

MBL Noble Line N11/N15

Handbuilt in Berlin, this preamp and monoblock power amp defies the industrial look, favouring instead an exquisite finish. And the sound more than lives up to the style
 Review: **Andrew Everard & Paul Miller** Lab: **Paul Miller**

By any standards, the Noble series from Berlin-based MBL is a looker. The components aren't massive – in place of slabby high-end units wearing their audio prowess on their sleeve, as it were, both the £11,500 N11 preamplifier and the N15 mono power amplifiers, at £13,900 apiece, are relatively slender units. They are also immaculately finished in a choice of gloss black or white, with accents for the control elements available in either polished gold or palinux (silver), with black detailing also offered if you go for the white main colour. A shade wider than the hi-fi norm at 45cm, they stand only 15cm tall, giving them as understated a look as possible given that gold or silver ornamentation.

This Noble line also includes the £13k N21 power amp, the £14k N51 integrated amp and £12k N31 CD player/DAC, the latter combining a slot-loading transport with USB and optical/coaxial inputs (and the option of a Roon module). This ensemble of Noble products looks suitably luxurious, but it's by no means the German brand's flagship range.

MBL'S ROYALTY

That role falls to the Reference line, headlined by the strikingly retro-looking 6010 D preamp, selling for £21,200, with options taking that up to almost £25,000 and carrying the legend 'Der Vorverstärker' (The Preamplifier) emblazoned across its tall faceplate. Its partnering components are the big 9011 amplifiers, switchable between mono and stereo, yours for £41,800 and promising up to 5kW of 'peak dynamic power'.

Like all MBL's products, the Noble series is handbuilt in-house in the company's Berlin factory. As its 'credo' says, 'That is how we are able to warrant the strictly controlled quality of our equipment. It also

enables us to react to innovations with great flexibility. We exclusively use trusted high-end technology combined with solid, high-quality materials'.

Slender the N15 power amps here may be, but there's no doubt about their function. The front panel carries just a single button with the MBL Logo, and the words 'Mono Amplifier' on that feature trim, which looks like a (Rolls-Royce) grille but actually isn't – instead the convection cooling airflow is in through the base of the amp, and out via the rear panel. And it still claims an impressive specification, being rated at 560W/4ohm, with a 36A peak current [see PM's Lab Report, p45]. All this stems from its second-generation LASA (Linear Analogue Switching Amplifier)

technology, a development of Class D operation and which is said to deliver a 'frequency response completely speaker-load independent, and low distortion that's independent of frequency' [see PM's interview sidebar, p43].

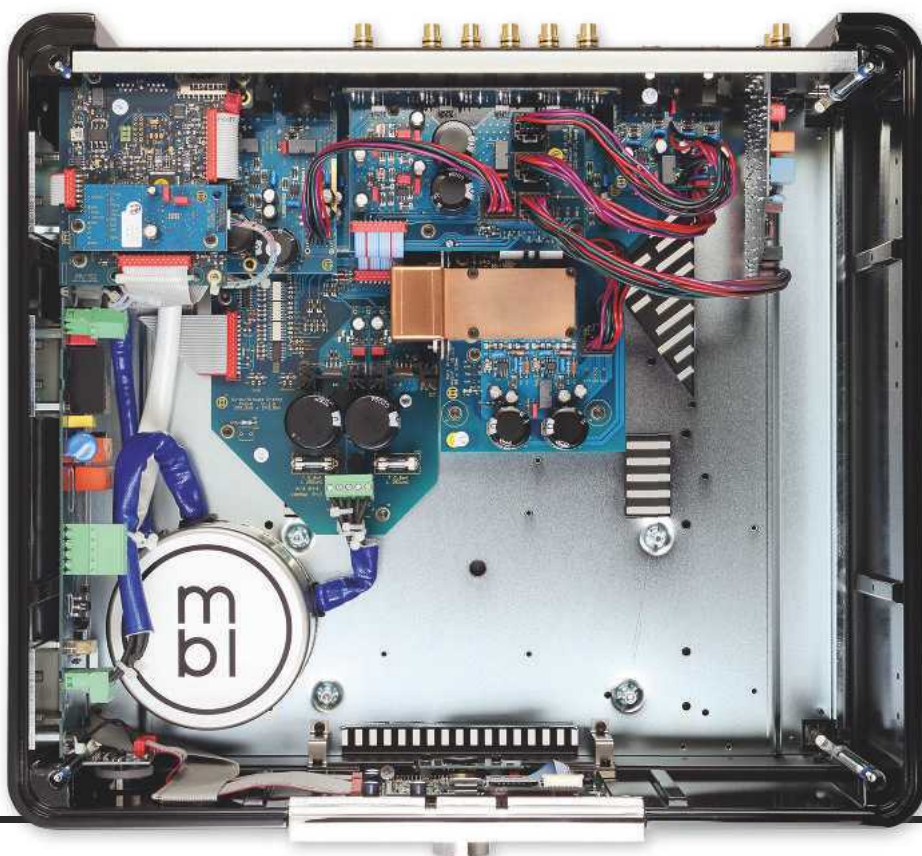
'The N11 wakes up when it detects you drawing near'

