

MBL 8011 Amplifier

Robert E. Greene

MBL is famous worldwide for its fantastic Radialstrahler speaker, with its exotic omni-directional drivers. But the company also produces electronics, and any visit to a German audio show is likely to leave indelible impressions of large, expensive, and powerful amplifiers sporting the MBL shield. Powerful especially applies: One MBL amplifier model will produce 5,000-watt pulses! The 8011 is near the bottom end of the MBL range in size and price, but it seems uncompromised in elegance and quality, both of sound and of construction. The 8011 is a true dual-mono design, right down to separate power cords for the two channels. Its power rating is 210 watts per channel into 8 ohms. Distortion specifications are impeccable, output impedance is low, signal-to-noise ratio outstanding, and apparent construction quality high. It seems the very model of a modern super amplifier.

As to sound, the words “essentially perfect” came to my mind eventually. But the words that popped into my head on first listen were “pretty” and “gorgeous.” This was not prejudice in action. To the extent that I have any *a priori* impression of German products as a whole, it is that they tend to be somewhat extroverted in the top and to present something of a warts-and-all sonic view. But from the start, the MBL exhibited a smooth, grainless, clear but relaxing sound that might even



seem a bit “soft” in the tonal sense. And this was not just a personal impression. Various people who are familiar with my system noted the same sonic character, without prompting from me.

My approach to the MBL was not to do direct comparisons with other amplifiers initially but simply to put it into my system as my day-to-day amplifier and let experience accumulate. This experience continues to be entirely pleasurable. It is also convincing I never caught the MBL out. It never exhibited any sign of strain: With peak pulse power of 1,100 watts per channel, why would it? I never felt that the amplifier was restricting resolution in any sense. It never emitted nastiness, outside of what the program material contained. It was silent in operation. And it worked flawlessly, and most conveniently, with a standby switch to put it into idle mode and suppress sonic output. (This is an agreeable thing for reviewers, who are constantly plugging and unplugging equipment.)

Channel separation was effectively infinite, via the dual-mono design. And stereo performance was exemplary, with natural depth perspectives and perfect image stability. The amp’s combination of seemingly flawless stereo, extremely high resolution owing to the excellent signal-to-noise ratio, and the grain-free beautiful sound made listening to orchestral music in particular a great pleasure. The Danish Radio Symphony’s recent recording (on Da Capo) sounded remarkably like the real Danish Radio Symphony in concert, from top to bottom. I found no errors I could attribute to the amplifier.

And this has held uniformly. The amplifier seems just to do its job of letting recordings sound as musically convincing as they can.

The MBL seemed and still seems like an amplifier that one could live with forever. I certainly could.

Bass and mid-bass performance in particular are superb. The MBL is flat to DC and consequently introduces no low-end phase shift from roll-off of

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the bottom end. I know that such phase shifts are small compared to those of speakers. But for some reason—perhaps the large pulse-power reserves and high “damping factor”—the bass behavior was as ideal in listening as it should have been in principle. Ofra Harnoy’s BMG recording of Schubert’s “Arpeggione” Sonata sounded suitably cello-like, and heavy-going bass like that on the Reference Recording Rachmaninoff *Symphonic Dances* was handled with aplomb.

Lurking behind all this description of excellence, there is, of course, the issue of sonic character and neutrality. To my mind, the sonic character of speakers varies so much more than that of good amplifiers that it is perhaps an exercise in futility to worry about absolute amplifier neutrality. Moreover, as David Hafler pointed out years ago, an amplifier must have an adjustable output network to produce true identity of input and output into all speakers. The top-end sound of a speaker/amplifier combination is a function of interaction between the two, particularly if one is worrying about the smallest changes. And a good part of the “character” of an amplifier is, according to Hafler, probably attached to this variation. Under

these circumstances, it is not surprising when amplifiers differ somewhat in their sound. But how to decide which sonic character is right? That is a riddle, since one has never heard one’s speakers without an amplifier. All I can say is that the MBL sounded a little softer on top with my Harbeth Monitor 40s than many amplifiers do.

Leaving these almost philosophical conundrums aside, the MBL 8011 remains firmly recommendable. I am in no position to determine which of its many circuit innovations made the sound what it is. But the MBL not only answers every technical criterion, it is also devoid of what people used to dislike about solid-state amplification: It has no trace of grain or harshness.

The 8011 belongs to the upper echelon of sonic quality. Whether its “character” suits you will depend on your speakers and on you. It suited me (but then, other characters do, too). Many speakers could use a certain softening of the top; much source material could stand it, too. So I leave judgment of absolute neutrality in abeyance, but I enjoyed every minute of my time with the MBL. I think you will, too. 🎧

SPECS

Rated power: 210 watts (8 ohms)
 S/N ratio: 115dB RCA inputs, 117dB XLR inputs, A weighted 118, 120dB
 Frequency response: DC to 130kHz
 Distortion: < .004 %, 4 ohms, 1kHz, 50 watts
 Dimensions: 18 x 7.7 x 15 inches
 Weight: 67 lbs.

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

MBL of America
 19162 N. 88th Way
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 Phone: (480) 563-4393
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 Warranty: Three years
 Price: \$8,250