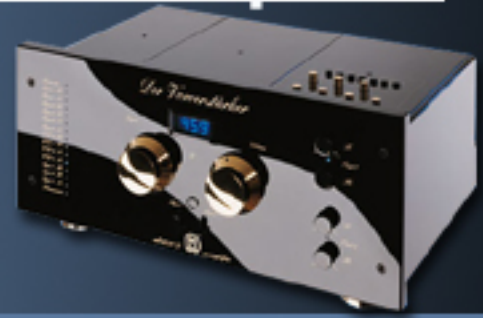


MBL 6010D Full-Function Preamplifier

by Scot Markwell

"I played the 6010 D in my home system for a few weeks. Impressed and more than a little surprised at the wholesale transformation from years ago, I realized that the company had been listening to its own equipment, music, other gear, and to what critics had been saying."



The MBL 6010 D full-function solid-state preamplifier is the finest example of its breed I have ever heard. Although it is not a perfect component (no component is perfect), it nonetheless comes closer to my ideal of what a preamplifier should do than any other (solid-state) unit. Sporting a complete complement of features, including full remote control, first-class moving-coil-capable phono section, dual adjustable (for level and left-right balance) single-ended and



balanced outputs, and a full bevy of line inputs that can be adjusted so that all input levels are similar, the 6010 D is loaded for bear. In its sonics, the 6010 D is in that rarefied field at the top that includes such components as the Plinius M-16, Levinson 32, Conrad-Johnson ART II, Wyetech Opal, Tom Evans Vibe, BAT VK 50 SE, and Burmester 808 Mk V. Of these, the Plinius, Levinson, and Burmester are available with built-in phono stages. I have not heard the Levinson, however, I can tell you that the Plinius M-16's phono stage is more than acceptable, although not the last word. The Burmester 808 Mk V has an excellent MC stage, better than the Plinius, but the MBL's MC section is extremely fine, indeed, almost as good as some stand-alone units that cost four grand or more.

So this is quite a package, both in features and in sheer bulk. I knew that the preamp was large from having seen it at shows, but I forgot what how seriously massive it is. It weighs 77 pounds! Somehow I managed to unpack it and get it onto a shelf in my Arcici Suspense Rack. The big Burmester is also weighty, but there you are getting a separate power supply to break it up into two pieces. Here you have one major aluminum case with all of the goodies packaged inside in module form. My review sample was lavishly finished in what MBL calls Arctic Silver, a lustrous pale Mercedes-Benz-like silver automotive finish that was as flawless and thick as I have ever seen on a piece of audio equipment.

Sockets, switches, plugs, and potentiometers in the 6010 D are, according to the manual, of the highest quality to ensure perfect interaction. MBL says that they designed the cabinet to allow for optimal signal flow between the individual electronic plug-in modules. The resulting exterior shape of the 6010 D is a little on the bulky side, but it is so well finished and executed that I fell in love with it straight away. The volume knob and the source selector are machined from solid brass. In my review version, these large knobs have a high-gloss chrome finish, while the controls on the gloss black units sport 24-carat gold plate.

MBL's plug-in module technology offers the option of updating the preamp as a customer desires, all the way from a stock unit to one decked out, as the review unit was, with the full

available complement of inputs and outputs. The basic 6010 D built as a complete preamplifier is equipped with two CD inputs, a tuner input, two tape loops, and six output terminals. Two extra slots can be fitted with phono modules (MM or MC), balanced or CD-direct inputs. And, as I mentioned, all input signal levels can be fine-tuned. A processor input (bypass) is provided for possible connection of a high-end video system. Volume, mute, and input selection are available from the remote unit. This is a remarkably well thought-out and executed design from an industrial standpoint, and as functional as anything I have ever seen. If I had a complaint, it's that the look and feel of the remote-control unit is not up the level of the rest of the preamplifier. Oh, it works well enough. But it is too plain and insubstantial for the 6010 D. Come on, MBL, give us a heavy chunk of machined aluminum with big buttons that are clearly marked, something that looks and feels like a million bucks.

The 6010 D's power supply is an example of overkill, in the same manner as that of the Burmester 808, and largely responsible for the relaxed and controlled composure of the preamp, as well as its ability to deliver devastatingly hard-hitting bass and realistic dynamic impact across the rest of the audio spectrum. The line amps for the CD inputs and output-driver amplifiers contain sophisticated bias current compensators to eliminate the need for coupling capacitors in the signal path, so the preamp can be run in a fully DC-coupled configuration.

