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World Premiere

Mystère ca11 Preamplifier

Great three-dimensional soundscape with an abundance of layering.

Review By Anthony Nicosia

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So here we are once more back with a product from Mystère. Those that have read my review of their **pa11 power amplifier** in this same issue of *Enjoy the Music.com* know how taken I was with its attractive looks and powerful clear sound. Now though it was time to look forward to pairing it to its counterpart the ca11 tube preamplifier. My mind can still recall telling Kevin Deal, Mystère's United States Distributor, that doing a double review might be a bit much being that I had a lot on my plate and so therefore only wanted the power amplifier shipped to me. Thankfully he gave me a small nudge to try both if only to see how they sounded. Admittedly it took only a very small bit of encouragement on his part as playing with audio gear makes me quite happy. Full plate or not after having heard this combination of products from Mystère and watching as all who came by left with smiles on their faces plus a song on their lips, made me feel compelled to share this lovely product through a formal review.

Not only was the ca11 enjoyable but the story behind the naming of the company entertaining as well. Not knowing how true this story is, nor planning on doing any research to verify its authenticity, it nevertheless was fun and interesting. On their website under the tab simply labeled "story" you get to see pictures of Stonehenge and to hear the full tale told to you in more detail than mentioned here today. Both the owner's manual and website talk about how around 1500 BC people from the Salisbury Plain in southern England used the famous Stonehenge for mysteriously unknown activities. According to the story recent researchers had found that sounds made in the center of the ring of large stones tended to stay within its parameters so that those outside the circle could not easily hear what was going on inside. This being due in large part to the shape of the surface of the stones facing the inner circle in contrast to the shape of the surface of the stones facing outside the circle.

Powerful acoustical principals created a sense of an almost concert like environment where people within could hear clearly amplified sounds. This isolation of information to those outside lead to a sense of great mystery known only to those with access to the inner most circle. It seems that from a distance people could see an eerie glow from a fire located in the circles center against a background of silence created by the stones. Mystère invites you to join their select inner circle of audiophiles and to enjoy the Mystère series products.

Design Features

The ca11 came very well packed. Thick foam surrounding its inner core with additional multiply layers of sturdy boxes to protect it left me with the distinct impression that the ca11 would arrive safely at my doorstep ready for review. The factory supplies the end user with cotton gloves, for use when it is necessary to touch the tubes themselves (never touch them while they are warm or hot of course) and also for when coming into contact with the classy looking black piano finish of the preamplifier. Your fingers naturally have oil on them and it is best not to use your bare hands to touch any audio tubes. Gazing at the ca11 with its high gloss piano lacquer and its five tubes one is immediately impressed with the companies detail to design. Each preamplifier comes with a matching finished tube cover, with ventilated slots for improved air flow that is included as standard equipment so one does not have to spring extra money to help protect your investment. The cage fits snugly thereby making quite slim the odds one might accidentally bump into it and send it flying to break tubes or scratching that nice high gloss finish. The ca11 uses four 6SN7's and one 5AR4 rectifier tube. They are all Russian in origin and as mentioned in the review of the pa11 amplifier, these particular 6SN7 Chinese tubes are ones I am not only familiar with but actually sought out and bought as an upgrade to those found in my previously owned SET amplifier.

As for the 5AR4, it sports the much desired coke bottle look which many seek and I found quite distinctive looking. I did not experiment with replacing tubes as the factory supplied ones did such a great job. As with the pa11 all the tubes were already installed and one need only remove the Styrofoam surroundings designed to protect it during shipping. On the front faceplate which extends slightly beyond the case are located two matching black knobs, one for selection of the various source components you may choose to attach and the other for volume control. Between the two knobs you will find lettering placed in a semi-circle displaying the name Mystère with a small blue light above it to announce when the ca11 is powered on. In order to start the unit one must only look to the right side panel near the front and to flip that switch upwards.

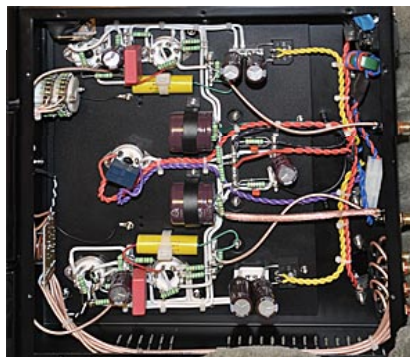
There are ventilation slots galore located on both side plates as well as the bottom plate to aide in dissipating heat. There is no need to spend additional money for isolation devices, as the bottom plate comes with three inverted cones that are already attached with points facing down. On the back plate (also finished in a nice high black gloss as is the entire outside of the ca11 except for its bottom portion) you will find an EIC connector with a fuse holder nestled beneath it. This rear portion also sports two RCA outputs for connection to an amplifier as well as four RCA inputs for attaching to various source materials. Each input is simply labeled 1, 2, 3 or 4 respectfully as is the selector knob on the front panel so one must remember which goes where. A simple feat really after you have set it up. I would use my most often used source as 1 and move upwards to 2, 3 and 4 depending on amount of usage, but that is just me.