POWER STATION

To that end, rather than use a type of switchmode power supply more commonly seen with Class D designs, this monoblock has a traditional linear PSU with a large toroidal

transformer double-shielded in a mu-metal housing. Fast-recovery rectifiers are also employed in the PSU while the amplifier output employs a form of soft-clipping (synonymous with NAD's amplifiers for decades) to 'massage' distortion as the N15 approaches full power.

RIGHT: Fed from a large linear PSU [bottom left/centre], the N11 includes an optional phono card [top right], balanced line in/output [top], screened motorised analogue volume control [under copper can], and network PCB [top left]





LEFT: Solidly constructed and exquisitely finished in a choice of gloss black and white for the chassis set against polished chrome and gold centrepieces, the N11/N15 trio (one N15 only shown here) is a statement piece. The N11's 5in TFT display is not a touchscreen although it, and the six 'smart keys', are enabled via a proximity detector as you approach...

The layout is symmetrical and, in addition to two balanced inputs on XLRs – one for a preamp such as the N11, the other for a second preamp or a network player with its own volume control – there's also an XLR output to allow pairs of amplifiers to be daisy-chained for bi-amping. MBL has also opted for a double set of fellow German-brand WBT's 'vibration-damped' speaker terminals.

Completing the connectivity are MBL's SmartLink v2.0 terminals on RJ45 sockets, allowing control and information exchange

between the components, along with an SD card slot for software updates.

Matching facilities are found on the N11 preamp, which is an all-analogue design principally controlled via a large colour display with six 'smart keys', these changing their function according to the mode being accessed. It's not a touchscreen, even though the expectation these days is for large displays to offer such functionality, but it does have a proximity sensor. This detects your hand approaching and switches the display from playback mode,

showing volume and the input selected, to control mode, in which the functions of the 'soft keys' are indicated. The illuminated MBL logo on the preamp's top panel doubles as a brightness control for both itself and the display: when turned right off, the display will 'wake up' when that proximity sensor detects you drawing near.

CARTFUL OF CLEVERNESS

Alternatively, you can control the N11 preamp – and a connected MBL digital player – with the stylish disc-shaped remote [see p45]. This has a minimal button layout (including a customisable 'option' key) while volume adjustment is achieved via an outer ring that's beautifully smooth and fluid in its operation. If that 'all-analogue' description has you expecting nothing more of the preamp other than input switching and a volume, the N11 still has some surprises up its sleeve.

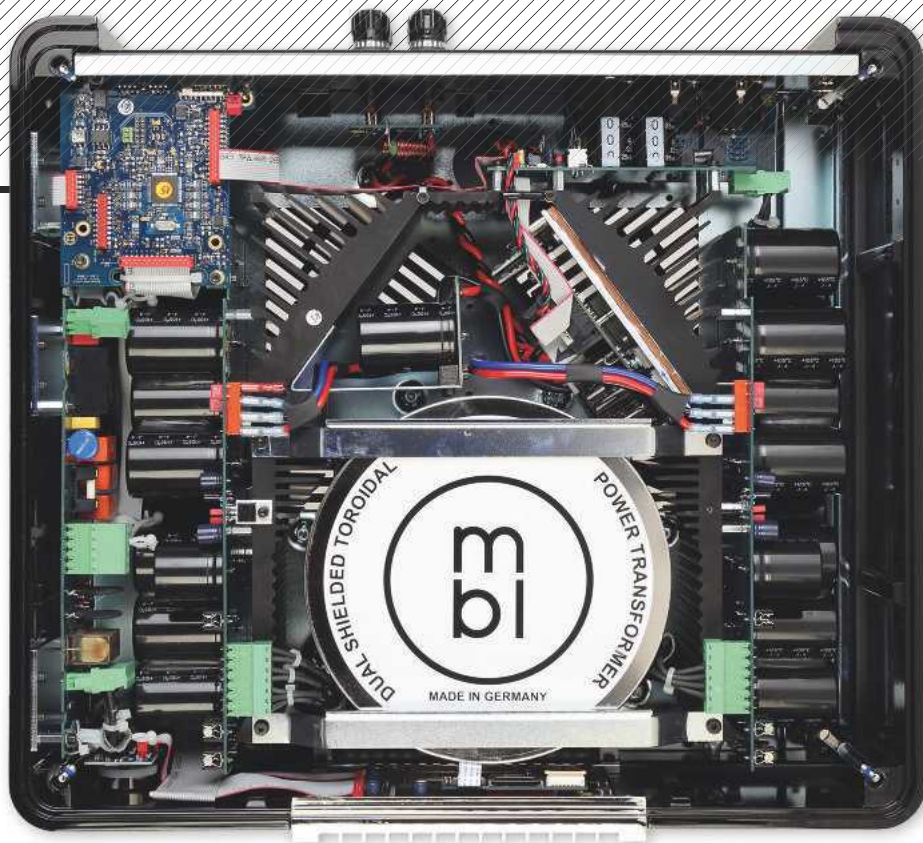
As standard this MBL preamp has seven inputs – five on RCAs and two on XLRs – the latter prioritised for optimum sound quality, but it's possible to specify it with either a phono input or an additional XLR pair. One of the inputs also offers a bypass option for use with an AV processor. The outputs are equally flexible with a total of five sets configured in two groups, one with two pairs of RCAs, plus one of XLRs, the other one pair of each. Also provided are fixed-level RCA and balanced outputs.

