

## MBL 1511 CD Transport and 1521 Digital-to-Analog Converter

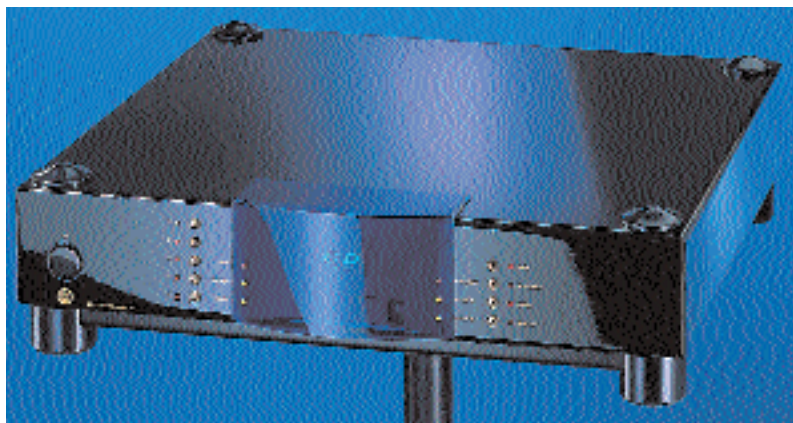
---

As Samuel Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon vainly anticipated the arrival of their cohort in *Waiting for Godot*, so the audio community remains in a suspended anomie over the wars among high-resolution digital formats. They have multiplied in the last few years – DVD-Audio, SACD, 96-kHz/24-bit – all have been hailed as the next best thing to being there. The problem is that they are not *here*. The hardware exists, but software remains

expensive, rare, elusive, providing little incentive to spend thousands of dollars for hardware specifically designed to accommodate a commercially unproven format. In the interim, countless conventional-format CDs are released every day and music lovers' collections will consist primarily of these 16-bit 44.1-kHz Red Book discs. Until a truly High End universal player, that audio Godot, arrives, the most sensible approach may be to hear the best that is within the conventional CD, using a superb transport and a converter of equal quality that can later accommodate whichever new formats emerge victorious.

Among the candidates for "best" are the team of the MBL 1511 and 1521.

Headquartered in Berlin under the direction of president Wolfgang Meletzky and chief designer Jürgen Ries, MBL is best known for its exotic Radialsträhler loudspeakers (review, Issue 121), though the company has long produced ultra-High End source components and amplification. The 1511 and 1521 are MBL's "entry level" digital products,<sup>1</sup> but their design, ergonomics, and overall quality place them among the elite of digital front ends. They are superbly made and immaculately finished; like the products of Jeff Rowland Design Group, they represent the acme of industrial design applied to audio componentry. The over-40-pound 1511 transport is a top-loading design; its large, heavy cover resembles a submarine's missile silo hatch, but it is so perfectly balanced that it lifts effortlessly. Inside the CD well are two indentations for fingers, to permit easy placement and removal of the disc. Typical of MBL's thoroughness, these indentations are located perfectly for either righties or lefties. A nonmagnetic metal puck finished to jewelry-like standards and adorned with a gold MBL logo is placed on the CD prior to play. The 1521 converter can accommodate up to six digital inputs and can



simultaneously drive three outputs. It also has slots for installation of boards for new formats. Currently a 96/24 board is available, and further expandability has been engineered in to the 1521. Design and construction quality aside, the ultimate questions about components this expensive are: Does the quality of the sound even begin to justify their cost?

One of the first discs I popped into the 1511 was the Tallis Scholars' *Spem in Alium* [Gimell 454-906-2]. This is an early digital recording I had always found to have the inevitable failings, most obviously a glassy, congealed sound in the title 40-part motet. Voices were smeared together and the rear of the acoustic ill-defined and murky. Worst of all, the individual sections of the choir were undifferentiated, sorely affecting the beauty and majesty of the music.

Hearing this huge work through the MBLs was an epiphany. To be sure, flaws remain in the recording, but the labyrinthine structure and the power of Tallis' music were another sonic world via the MBLs. Never did the sound fall apart, even with all voices at full force and the lead sopranos singing *fff* at the tops of their ranges. Individual voices could be followed with no problem throughout the piece. The air of the recording venue retains that oddly dead quality found in many early digital recordings, and the murkiness that imparts is inescapable, but the MBLs revealed such a wealth of information that the recording's problems became far less distracting and the music much more rewarding. Similarly, the distant murkiness of Philip Glass' *Akhmaten* [CBS M2K 42457] was clarified and opened up in ways I had not thought possible. The identity of each of the

---

<sup>1</sup> The 1611 Referenz transport and 1621HR DAC represent the top of the line at \$15,500 each.

three singers' voices in the opera's Epilogue can be determined with wonderful precision.

