

Lamm LL2.1 Deluxe preamplifier & LP2 Deluxe phono preamplifier

Change comes slowly if at all to a Lamm amplifier, which seems the product of such deliberation that change is little needed. But parts suppliers change their parts, consumers change what they wish to consume—and Vladimir Lamm, who designs all of the circuits for all of his amplifiers, responds by drawing his products a little bit differently. In doing so, he often finds a way to make them sound better.

So it was this spring: In addition to the LL1 Signature (\$42,690), a four-chassis assault on the state of the preamplifier art, Lamm Industries announced a new version of the LL2 line-level preamplifier, which I reviewed in *Stereophile's* September 2005 issue (see www.stereophile.com/tubepreamps/905lamm). Now it's something called the Lamm LL2.1 (\$5690 in standard trim, \$5990 for the Deluxe version with added bypass capacitors).¹

Lamm says he received a number of requests for a line preamp with less gain than the LL2, mostly from people who rely on digital music sources: The healthy outputs of most CD players and D/A converters prevented users from turning their volume controls much past 9 o'clock, and otherwise made it difficult to match sound levels between various other source components. Lamm responded by redesigning his circuit to incorporate 15dB of switchable attenuation.

Switchable attenuation required an extra switch—I suppose that's the sort of insight you'd expect from a hi-fi reviewer—and an extra switch required a revised front panel. Thus the Lamm LL2.1 looks a little different from its predecessor, with much larger volume knobs. (Happily, the new Lamm preamp retains its predecessor's approach to such things, with separate poten-

tiometers for each channel: Balance can be adjusted, as it often needs to be, without having an extra pot in the path.)

On the subject of clean paths: The Lamm LL2.1 retains the LL2's source-selection scheme, which is also excellent. Going on the assumption that every listener has one preferred source, which he or she uses more often than all others, Lamm designed his preamp with one pair of direct inputs and two pairs of standard inputs: The former pair goes straight from the input jacks to a high-quality two-position switch,

supply of the LL2.1, rectification comes courtesy of a 6X4 tube and two rugged-looking diodes, and smoothing is done with a pi filter of the usual sort, built around a small Hammond choke. Filament voltages are maintained with a large, nonswitching regulator.

Build quality is superb, with sturdy metalwork and a clean circuit board that incorporates numerous test points for easy servicing: a very professional touch. Parts include pale blue Dale resistors, French blue CDM electrolytics, and sky-blue Vishay film caps and Takamishawa relays: As Lenny Bruce once said in a very different context, I've never seen so much blue in my life. (But in this, the Deluxe version of the LL2.1 preamp, some of those blue caps are bypassed with yellow Electrocube polystyrene caps. The effect is *tres* Provençal.) The LL2.1's input impedance is specified as 50k ohms and its output 250 ohms, the latter suggesting good compatibility with a variety of power amplifiers.

Lamm's recent introduction of the LL2.1 brought with it the opportunity for *Stereophile* to listen once again to the company's analog stalwart, the LP2 Deluxe phono preamplifier, which Mikey Fremmer wrote about in his December 2002 "Analog Corner" column. The LP2 Deluxe is itself unchanged, although the price has gone up: from \$6690 in 2002 to \$7290 in 2009. (As with the LL2.1, Lamm's phono preamp is also available in a non-Deluxe version, for a few hundred dollars less.)

The rear panel of the Lamm LP2 features two pairs of input jacks: one pair each for moving-coil and moving-magnet cartridges. Individual left- and right-channel toggle switches allow the user to choose between them, since keeping an unused pair in-circuit would be an engraved invitation to noise. The MM jacks lead straight to the first gain stage, but the MC jacks lead to a pair of Jensen step-up transformers with a 10:1 turns ratio. Thus



Lamm LL2.1 (top) and LP2 Deluxe (bottom).

then on to the volume controls and gain stages. The latter goes from that first switch to another high-quality switch, allowing the choice between Line 1 and Line 2, and then to yet another, for tape-loop switching. Thus the signals from all three input pairs are subject to much less degradation than with the typical rotary switch, and those from the direct inputs are subject to even less than that. It makes sense.

The above-mentioned gain stages are built around four well-loved tubes: a pair each of 6189/12AU7A dual triodes and 6DJ8² dual triodes, the two halves of the latter wired together in shunt-regulated push-pull mode. (Remember: The term push-pull doesn't refer to the Lamm LL2.1's amplification topology, which is single-ended and thus fully class-A.) In the power

² Actually, the 6DJ8s have been replaced in the Lamm LL2.1 by that tube's Russian equivalent, the 6H23, which some enthusiasts seem to prefer.