Within the set-up menu it's possible to switch off unused inputs for faster scrolling between those in use, set the maximum level at start-up and engage the preamplifier's 'Unity Gain' mode. This ↻

UNITY GAIN

Most amplifiers still offer far higher gain (amplification factor) than is strictly necessary when used with today's relatively high-output sources. We regularly see integrated amplifiers, or pre/power combinations, with a total +45dB gain (or x178) when, for example, a gain of +27.8dB is all that's required to raise the 2V from any of today's digital player/DACs to the N15's rated 300W/8ohm. This excessive gain is, on the whole, a throwback to the 1960s and '70s when audiophiles were reliant on tape decks and FM tuners with a mere 200mV output. In 2022, only half the available gain of most amplifiers is used, limiting maximum S/N, and relegating the volume control to where it's least linear and where channel balance is poorest. In many pre/power combinations this means the preamp is being used as little more than an active attenuator and buffer...

We've seen a few amplifiers with appropriately reduced gain – the Rotel Michi X3 and X5 [HFN Apr '21 & Jul '21], for example, just as Constellation Audio [HFN Jul '15, Oct '19 & Dec '19] allows the J-FET input stage of its power amps to be bypassed, reducing gain from typically +26dB to +12dB and relying on the partnering preamp to 'make up' the volts. MBL takes the opposite approach to achieve the same ends (it's no coincidence the N15's gain is exactly +27.9dB). In standard guise the N11 pre offers +9.8dB overall gain (balanced in/out) while 'Unity Gain' limits this to +0.2dB – equivalent to reducing the volume from '100' to '70' on its display. Provided your source can deliver in excess of 2V (balanced) then the N11/N15 can always be driven to full output with no 'wasted' gain, and the N11's motorised volume control swept through 100% of its range. PM



ABOVE: Supported by a massive transformer and linear PSU occupying most of the chassis space, the N15 uses an Ncore NC1200 Class D module capable of 400W/8ohm. The switching output stage is MBL's own with high speed transistors mounted onto one side [top right] of the V-shaped heatsink

MBL feature simplifies the signal path by eliminating excess gain in the N11 so it behaves as a simple – elegant – buffered volume control [see PM's boxout, p41].

PRODIGIOUS PERFORMERS

Set up in PM's listening room with the usual Melco/dCS Vivaldi One [HFN Feb '18] front-end, and with speakers including Bowers & Wilkins' flagship 801 D4 [HFN Nov '21] and the fabulous Wilson Audio Alexx V [HFN Jan '22], these MBL amplifiers proved more than up to the task of driving both sets of floorstanders in convincing fashion, as you might expect given their prodigious measured output [see p45].

This was immediately apparent with Yello's *Touch Yello* album [Polydor 7640161960251] which found the N11/N15s digging deep into the electronic rhythms, while also giving fine character to Till Brönner's trumpet contributions and the guest vocals. In broad terms, the amplifiers offer a fine combination of low-end drive with a sweet, clean and informative midband and treble. Not the last word in extreme treble detail, certainly, but they do avoid any abrasiveness, creating a fine soundstage that wraps the listener in the music.