Digital playback has often had problems adapting to the scale of music. Too often, there is a homogenized element to CDs, with two or three musicians not seeming that much smaller than an entire orchestra. Analog's ability to fix and focus properly scaled, fully developed images has always been one of its trump cards compared to CD playback. The 1511 and 1521 are able to match all but the finest of analog in this respect. Listening to Bert Jansch's "Needle of Death" and "Anji" [*Bert Jansch/It Don't Bother Me*; Transatlantic ESMCD 407 (UK)] was eerie. Listening with eyes closed or in the dark, it was as though Jansch and his acoustic guitar were some eight feet from me. The German components captured every woody nuance of the guitar's body, every detail of Jansch's snaps, plucks, and gentle brushings of the strings, his pauses for breath, and a sense of "thereness" which was both entrancing and unsettling. I saw Jansch perform at an intimate venue several years ago, and sat no further from him than my speakers are from my listening chair. That the MBLs could conjure such a convincing illusion was unnerving.

On orchestral and other large-scaled music, there was a sense of completeness and clarity quite unlike that from any other digital sources I have auditioned. Soundstages, both real and artificial, can assume dimensions that seem to wrap around the room's side walls and envelop the listener in a virtual environment. More importantly, the MBLs

impart weight and power to intense and loud passages. The Vaughan Williams *Sinfonia antartica* [Naxos 8.550737] contains tremendous *fortissimos*; when heard live, such full-orchestra power does not manifest itself simply by an increase in volume. You can feel down to your bones the immense physical force of an orchestra in full cry – there is a *presence* and forcefulness far more compelling and affecting than mere loudness. The MBLs suggest this quality to an wonderful degree for any source component, digital or analog.

Dynamically, the MBLs pass muster with a flourish. Blockbusters like the *Thin Red Line* and *Gladiator* soundtracks are great for wowing your pals and finding out whether a component can take the utmost in punishment, and the MBLs cruise through their detonations and percussion attacks, never placing a foot wrong. Demands of an entirely different nature come from the way Diana Krall slinks around notes in "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" from *All For You* [Impulse IMPD-182]. Krall caresses the lyrics, modulating the intensity and loudness of her voice with complete control and sheer finesse. The 1511/1521 duo captures every shading, every emphasis and reticence in Krall's voice and piano playing. Nothing gets lost by the MBLs, even at the most demanding moments. The decay of the mighty gong crash clearly shimmers away, despite the entrance of a massive brass *tutti* in the Third Movement of the Vaughan Williams, a first in my system. While I knew the crash's fade was there from the hints other digital front ends

provided, only the MBLs have allowed it to be heard naturally and effortlessly. On the Grateful Dead's *One From the Vault* [Grateful Dead GDCD 40132], the constant complex interplay between drummers Bill Kreutzmann and Mickey Hart is a soundtrack unto itself rather than just a percussion backdrop for the band's exploration. The fragile and complex reverberation trails from the voices of Custer LaRue and the Merry Companions on the Baltimore Consort's *Art of the Bawdy Song* [Dorian DOR-90155] are long and rich, with none of the "digital deafness" discussed by Dan Sweeney in his review of the Accuphase DP-75V CD player (Issue 125).

The timbral balance of the 1511 and 1521 is, as you might guess, beyond any meaningful criticism. In the midrange, it's as lifelike as any component of any type, harmonically rich and superbly balanced. The treble, to my mild surprise, was where the most unexpected strengths were found. The MBLs' top octaves are not "excellent within the limitations of digital." Here is the kind of delicacy, sweetness, and extension usually associated with the finest analog or even live music. Well-recorded strings should have a rich and satiny yet not mushy or generic tone; the German giants deliver the truth. The swirling cellos of Smetana's *The Moldau* [Stokowski *the Magician*; RCA 70391-2] retained their woody warmth without losing one whit of definition or individuality.