—Art Dudley

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low-output MC cartridges see not only an additional 19.75dB of gain but also a set of loading characteristics that are, in my opinion, altogether *better* than those offered by the typical active device sans transformer.

Each channel of the LP2 uses two 5842 miniature triodes: a distinctively sensitive tube made by Raytheon as a replacement for the even older Western Electric 417A. I wondered why Vladimir Lamm didn't go all out and equip his phono preamp with NOS Western tubes; as it turns out, owing to the fact that microphonic samples of the 417A and 5842 are fairly common, he's forced to buy in large quantities and hand-select the tubes that his customers will get—an approach that would render the WE version unaffordable in a production item such as this. But Lamm suggests that LP2 owners fortunate enough to find 417A samples they can afford are free to experiment.

In contrast with the LL2.1 preamplifier, the supply rails of the LP2 are fully dual-mono downstream from the rectifier tube—another 6X4—with twin pi filters built with beefier chokes and reservoir capacitors. The filament supply, on the other hand, is more or less identical to the one Lamm uses in his line preamp, with the same solid-state regulator.

Lamm's phono preamp is also strikingly well made: I've never seen a battleship from up close, yet I'm certain that the Lamm LP2 is built like one. In addition to the same construction techniques used in the LL2.1, there's a hefty internal wall in the LP2, presumably to keep the power-supply bits from interfering with the very sensitive signal-path bits. Also, rather than trust such a task to the circuit-board traces, the DC-filtered output signal is carried from the final 5842 stage to the output jacks by a pair of shielded cables. Nice.

It was impossible not to notice the LP2's extraordinary heft: At first, I wondered if the two shipping crates I'd received from Lamm had had their labels transposed, given that the one labeled "LP2" was more than 20 lbs heavier than the one labeled "LL2.1." Yet that, too, proved a function of my review sample's Deluxe status: A thick, heavy damping block was attached to the bottom of its chassis, in an effort to isolate the preamp from various resonances and thus maximize its signal/noise ratio. (The LP2 Deluxe also includes the same sorts of capacitor up-

grades as the LL2.1 Deluxe.)

The Lamm LP2's output impedance is specified as 3.5k ohms: a little on the high side, but nonetheless suggestive of good performance with any well-designed line stage. Input impedances are stated as 47k ohms for MM cartridges and 40 ohms for MCs—but keep in mind that a 40-ohm transformer impedance is not directly comparable with a 40-ohm active stage impedance. (If, for whatever reason, you've come to expect a certain kind of performance from an active device with an impedance number in that neighborhood, you'd be very much mistaken to expect the same thing from a transformer.)

Apart from the LP2's need for a sturdier-than-usual shelf, installation of both products was straightforward, and neither gave me even a hint of trouble. The LP2 and LL2.1 both became moderately warm during use, but not alarmingly so, and both sounded better after being used for at least half an hour, after which their performance remained stable. Neither appeared to invert signal polarity, and both were, indeed, as free from hum and noise as any product I've heard. As to ancillary gear, my phono cartridges included an Ortofon SPU 90th Anniversary, EMT OFD 25, and Grace F-9E; the digital source was a Sony SCD-777ES SACD/CD player; interconnects were Shindo and Audio Note silver; speaker cables were Auditorium 23 copper; the amp of choice was my Shindo Haut-Brion (input impedance: approximately 100k ohms); and speakers were Audio Note AN-E SPe H/E and Quad ESL. Regrettably, I did not have an original LL2 on hand for direct comparison.

Listening to the LL2.1 Deluxe with digital sources did nothing but reinforce my earlier impression of the LL2: Vladimir Lamm's designs are the utterly cleanest-sounding tube electronics I've heard—clean, that is, while still maintaining the organic flow I associate with the best tubed components, and without the steely, mechanical, or overretched qualities I associate with the worst.

Throughout David Crosby's nicely done boxed set, *Voyage* (CDs, Atlantic/Rhino R2 77628), the LL2.1 sounded more open than my Shindo Masseto, with voices pulled farther from the mix and presented with a greater sense of wholeness and body. The Lamm was, quite simply, *cleaner*. For its part, the Shindo sounded more like a tube

component: warmer and more sonically opaque. Less ambiguous was the Shindo's stronger bottom octave, with the electric bass in the intro to "Long Time Gone" pressurizing my room more realistically.

Orchestral music, such as Sir John Barbirolli and the New Philharmonia Orchestra's 1967 recording of Schoenberg's *Pelleas und Melisande* (CD, EMI 3 71492 2), was consistently well played by the Lamm, whose superior openness helped to unravel the dense scoring, and to make clearer the identities of the darker woodwind and brass instruments that Schoenberg favored in his tone poems.

In other words, I daresay no one who has spent time with an LL2 would be surprised at the sound of an LL2.1—but I imagine he or she *would* be delighted.