To correctly describe the sound of the 6010 D, I'll have to go back in history a little. In early in 1992 I requested the then-current version of the 6010 D for a Harry Pearson review. Well, we got one, sure enough, and it was a heavy then as it is now, and looked remarkably similar. Except that one was black, and it sounded not so pretty. The preamp looked the part of a top performer, but it manifested a thin, analytical, bleached presentation that was devoid of true harmonic color and lacking in correctly balanced bass weight. Neither HP nor I cared for the sound of the unit, and after a time I packed it up and returned it to the distributor. Through the next several years, I heard other MBL products, as well as the 6010 D, both at private demonstrations and at CES each January. I realized that something good was going on at these other auditions, and resolved to have another go at the big MBL preamp. But other products always seemed to get ahead in the queue and revisiting the 6010 D was delayed.

At the 2002 CES, I heard a demonstration of MBL's latest gear using the 6010 D and a set of 101 D Radialstrahler loudspeakers (the ones that look like Barbara Eden's bottle in *I Dream of Genie*), as well as a set of its back-breaker amplifiers, the 9010 C, in monoblock mode. The sound this time was breathtakingly gorgeous, with no hardness or thinness at all. As a matter of fact, the system's acoustic signature seemed to be linked directly to the recording's; I could not discern that the system itself was doing anything except play what was on the discs. With great anticipation, I requested a 6010 D for review and several weeks later I received it.

I played the 6010 D in my home system for a few weeks. Impressed and more than a little surprised at the wholesale transformation from years ago, I realized that the company had been listening to its own equipment, music, other gear, and to what critics had been saying. Here we have a wonderfully sweet-sounding preamplifier that is noiseless and grainless and possessed of enormous dynamic reserves. At low-to-medium levels, the 6010 D is capable of impressive three-dimensional layering in depth and the ability to present a wide-open stage (both vertically and horizontally), with silky highs out to infinity and extremely potent bass. My system at the time was centered around two high-efficiency speaker systems, the Lamhorn 1.8 and the Coincident Speaker Technology Victory. I was using several SET amps and the AtmaSphere M-60 monoblock OTLs, too, as well as the AtmaSphere MP-1, a full-feature preamp like the MBL, and not too much less expensive (\$9,800). The chief difference here was pure tube versus pure SS operation. Where the AtmaSphere sounded slightly more distant, with a big, super-relaxed, and billowing soundstage that seemed to fill the room, the MBL was more vividly intense, more

focused on individual instruments, and tidier in its rendition of the soundstage. The MP-1 had a slight tendency to make every recording sound as if it had a wonderful big acoustic (pleasing to be sure, if not entirely accurate), where the MBL painted a more different sonic portrait for each recording, sometimes sculpting precise and dimensional vistas of sound with a given recording and at other times allowing me to hear manipulation of the soundstage or the (mis)application of mikes or some other flaw in the recording. I achieved the best performance driving the M-60 AtmaSpheres in balanced mode from the 6010 D.

Much as I knew that I had a really top-flight performer in hand, I quickly recognized that my home system at the time was not capable of extracting the full potential of the MBL, never mind find its true limits (and limitations). So I packed the thing off to HP's and stuck it in his main system. Here, in conjunction with the Alón Exotica Grand Reference and the Hurricane amplifiers and Clearaudio and Burmester front ends, I was able to come to grips with the MBL's performance.





The preamp displayed the same traits I had heard in my own system, and expanded from there. Certainly one of the most impressive aspects of this preamp is its dynamic authority. On really big passages, whether it was an orchestra in full cry or a 45 RPM dance-single belting out the bass line, the 6010 D repeatedly surprised and almost scared me with its ability to let totally uncompressed sounds pass through it without flinching. Records like Prokofiev's *Scythian Suite* (Classic/Mercury LP SR-90006), with its pounding nine-foot concert bass drum and screaming percussion, were downright terrifying in their impact at concert volume.

