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UK £4.00 US $9.99 Aus $9.95
Welcome to a world of truly luxurious audio. From the portfolio of Berlin’s MBL Akustikgeräte, the 1511F D-to-A converter is almost as large as the Mark Levinson amplifier that sits in my equipment rack. Built around a substantial metal chassis with brushed aluminium panels and polished acrylic trim pieces, it weighs 16kg and sports five digital inputs and three line outputs (one balanced and two single-ended). The outputs are simultaneously active should you wish to feed your main system, a secondary system and a separate headphone amplifier, for example. As it’s nothing other than a DAC, yet costs as much as many hi-fi enthusiasts’ entire music systems, you’d be right to assume it aspires to being ‘up there’ with the best of them...

DIFFERENT THRILLS
This is one of the components in MBL’s Noble Line range, a step up the price ladder from the company’s ‘entry level’ Corona Line separates [HFN Sep ’12]. OK, so it could be judged a ‘mere toy’ if compared with the company’s Reference Line 1611F DAC that costs twice the price, or if put alongside the wildly elaborate form of Light Harmonics’ Da Vinci DAC [HFN Apr ’13] which, despite having only two inputs, costs (gulp) £20k. Still, this is like comparing an AMG S-Class Mercedes with a Ferrari: you’d expect them to offer different thrills, both equally exhilarating.

The 1511F’s front panel houses a large VFD status panel flanked by two rows of control buttons that govern input selection, standby, mute, and allow setting of the display brightness in seven steps (including off). One button labelled True Audio disables the DAC’s error correction circuits. It is recommended that True Audio is engaged “for maximum sound quality”. An error light in the display will warn if incoming data is corrupted – when playing a badly scratched CD, for example – in which case disengaging True Audio might improve playback by obviating clicks and dropouts. The company’s Noble Line range includes a CD transport (model 1521A) to partner the 1511F, the former naturally supplied with a remote handset that will also control the DAC’s major functions. Made of alloy and finished in black or silver, the remote is available separately for £175.

AIMING FOR A BALANCE
Previous incarnations of the 1511 dating back some five years featured a proprietary ‘SACD Link’ for marrying with appropriate MBL disc players, but since hi-res audio is now predominantly computer audio-based this has been replaced with a USB input. And this current version employs an improved ‘descrambling algorithm’ claimed to deliver a ‘smoother transition between the low-level delta sigma and high-level multi-bit parts’ of the DAC.

As with the USB and SPDIF inputs of the Corona C31 CD player/DAC [HFN Sept ’12], all of the 1511F’s inputs are limited to accepting data up to a maximum of 24-bit/96kHz, which might disappoint number-counting obsessives collecting hi-res downloads in the largest possible file sizes. I’m also guilty in this respect: it’s kinda daft, since I know that many of today’s finest-sounding DACs that accept 192kHz data may subsequently downsample internally. Moreover, the S/N ratio and low-level linearity performance of some of the latest top spec DACs featuring 32-bit/384kHz-capable USB inputs (and even more rarified DoP functionality for native playback of DFF files) often suggest resolution capabilities no better than 16-17
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Says MBL’s chief development engineer Jürgen Reis: ‘Research shows that when we compare the sound of a 96kHz or 192kHz recording through today’s replay systems, the differences we perceive are due to typically-employed digital filtering techniques.

‘Since we believe the ear to be four to five times more sensitive to pre-ringing than to post-ringing, we’ve designed a psychoacoustically optimised filter type best described as approximately four-fifths minimum phase and one-fifth linear phase, as we’re aiming to give the best balance between impulse behaviour, stopband rejection and band pass transition.

‘When developing our asynchronous USB MCMII [Master Clock Mode Interface] we focused on low jitter clocks, with low noise and high bandwidth voltage regulators, and aimed for extremely high isolation to avoid computer noise entering the D-to-A stage. We did in fact intend to make the F version of the 1511 24/192-capable, but I was not happy with the sound because the bass lacked some punch and the midrange was missing some definition.’

While at the core of the 1511F lies the same Crystal CS4398 DAC seen in the Corona C31 player/DAC, there are many differences in design topology. The 1511F’s display and control power supplies are fed from separate windings on the power transformer and isolated from the analogue and digital paths with opto-couplers. To further lower interference there are two input receivers.

An auxiliary receiver with fixed oscillator measures incoming sampling rate, isolated from the DAC’s digital audio path to minimise ingress of noise. Its ‘voicing’ is also different from the C31’s [see boxout].

‘Muted trumpet displayed just the right amount of searing blast’

if you’ve witnessed one of MBL’s demonstrations at an audio fair, its electronics driving the company’s unique

ANALOGUE LOVER’S DELIGHT

is one of only very few high-end audio manufacturers producing complete replay systems from source to loudspeakers. Doing so affords complete control, allowing tuning of the electronics for precisely the sound character they desire. Says MBL’s chief development engineer Jürgen Reis: ‘Although the DAC circuit and output drive chips in our 1511F are the same as those used in our Corona Line C31 CD player, the DAC has been tuned to sound quite different. With more expensive Noble Line components such as this, we want to give our customers a more emotionally-oriented sound; one could say a more “analogue-style” sound, with smoother and more relaxed high frequencies. Where necessary we employ higher-grade internal components if we judge them to deliver more musical enjoyment. And in the 1511F in particular, we have tweaked the group delay of the digital bi-phase signal so the bass delivers more “rhythmic swing”. Since the acoustic aspect is tuned differently, the measurements will be different.’
self-assured and even-handed. My favourite rock and jazz/rock recordings (countless live Zappa albums, alongside 1970s-vintage live performances of Focus and Ian Carr’s Nucleus, to name a few of my references) were delivered with immediacy and delicacy in equal measure, together with outstanding dynamic qualities.

I can’t concur wholly with Reis’s description of the 1511F sounding ‘more analogue and relaxed’ than his C31 player/DAC, since I found the C31 exceptionally smooth and luscious-sounding. In my system, at least, the 1511F sounds less creamy and more tightly-focused than the C31, with better transparency thanks to its ‘blacker blacks’. And where I judged the C31 to be a bit euphonic, with a coloured sense of richness, the 1511F sounded more open with Patricia Barber’s self-assured and even-handed.

AUTHENTIC ZING
Digiphobes adamant that most digital replay sounds remorseless and barren really should bow to the intimacy and involvement the 1511F delivers. I was knocked for six by the way it remained composed and barren really should bow to the digital replay sounds remorseless. Digiphobes adamant that most sensitive recording engineers both inside and out. Let’s face it, if your job necessitated sitting in front of a replay system of such high calibre for hour upon endless hour, listening to music and making judgements on the subtle subjective effects caused by changes in the electronic and mechanical design of your sources and amplifiers, you’d be bound to conclude ‘Well, there sure are worse ways to earning a living.’

Choosing any component is a matter of system integration: what does it do for you in your system? MBL’s 1511F DAC is indeed ‘up there’, its sound waiting to be judged alongside the finest high-end DACs available at any price. Its ability to paint spookily realistic images out of silence is nothing short of fabulous, while its build quality shows carefully considered engineering both inside and out.

Sound Quality: 86%