MQA UNDER FIRE
The download boss who's not sold on the new hi-resolution »wonder format«

NEXT-GEN
»NOBLE LINE«
MBL's CD/DAC and amp:
classic style meets digital hi-tech

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Where I to be asked to describe the essence of the new N31 CD player/DAC and N51 integrated amplifier from MBL’s “Noble Line”, I’d do no more than hand over the heavy remote control. The object of beauty shown above, with its rotating chrome-plated ring for the volume control consistent with its shiny surface, has a solidity and finesse representative of the quality of the components it controls. Approach it with your hand, and the backlight glows up, indicating that its ready to take instruction!

It’s a trick the remote handset shares with the 5in color TFT displays adorning the front panels of the N31 and N51, this striking feature giving the MBLs a modern look and reminding one of the large-format screens now common in cars - including their gesture control. Tiny buttons next to the display let you navigate, with labelling next to them changing according to the functions or menu in use.

Top player – and converter

Designed in black, with gloss white and shiny metal detailing, the products of the revamped „Noble Line“ are certainly striking: the brand logo, proudly displayed on the top panel, is surrounded by a glowing aura. When touched, it varies its brightness, as well as that of the display, in six stages, or turns both off completely. The Power/Standby button is likewise ringed with an illuminated glow.

The N31 plays CDs to reference standards, but is also a highly accomplished...
The slot-in drive is shock-resistant. Vibration-damping foils in several places demonstrate the high degree of care and fine-tuning.

**Fine tuning by filter**

The digital inputs include two USB interfaces for PC or Mac, one of which is designed for high-bit signals up to 24 bits / 192kHz or „double DSD“ 5.6 MHz bandwidth. A narrow strip at the bottom of the CD-Text-capable display indicates the received format, which is useful as bottlenecks in the computer chain can deliver a diminished sound. If you can see the problem, rather than just having an inkling from listening that something is amiss, you can go into the computer settings and put things right.

In addition, a small symbol for the selected digital filter, of which the N31 has three on offer: our favourite, and that of MBL’s Jürgen Reis, is „Minimum Phase“. With this everything is in the most beautiful order, the MBL sound being wide, extended and to the horizon in depth; „Slow Roll Off“ suits singer/songwriter-style music with its slightly more comfortable, slightly rounded dictation, while „Fast Roll Off“ makes the bass impulses really hard-hitting, but at the expense of some superficiality in the midrange. It’s crisp and direct, but at the same time somewhat disjointed – just the thing for techno, perhaps?

That’s almost it when it comes to adjustability: unless those manufacturers offering owners an almost limitless number of switchable parameters, MBL does (almost) everything for you. DAC-geeks will note with appreciation that the class-leading fully-balanced ESS Sabre 9018 is used, around which Reis has constructed a complex architecture in order to make the most of its quality. In addition to those digital filters, this also includes three-stage jitter reduction.

In the N51 integrated amplifier, the mu-metal-encapsulated ring core transformer occupies the front two thirds of the internal space, along with the power supply capacitor banks. On the other hand, the power amplifier section is very small, despite more than healthy output, thanks to its use of 360kHz switching stages, which are both space- and energy-efficient, and generate very little heat.

This „LASA“ concept („Linear Audio Switching Amplifier“), developed by Jürgen Reis, was seen for the first time in 2012 in MBL’s „Corona Line“ and has since been further refined. Switching the amplifier core may be, but the power supply technology remains linear, removing the risk of RF interference from this...
device affecting other components.

A clever counter-coupling avoids nonlinearities in the high-frequency range, which are unavoidable in connection with Class D Amps, due to the necessary output filters to match the impedance of the connected loudspeaker. Our measurements confirmed the effect of this measure.

A special feature is the ALPs potentiometer for the volume control, placed close to the inputs in the interest of shortest signal paths. Unlike most of his development colleagues, Reis does not rely on resistor ladders, but is rather a supporter of conventional potentiometers, to which he attributes a particular sonority and natural grace in the middle area. In the N51, the potentiometer it is moved by the adjacent stepping motor and is so precise (see measured values) that the chip solution isn’t missed.

The N51 also offers „Unity Gain”, ensuring that, with the N31 connected, its signal at the zero-decibel mark fully exploits the considerable power of the amp already smoothly starting clipping. If you need more amplification in the case of a low average level of the music, „Unity Gain” simply switches off.

Another nice touch, and one often overlooked but essential for the best sound, are the vibration-protected „NextGen” connections found here, from Essen company WBT.

A „strong” appearance

The MBLs made a striking appearance in the STEREO listening room, where we hooked them up to the company’s 116F radial radiator speakers. We played each unit alone for our edification against various competitors, and both proved that, whether used together or severally, they delivered the “MBL sound picture”.