This was very much the case with Anna Fedorova's fabulous *Shaping Chopin* set of solo piano works [Channel Classics CCS 43621; DSD128]. Yes, some alternative amps may create a marginally better

impression of the ambience of this recording, but it's hard to argue with the 'piano in the room' effect the N11/N15s deliver, the scale of the instrument's 'image', or the way the fluidity and spirit of Fedorova's playing is conveyed. There's superb light and shade in both the performances and the sound here, and it's a captivating, entirely effortless listen.

However, Adele's latest album, *30* [Columbia G0100046925635], while delivered with that same weight and richness was also attended by some slight

stressing of the singer's sibilants via both the Wilson and B&W speakers. If you thought too long and hard about it, then it was mildly distracting, otherwise not.

Then again, we were on much safer ground with Sting's current release, *The Bridge* [A&M Records 3858707; see p97], which belies its lockdown genesis and scattered recording of musicians with tight, cohesive performances right from the Police-like opener, 'Rushing Water'. With its powerful drums, chopping guitar and tight multi-layered vocals, it echoes the wonderful 'Fragile' with its acoustic guitar, simple bass and percussion, as it does the close-up voice on 'For Her Love' before concluding with a passable cover of 'The Dock Of The Bay'.

Their ability to deliver this combination of focused soundstaging, fine presence and bags of detail serves well the introspective

'Plant's voice has superb immediacy on "Go Your Way"'

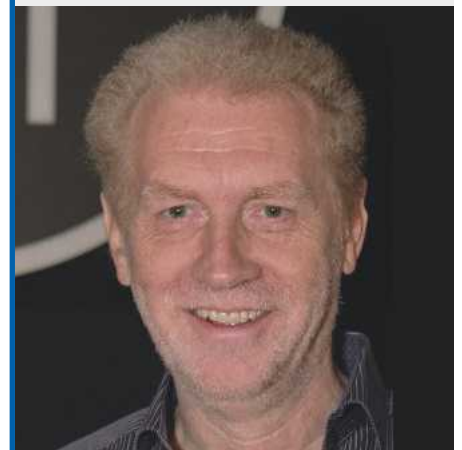
JÜRGEN REIS

MBL's chief engineer and 'public face' of this respected German brand, Jürgen Reis, is cautious about revealing *too* much about the proprietary working behind his 'LASA 2.0' amplifier technology.

'We have optimised the behaviour of the output stage circuitry to drive *real* loads', he emphasised during our call over the Xmas break. 'We employ a "four quadrant" test that looks at our amplifier output current and voltage both in- and out-of-phase, ensuring it will drive the most reactive loudspeaker loads without becoming overstrained. We've also introduced a low-impedance grounding concept for the power supply and output stage, meaning higher transparency and improved control over the frequency range.'

At the heart of the N15 is a proven Ncore NC1200 Class D module from Hypex whose 5th-order self-oscillating control (feedback) loop encompasses the full audio path, including the output filter network. It's this technique that ensures the N15 maintains a predictable frequency response regardless of the speaker load, unlike more traditional Class D amplifiers. Nevertheless, MBL has nested the NC1200 module within a distinctly 'audiophile' environment, including a huge linear power supply and with proprietary switching transistors at the amplifier's output.

There's some customisation of the Ncore module's parameters, too. 'We have made the amplifier's transition to clipping more gentle', says Jürgen, 'even at very high sound levels or when driving tough speaker loads, the amplifier will not appear aggressive or distorted'. PM



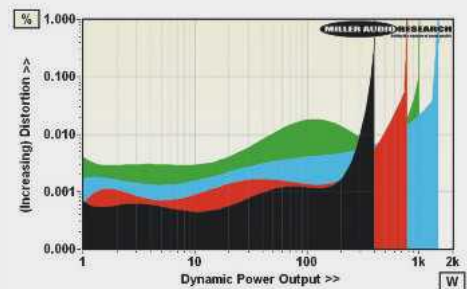
LAB REPORT

MBL NOBLE LINE N11/N15

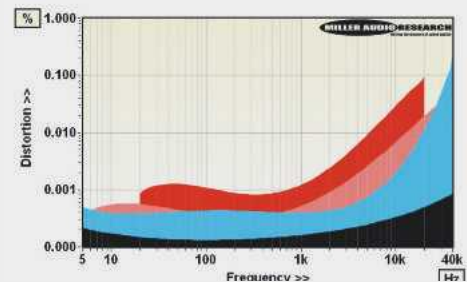
Tested in its standard guise (see boxout, p41, for 'Unity Gain' mode) the N11 preamp offers a +9.8dB gain and vanishingly low distortion of 0.00006-0.0003% (20Hz-20kHz re. 0dBV, balanced in/out). Full output is 10V from a 96ohm source impedance, the A-wtd S/N ratio is a respectable 101dB (re. 0dBV) while the freq. response extends from sub-1Hz to 100kHz within ± 0.15 dB.