It does not offer a remote control and while never a deal breaker would have been nice and worth a little extra if it is ever available as an option. All inputs and outputs are gold plated which is of course another nice touch. Like its matching amplifier the pa11 this ca11 preamplifier comes with a solid rather thick (for factory) 16awg power cord. Underneath there is a sturdy bottom plate. Upon removing this you will see, like with all the Mystère products, that point to point wiring is used as well as rigid copper wire covered with a woven silk tubing for insulation. With the extra room provided by using separate components instead of one integrated design it is easier to layout wires in an effort to prevent interference and crosstalk.



Let the Music Begin

First let me say that placing the pair of products from Mystère side by side on top of my audio cabinet was a joy to behold. Here glowing beautifully in a nice darkened room where thirteen tubes, eight from the pa11 amplifier and five from the ca11 preamplifier. While the true beauty of a product should be measured in its audio performance rather than its physical appearance it is nice to have both together in one package which is what the people at Mystère have done. One of my favorite CD's, YO-YO MA & Friends *Songs of Joy & Peace* [Sony Classical 88697-24414-2] with its many selections of string and wood instruments is something I am especially fond of listening to especially with tube audio gear. Here on the selection "A Christmas Jig/Mouth of the Tobique Reel" one is treated to the playing of YO-YO MA on cello along with Natalie Macmaster on fiddle, J.D. Blair on drums and Marta Cook on the Celtic harp. This is a beautiful combination as the ca11 allows one to differentiate quite easily the sound of each stringed instrument. This quick paced song is given a nice wide soundstage within which to present us with this talented trio of string based musicians.



Here the ca11 allows one to hear details of each instrument within a nice layered texture of tube magic. The cello sounded large and full sized, as it should, yet one was still able to hear inside the instrument as its wooden body resonated from the sound of the bow moving across the strings. Music from the Celtic harp was sharp and clear while the fiddle was quick and light and the presentation of its smaller size in comparison to the cello came across precisely correct. The ca11 expressed the width and depth of the soundscape adding a nice layered effect to the presentation making for a sound that was "alive" and easy to enjoy. I found that again in the song "Here Comes the Sun" performed by James Taylor and written by George Harrison of the Beatles. Not only did the ca11/pa11 combination give depth to the sound of Mr. Taylors guitar but his voice as well was showcased with a nice resonating quality about it.

With tubes glowing brightly, in the background of my room, the ca11 breathed life into the cello of YO-YO-MA allowing the emotional content of the song to blossom. As for its ability to project accurate layering one need only listen to "Invitation al Danzon" with cello (YO-YO MA), clarinet (Paquito D'Rivera) and piano (Alon Yavna) all coming together without the aide of any vocal accompaniment. With this each instrument is properly layered within the soundscape, one on top of the other while still quite staying distinctly separate from one another. Here the piano took on a realistic proportion in respect to depth and height while the strings of the cello could be heard to vibrate with music. The high pitched sound coming from that beautiful wooden clarinet hung nicely in the air never sound etched or shrill. The ca11 clearly had a knack for making music sound natural and alive.

So far the Mystère ca11 has performed very well with string instruments and solo vocal content. Now it was time to mix it up a bit with something completely different, Jimi Hendrix. I can still clearly see myself back at Woodstock in 1969 hearing him play "The Star Spangled Banner" which is now on the CD, *The Essential Jimi Hendrix Volume One and Two* [Reprise 9 26035-2]. To me it was not that this was such a great song but rather just different and rebellious, like the nature of the 60's itself. I was unsure if the ca11 could keep up with Jimi Hendrix playing this rather "wild" sounding piece as I hoped it would be just as fantastic as that day back in the summer of 1969. Well ,maybe I am asking a bit much at that yet at least let us see if we can get a semblance to the feeling many of us felt upon hearing this song for the very first time.

It was now time to crank up the volume to right around two o'clock and to let loose the pa11 amplifier to be guided by the ca11 controller. You know what, it did very well. The sound of all that reverberation coupled with the long decay of notes as the sound of one cord overlapped the sound of the other was pulled off nicely by the ca11. Now nothing is going to sound the same as any original performance but it got things pretty right, not too slow but with just the right tempo to keep things moving along helped in presenting a realistic resemblance to the original. What surprised me was with the song "Purple Haze" where the ca11 showed me some deep bass response. Usually one thinks of tube gear with mostly midrange magic but this little preamplifier did just fine down low.