Along with such dynamic ability comes some of the deepest and most viscerally satisfying bass reproduction I have ever heard. For all of its bombast, however, the 6010 D is able to capture the most minute details in a recording. All of the subtleties of the harpsichord's pluckings are illuminated in a brilliant yet never harsh light on *The Strayaway Child* (Song of the Wood LP 7811); and the high percussion from the "Gulliver Suite" on Herrmann's *The Fantasy Film World of Bernard Herrmann* (Decca LP PFS-4309) sparkled like crystal in bright sunlight. This preamp is rated to have useable response from DC to 1MHz, and, as far up as I can hear (my ears crap out between 18-19kHz), it certainly delivers excellent high-frequency extension, purity, and grit-free transients and overtones. I began to do the silly audiophile thing of looking for recordings that would be glorified by the MBL, even if it was not my favorite music. Even after I tired of that, though, I found that I still wanted to remain and listen to music, so non-fatiguing and pure-sounding was the 6010 D. Although the MBL's phono stage comes with a factory loading of 100 ohms, I found the open, extended, and vivid sound through the phono section to match that of the linestage portion of the preamp, something that is not always the case. Too often today, LPs seem to be given second-citizen status in full preamps, but not by the MBL. If I were using this preamp as a stand-alone device (sans separate phono stage), I would not worry a bit that I was getting less than I should from my records. Perhaps units like the Plinius M-14 or the Groove can retrieve a bit more information from the grooves of an LP, but the MC section in the 6010 D is so well matched sonically to the rest of the circuit that it works seamlessly and invisibly.

Because the MBL is so spectacular at the frequency extremes, I have neglected the unit's midrange performance. Here there is a musically seamless naturalness, both tonally and dynamically, that meshes so well with the top and bottom of the frequency spectrum that I had a hard time ascribing any outright colorations to the unit. Upon extended listening and comparisons to the other top preamps in-house, such as the Wyetech Labs Opal, the ART II, and the Vibe, I came to see that the dominant character of the 6010 D is one of slightly lighter-than-real-life textures and a treble sweetness that, while perhaps a little more glamorous than it should be, is nonetheless musically consonant and quite seductive to the ear. Also, the dynamic ability the 6010 D shows in the bass seems not quite as pronounced throughout the midband, where the sound could, on occasion, seem a little squashed as the volume knob was advanced. This is not a question of amplifier power, mind you, but a slight inconsistency in the manner in which dynamics are decoded by the unit. Certainly this is not a serious failing, and one that becomes apparent only because of the excellence of the bass. But this slight lack of dynamic continuousness is there, and it is audible on systems of sufficient resolution.

Regardless of this slight dichotomy in performance, the 6010 D was a revelation with super-explosive discs with fast and dynamic midrange content and bass alike such as *Gladiator* (Decca/Universal CD 289 467 094-2) or Bob Dylan's *Unplugged* (Columbia CD CK 67000), which boasts some of the most natural-sounding vocals and acoustic guitars I've heard, analog or digital, and such dynamic vocals and harmonica that it can startle you even after repeated listenings. Complex instrumental lines are unraveled and clearly delineated, right along with a stoic bass foundation and exceptional air. The harmonic structure of the midrange reproduction is, in the end, just a touch richer than life, but I do not find this a significant or deleterious flaw—easily forgiven when listening to music.

Toward the end of the review period, I briefly compared the Burmester 808 MK V and the MBL 6010 D directly and in my judgment the Burmester, at just over \$30,000, was no better than the MBL; it was just different. A tad more dynamically seamless top to bottom than the MBL, perhaps, but also not as sweet and lush. Is the approximately \$15,000 difference in price worth it for the Burmester owner? That of course depends on the sonic biases of the purchaser. For me, I have to admit that I was easily seduced by the MBL's styling, build quality, and sonic brio, and I would not hesitate to buy one if I could afford it. It is one of the few pieces of stereo gear I have heard over the years, joining the Forsell Air-Bearing CD Transport and the Shahinian Hawk loudspeakers, that I covet. Now I want to hear what MBL's under- \$3,000 4004 A full preamp sounds like; that is something I could almost afford! 

Manufacturer Information:	
	MBL America
19162 N. 88 th Way Scottsdale, AZ 85255	
Phone: 480 563 4393	
mblusa@cox.net www.mbl-hifi.com	
Price: \$15,180 for the base unit	
-second input/output group: \$3,729	
-MC phono section:	\$1,155
-CD direct:	\$429
-XLR input:	\$429

Associated Equipment:

VPI HW-19 MK IV turntable w/VPI JMW Memorial 10.5 arm, VPI Aries Scout turntable w/VPI JMW 9 Memorial arm; Benz LP, Clearaudio Harmony Wood, and Madrigal Carnegie 1 MC cartridges; Plinius M-14 phono section, Plinius M-16 (solid-state) and Emotive Audio Sira (tubed) line stages; NAT Se1, Viva 300B, and Manley Labs Neo-Classic SE/PP 300B SET amplifiers; Forsell Air-Bearing CD Transport and EAD Theatermaster DAC, Lamhorn 1.8 and Coincident Speaker Technology Victory loudspeakers, SLM/Janis subwoofer; Siltech Gen III, Audio Magic, and Stealth Technologies interconnects and loudspeaker cabling, Arcic Suspense Rack