The fully balanced operation of the partnering N15 monoblock(s) is just one reason behind its claimed, superior, common-mode rejection. In practice it is remarkably 'clean' and free of PSU hum and noise to the tune of -86dBV (10-500Hz) even though the smooth increase in white noise from the Class D modulator takes this to -71dBV with an A-wtd S/N of 82dB (re. 0dBV, 20Hz-20kHz). MBL rates the power output as 300W/8ohm and 560W/4ohm which, in practice, turns out to be a very generous 352W/8ohm and 615W/4ohm with sufficient headroom (almost unheard of in a Class D architecture) to sustain 402W, 785W, 1499W and 1001W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads, respectively, [see Graph 1, below].

Moreover, MBL has pushed out the inevitable rise in inductive output impedance to beyond 60kHz, the low 0.016ohm achieved across the audioband increasing, finally, to 0.3ohm/90kHz and 2.5ohm/100kHz. By the same token, the global feedback that's central to the Ncore modules ensures the N15's response is unaffected by speaker load, reaching out from a sub-1Hz bass to -0.5dB/20kHz and dipping to -5.5dB/60kHz. Distortion, too, follows a similar pattern - 'flat' at a very low 0.0004% from 20Hz-2kHz, rising to 0.01%/20kHz then 0.23%/40kHz (all 10W/8ohm) [see Graph 2, below]. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max current is 31.6A



ABOVE: Distortion vs. freq for N11 (re. 0dBV, black) and N15 (re. 1W/8ohm, blue; 10W, pink; 100W, red)



ABOVE: The N11 [top] has optional phono and seven line ins (two on XLRs and one HT/AV bypass) and three groups of preamp outs – fixed on XLR/RCA plus variable on XLR/2x RCAs and XLR/1x RCA. N15 [one shown, bottom] has XLR inputs, a loop-through line output plus two sets of 4mm WBT 'full copper' cable posts

nature of much of the material on this album, ranging from folk tunes to jazzy breaks, all performed by a superb group of musicians.

RELAXED CONFIDENCE

Neither do the N11/N15 'Nobles' demand exemplary production to show what they can do – provided you're not intent on spotting every last nuance, however entertaining, of a recording, and instead simply want to revel in the music, then they will suit you just fine.

For example, with the often-dense T Bone Burnett production of the second Robert Plant/Alison Krauss outing, *Raise The Roof* [Warner Music UK], her plaintive vocals are a delight on their cover of Merle Haggard's 'Going Where The Lonely Go'. Meanwhile Plant's voice has superb immediacy on Anne Briggs' folk 'Go Your Way', with both the harmonies and the obvious quality of the backing musicians revealed to striking effect.

Even with the woolly period production values of David Bowie's *Toy* album, once thought to be mythical but now revealed as part of the *Brilliant Adventure* (1992-2001) boxset [Parlophone/ISO DBX 5], MBL's Noble amplifiers deliver a sound of very fine clarity. They clearly reveal the singer's vocals have less of Anthony Newley's vaudevillian influence than the originals as he revisits the likes of 'The London Boys' and 'Let Me Sleep Beside You'.

Similarly, the 2000 live set from the BBC Radio Theatre, also in this boxset, retains real spirit and vivacity, with both Bowie and his band on top form. Here the MBL N11/N15s drove the Wilson Alexx Vs with palpable confidence, revealing a sound of excellent presence and ambience across the eclectic set-list. It's a thrilling, enveloping sound, with generosity and impact served up in equal measure. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Not for those who crave every detail being hurled at them, this MBL preamp/monoblock trio instead majors on the finer points of music-making – a sound blending weight and richness with all the niceties of focus, soundstaging, and instrumental and vocal timbres. Weighty they may sound, but with a lavish low-end comes agility, whether carrying the impact of solo piano or driving a rock or jazz track.

Sound Quality: 87%



ABOVE: A 'handful' of remote control with buttons for MBL's CD players and amplifiers. Volume is governed by spinning the chromed peripheral ring

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Continuous power (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	352W / 615W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	402W / 786W / 1.50kW / 1.0kW
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz, pre/power)	96ohm / 0.016-0.04ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz-100kHz, pre/power)	+0.0 to -0.2dB / +0.0 to -4.5dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	323mV (pre) / 116mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	101.1dB (pre) / 82.0dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.00006-0.0003/0.0004-0.0095%
Power consumption (idle/rated o/p)	25W/665W (21W, preamp)
Dimensions (WHD, Pre/Power)	450x150x450/450x150x425mm