Adding the Lamm LP2 phono preamp to the mix brought categorically similar changes to the sound of my system. Again, the Lamm was apparently more neutral than the phono section of my Shindo Masseto preamp, with instrumental and vocal timbres sounding clean and right—yet not mechanical or overly dry. Following through with my recent, inexplicable David Crosby kick, I spent a lot of time with his beautifully recorded if musically variable album *If I Could Only Remember My Name . . .* (LP, Atlantic/Classic SD-7203). On "Laughing," the lead vocal is buried too deep in the mix for even the Lamm LP2 to drag Crosby kicking and screaming (and resisting arrest) to the fore, but the LP2 phono preamp did make it *clearer* than the phono section of the Shindo.

Very much on a par with the Shindo Masseto, the Lamm LP2 consistently drew my attention to details of music rather than to mere sound. The way it helped my system play the well-loved version of Elgar's song cycle *Sea Pictures*—with mezzo-soprano Dame Janet Baker, Barbirolli, and the London Symphony (LP, EMI ASD 655)—was wonderful. In the second verse of "Sea-Slumber Song," it caught perfectly well the lovely moment when the French horn doubles the voice, resolving softly away to allow the flutes to swoop upward, seabird-like: sweet. And throughout that number, with its ironic hints of a storm just below the surface, the Lamm made it especially easy to envision the calm presence, the sheer physical reality, of Dame Janet's voice; with the Shindo preamp, the

stage was flatter, spatially. My only regret was that the Lamm didn't do as good a job retrieving the subtle and menacing bass-drum accents through-out: The Shindo was much more responsive to very low sounds.

An interesting aside: As I recently mentioned in these pages, the Shindo Masseto's MC performance can be improved by forgoing its internal step-up transformers in favor of the Hommage T1 transformer (\$4695) from Auditorium 23. The Hommage also improved the sound of the Lamm LP2, but by a narrower margin, indicating that the Jensen transformer specified by Lamm is a very good component, and is expertly matched to its surroundings.

And so it went for a number of weeks: the Lamm combination being consistently a bit more open and explicit and truthful, the Shindo being thicker and more romantic and a little more human, and both doing a lovely job of things. I wish the former had the latter's mono capabilities (albeit on phono only) and compact prettiness, and that the latter had the former's Mute switch and balance-control capabilities. (Interesting that the Lamm combination sells for \$13,280, the Shindo for \$11,500.)

More to the point, I really wish the Shindo had the switchable attenuation of the new Lamm LL2.1, especially since I have yet to hear any volume pot, on any piece of gear, that tracks as well at low settings as it does on high. And if I already owned an LL2, I'm certain I'd feel the same degree of revision-envy.

A couple of years ago, when I owned a pair of Lamm's magnificent and almost peerlessly nuanced ML2.1 mono amplifiers, I came within a clam's whisker of buying a Lamm LL2 preamplifier: It was that good. As it turned out, I changed direction (again!) and went with Shindo separates: differently beautiful animals. Delighted as I remain with my choice, the Lamm LL2.1, especially in tandem with the Lamm LP2 phono preamp, is the rare thing that makes me look back wistfully. What a combination!

Though the price increase, as with all such things, is a drag, it isn't

enough to choke my enthusiasm. And I can say—while acknowledging that most of the playback products I own are best described as things that appeal to special tastes—that the Lamms' kind of neutrality, their soundless sound, is the closest I've heard to a level of performance that would truly and thoroughly satisfy *any* enthusiast. Myself included.

—Art Dudley

Simaudio Moon Evolution P-8 preamplifier

Back in March, I reviewed the Moon Evolution P-7 preamplifier (\$6900) from Canadian manufacturer Simaudio.³ As you can read in the reprint of that review in our free online archives (www.stereophile.com/solidpreamps/simaudio_moon_evolution_p-7_line_preamplifier), I very much enjoyed my time with the P-7: "Beautifully made, beautiful looking, and beautiful sounding, the Moon Evolution P-7 justifiably deserves a Class A recommendation in *Stereophile's* 'Recommended Components.'" I also wrote that I would soon turn my attention to Simaudio's Moon Evolution P-8 dual-chassis preamplifier, but added that, "given how consistently fine the P-7 sounded in my system, it's difficult to imagine how it might improve on what its less expensive sibling has to offer."

Kalman Rubinson reviewed the Moon Evolution P-8 (\$13,500) in November 2006 (see www.stereophile.com/solidpreamps/1106sim) and was much impressed, concluding that it reminded him of Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat: "When the Cat is conversing, or when I use the P-8's controls, either is engaging company. Otherwise, their corporeal representations

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Simaudio Moon Evolution P-8 two-chassis preamp.