to widen the scope a little and include MBL products that are more affordable. MBL's super-system will unfortunately have to remain a distant dream for most of us, one that we can only get close to during trade fairs or, indeed, the World of HiFi.

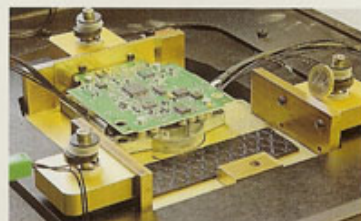
So, while we have this rare opportunity, allow us to enjoy a little more of it. How about "September In The Rain", a

splendid big band number from Telarc's first SACD sampler? To be honest, I often play the track as an opener for my demonstrations. After a brief, quiet intro, the big band strikes up in a refined but powerful manner. It makes for a pleasant surprise effect when the sound suddenly confronts the listeners like a wall, demonstrating with immediacy



A single-stage Class-A amplifier module from the input section of the large 6010D preamp.

A material mix comprising copper, brass, aluminum and steel provides effective protection against resonance in the sprung sub-chassis of the 1621 CD drive.





A small jumper is used to fine-adjust the 101E to the listener's environment and sound preferences.



Featuring digital electronics from DCS and top-quality HMS cables, the MBL amps and a pair of 101 played at their peak at the World of HiFi in Lucerne.

and without violent eruptions what the system has in store in terms of inner potential and lungpower. A wonderful piece, performed with coolness and slight reservation, thereby achieving an all the more intense effect.

Our ultimate MBL set masters the art of casual but precise timing as well as the "life-size" portrayal of the orchestra in grandiose fashion. At the same

time, it exudes the mood of complete composure and careful concentration that luxury systems simply have to have a command of.

A major factor here is the stoic 1621CD drive, which has to provide all the data for the tiny twists and turns in the music and also the supposedly minor details from which the sophisticated 1611 D/A converter builds up that sumptuous soundscape

and reconstructs the astonishing flexibility and discipline that now separate the members of the major league of top-end hi-fi.

Everything has to gel for the distance to the original (mentioned at the top) to be kept low. If the recordings play ball, you experience the "window effect". It is not as if the performers

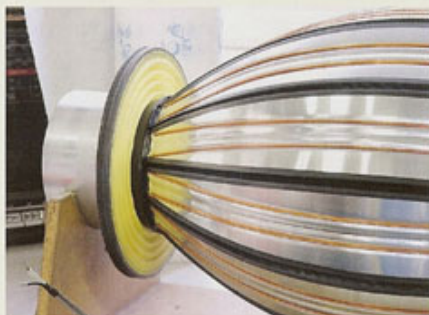
were in the room. It is more like listening through a huge window into the room in which the recording took place, giving us a tantalizing, startlingly authentic blueprint of the event that has an iridescent subtlety - not infrequently a "glimpse" of hi-fi heaven and so captivating that I always think about how I could afford this system. The streetcar named desire really does terminate here.



The entry to the world of MBL Radialstrahler speakers; the 121 compact package.



Jürgen Reis is head designer at MBL. For some 23 years now, he has been defining - and refining - the technical and acoustic properties of MBL units.



Thin copper rods stabilize the slim strips of aluminum that comprise the "melon" for the bass ranges of the Radialstrahler. A moving coil ensures that they vibrate in rhythm with the music.



The 12-inch wide chassis, given a lighter diaphragm for the E version, is located on the inside of the bass speaker.

The tweeter and midrange driver of the Radialstrahler work with carbon strips.



## Mini Power Plants

The smaller amps from MBL are also high on passion



There is one very distinct feature shared by the smaller amplifiers from MBL; they sound more potent and fearless than their bare specifications would have you believe. With the entry-level 8006A power amp (above, review in STEREO 1/01) for example, we measured a nominal power rating of just 67 Watts at 8 Ohms, but the way the thing gets to work so cheerfully is almost beyond belief. Together with the 4004A preamp, it is unrivalled in this class in terms of dominance and punching power. The elegant 7008 integrated amplifier

(center) manages to generate some 102 Watts per channel at 8 Ohms. It likewise boasts a whole-hearted, sumptuous musicality. Once you've heard it, you won't want to let go of it. "Power combined with agility and resolution" wrote STEREO in the test profile for the 230 Watt / 8-Ohm 8011M monoamps (bottom). They've learned a serious thing or two from the 9008.