The bass of the MBLs may well give rise to some differing viewpoints. I found it tightly controlled, punchy, and powerful on all types of music but never of the "bass in your face" school. The bass synthesizer dominating "Justice's Groove" on Stanley Clarke's *East River Drive* [Epic EK47489] had perfect pitch-definition and belly-punching force, as did Jimmy Earl's up-front five-string bass guitar on "I'm Home Africa." Some hard-core bass fetishists may find the MBLs deficient in "slam" and sheer impact. But the ultimate test remains acoustic music recorded in real space, and here, they shone. The bass-drum shots on Keith Johnson's recordings of Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* [Reference RR-93CD] and Bernstein's *Overture to Candide* [Reference RR-87CD] were laser-focused blasts of low frequencies, not superficially impressive overblown mush. In comparison to the Theta David transport, the 1511 placed less emphasis on the bass but integrated it much more seamlessly into the overall sonic picture.

It strikes me now that I have not yet described what it is that makes the MBLs the most compelling components in my acquaintance. This can best be described, perhaps, as a continuousness in all sonic characteristics. It has always seemed to me that an appropriate analogy for the problems of digital was the very nature of the medium. Analog media operate through a medium of continuous contact – a tape being drawn over a playback head or a stylus tracing the endless record groove. The digital playback process lacks this intimacy, with a laser scanner reading the pits burned into the surface of the disc. The analog sources seem effortless-

ly able to capture not merely the sound as such but more context, detail, and meaning despite the obvious limitations of the mechanical processes involved. Digital has never done this for me in my system, though at shows, the Accuphase player and the Linn Sondek CD20 have impressed me greatly in this regard. Somehow, the MBL transport and DAC bring to digital playback that sense of intimacy and involvement. Listening to the Dead's "Franklin's Tower" from *One From the Vault*, the vocal harmonies on the line "roll away the dew" simply popped into the room, with Bob Weir and Donna Godchaux appearing as full-sized, wholly dimensional human beings, not singing heads. In recent weeks, two CDs that have had extensive playing time: I've heard Brian Wilson's *Imagination* [Giant 9-24703-2] and Tasmin Little's recital of Delius' violin sonatas [Conifer 51315-2].<sup>2</sup> More different recordings would be difficult to imagine. Wilson's CD is a 96-track digital production of elaborately layered modern popular music; violinist Little and pianist Piers Lane are recorded in purist fashion in a natural church acoustic. Both are labors of love for their creators, and that sensibility shines through the 1511/1521 duo. Through the MBLs, Wilson's soaring "Dream Angel" and Little's sensitive and intelligent readings of Delius' violin music demand not merely attention but connection and commitment by the listener. There is a solidity and a tactile quality to CDs as reproduced by the 1511 and 1521 that is as addictive as it is unusual. There is immediacy to their sound, but also a delicacy and refinement that cannot be explained – it must be heard.

I did not sit and listen to CDs for hour after hour before their arrival, but found that the longer I shared the MBLs' presence, the less and less I listened to analog. By the time of writing this review, CDs accounted for 70-80 percent of my music listening.

PAUL BOLIN

*More of our staff plan to comment on this interesting duo in an upcoming issue.*

#### IMPORTER INFORMATION

MBL of America  
8730 E. Via de la Luna, #13, Scottsdale, Arizona 85258  
Phone: (480) 563-4393; fax: (480) 563-4394  
www.mbl-hifi.com  
Source: Importer loan  
Prices: 1511– \$6,980; 1521– \$7,480

#### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Jeff Rowland Design Group Coherence II, Plinius M16, Audio Research LS25 Mark II line stages; Atma-Sphere MA-1 Mark II.2, Audio Research VT100 Mark II, Plinius SA250/V power amplifiers; Apogee Duetta Signature, Silverline Sonata, Coincident Super Eclipse loudspeakers; Kimber Illuminati Orchid, CCC Green Hornet digital interconnects; Nordost Quattro Fil, Siltech SQ-80 G3 interconnects; Nordost SPM, Siltech LS 288 Gold/LS-120 G3 speaker cables; CPCC Top Gun and Top Gun HCFI power cables and Super Power Block; Aurios Media Isolation Bearings, Solid-Tech Feet of Silence, Shun Mook Iso-Qubes and Nordost Pulsar Point footers and RadPad isolation platforms

<sup>2</sup> The Delius recording and the aforementioned Tallis Scholars CD are both products of balance engineer Mike (Mr. Bear) Hatch. My, how the quality of recording equipment has improved in the 15 years between the two sessions.