We love this presentation, with opulence, colourful and energetic basic tone, and sense of exuberance. In contrast to direct-radiating loudspeakers, which like to place the event directly in the listening room, MBL’s omnidirectional models project the scale of the recording space into the room: whether the atmosphere of a recording is that of a hall or a jazz cellar, this system recreates it fully.

Jürgen Reis, who has been developing the MBL products since 1983 and now has a wealth of experience in terms of sonic finesse, has equipped the 116F with a pair of 14cm bass units and two mechanically linked aluminium-cone 21cm subwoofers, meaning the speaker produces a lot of energy.

That woofers design means less of this energy is lost to resonances in the MDF enclosure, meaning that more energy is used to shift air: even though the bass

For bi-amping, there is a controlled pre-output (pre-out); the loudspeaker terminals jacks are „NextGens” from WBT.
section is supported with a rearward reflex opening port, the housing remains surprisingly quiet, and you can hardly feel movement under the fingers.

However, on our usual measurement, which only takes direct sound into account, the 116F sensitivity hardly exceeds 80 decibels (see diagrams), so it needs 10 times as much power as the (admittedly high-sensitivity) Focal Maestro Utopia.

From the fullness into the full
Neither the player/DAC nor the amp – nor indeed the two combined – have the smoothest sound, yet they touch the audiophile nerve with their fluent timing, a full yet flexible bass and plenty of musical tension, all the while seeming relaxed and totally in control.

The N51 certainly helps, with considerable reserves it can mobilize with lightning speed, and both devices – which can be connected via „Smart Link“, which opens the door to further functions and convenience – are also meticulously refined. Combined with the high-resolution radial radiators they are able to envelop the listener in a glamorous, yet precise, sound.

There’s no question: MBL’s new „Noble“ set draws on an abundant sound and delivers a full experience – albeit at a luxury price. And who can argue with that?

Matthias Böde

MBL N31

At €12,000
Dimensions: 45 x 16 x 46 cm (WxHxD)
Warranty: 3 years
Contact: MBL
Phone: 030/23005840, www.mbl.de

The N31 is equally convincing as a DAC and a CD player, with pronounced audiophile instinct for gripping, authentic sound. High-bit PCM and DSD files are also handled well by the MBL.

MEASUREMENT RESULTS

Quantization noise distance 0 dBFS  97 db
Output resistor Cinch  100 ohm
Output voltage Cinch 0 dBFS  2.3 V
Noise distance Digital Zero  102 db
Distortion factor at-60dBFS  0.6%
Linearity at-90dBFS  0.2 db
Jitter  1.1 NS
Deviation from FS  60 ppm
Reading-in  10 s
Power consumption 50W/80W  1/20 W

LAB COMMENTARY: High-class values prove the technical claim of the N31. The MBL shows no weaknesses and underlines the stability of the analogue output stage in the relatively low output resistance.

FACILITIES

Five digital inputs and three digital outputs (each light guide, symmetric, coaxial plus two USB interfaces), analog output in cinch and XLR, remote control, SmartLink connection with advanced comfort functions, German user manual

SOUND LEVEL CD  100%
SOUND LEVEL DAC  98%

PREIS/LEISTUNG

★★★★  VERY GOOD

MBL N51

At €13,800
Dimensions: 45 x 16 x 49 cm (WxHxD)
Warranty: 3 years
Contact: MBL
Phone: 030/23005840, www.mbl.de

The innovative integrated amplifier captivates with a noble look and is brimming with power. But it’s no sledgehammer, but rather a paragon of behavior, with the sense of bright colors and potency in the background, making it a fine partner for any type of loudspeaker.

MEASUREMENT RESULTS

Continuous power (8 ohm/4ohm)  232 w/435 W
KLIRRF. At 50MW/5w/db pmax  0.008%/0.01%/0.01%
Intermod. 50MW/5w/db pmax  0.006%/0.004%/0.4%
Noise distance at 50MW/5w  79.1 db/97.7 dB
Damping factor. At 4 ohm (63hz/1khz/14kHz)  79.1 db/97.7 dB
Upper cut-off frequency (-3db/4ohm)  52 kHz
Talk about Line 1 > Line 2  73.1 db
Synchronization error volume at-60db  0.1 db
Stereo channel separation at 10khz  75.1 db
Power consumption standby  0.8 W
Power Consumption Idle  50

LAB COMMENTARY: Rich output is paired with low distortions and high interference resistance, while also positive are the effective channel separation as well as the precise tracking of the volume control.

FACILITIES

Six high-level inputs (5 x Cinch/1 x XLR), including a „processor“ looping option for AV applications, fixed and variable outputs, „SmartLink“ connection, remote control, German manual.

SOUND LEVEL  98%

PREIS/LEISTUNG

★★★★  VERY GOOD