Time to put on a little easy listening music in the form of the CD from Janis lans, *Breaking Silence* [Morgan Creek 2959-20023-2]. My Placette passive preamplifier, using lots of Vishay resistors, while sounding very detailed can come across to me as being a little too dry sounding on some selections. With the Mystère ca11 things took on a more romantic sound like one would want and expect from tube gear. Music though was never syrupy and in fact had a surprisingly good amount of detail to it. The nice relaxing way it presented music was a great balancing act that it never failed to do well. On "All roads to the river" vocal content appeared quite detailed as one could hear the subtleness of breathing as well as the sound of the trailing off of various letters such as T's and S's at the end of words. Yet while doing so the ca11 still retained that smooth easy feeling with Janis lan's performance.

With "Tattoo" images were clearly defined within the soundscape, displaying proper height and location, as the quickness of the guitar complimented her softly compelling voice. The bass playing of Chat Watson on "Guess You had to be there" vibrated with authority as its strings resonated with correct timbre. Turn up the volume and you get that in your chest type of feeling, while still remaining clear and controlled. Now for one of my favorite CD's performed by Andrea Bocelli, *Verdi* [Philips B0001292-19] on DVD-Audio, during "Di quellapire Il trovatore". Here the ca11 did a good job of filling my room with his magnificent voice as the chorus behind and the orchestra surrounding him yielded a great 3-dimensional effect thus displaying the layering prowess of the preamplifier. Even when played loud enough to borderline being a little uncomfortable the ca11 enriched the experience of his elegant tenor voice as it came on full force rising above the orchestra and background chorus.

Before wrapping up this review with my conclusions one more CD remained to be heard, *The Romantic Violin* [Digital Stereo HCD-2-3702]. Listening to Ludwig Van Beethovens "Violin Concerto in D major op. 61 was quite relaxing as both horn and violin sections sounded good in the upper frequency regions, not coming off as either sterile or too sharp. When needed the pa11 (amplifier) and ca11 (preamplifier) could quickly display their dynamic tendencies moving swiftly from soft to loud passages with apparent ease. Definitely a good combination of equipment that works very well together.

Conclusions

It must be said that the ca11 preamplifier from Mystère is not only beautiful but also did not disappoint when it came to delivering the sonic goods. In this price range there are a lot of preamplifier's yet none I knew could embarrass the ca11 as it definitely held its head high above water amidst a group of worthy contenders from around the globe. At this price it is a recommended must listen for those wanting a tube component in your audio system. Running through different types of music from classical, easy listening, rock & roll, various stringed ensembles and vocals the ca11 always came away a winner. It is worth mentioning that when coupled along with Mysteres own pa11 amplifier, the combination together was greater than each individually and therefore recommended to purchase as a single unit.

At first I thought that mixing both together might risk a sound that was perhaps a little overly romantic but actually it turned out to be a winning combination. Their coupling instead gave a "live" effect to CD after CD by adding a layer of detail and new insight into each new musical passage it presented me with. They also surprised me with the amount of lower bass response produced with this pair of tube components. Buy the ca11 along with the pa11 and join the group of happy audiophiles worldwide who have discovered the joy of owning tube gear. Equipped with quality tubes, a tube cage, plenty of ventilation slots, isolation support for under the chassis, a sturdy factory power cord, gold inputs, an attractive appearance and high quality parts throughout, the Mystère ca11 shines as an example of a manufacturer hitting a price point and exceeding our expectations beyond that particular price barrier. Both the ca11 and pa11 change the vision of tube gear being ancient technology and too complicated, reserved only for those "in the know". Mystère takes the mystery out of owning tube gear and brings the joy back in listening to music.

The Listening Environment



The review room is eighteen feet eight inches long by thirteen feet wide with the loudspeakers and equipment kept on the short wall. The cathedral ceiling starts at eight feet and slops up-wards to thirteen feet at its peak in the middle spanning across the short length of the room for the full thirteen feet width. The hardwood floor has a nine by six foot oriental rug lying down the long ways facing toward the system placed dead center in between, yet not under, the listener and the review equipment. The room has no doors but there are two openings. One opening is in front of the right loudspeaker giving access to the hallway while the other is behind the listening position which opens to a formal dining area. The room is treated with three floor standing acoustical panels, one behind each loudspeaker and one in front of the fireplace (although I have been known to move them), while all audio equipment is located in a Cherry Synergy Twin S30 Salamander audio rack against and in the middle of the short wall. I have two power conditioners which plug into a PS Audio Power Port receptacle located behind the audio rack. I also use two Blue Circle Audio MKIII Power Line Pillows one on each of two outlets on the long walls next to and behind each loudspeaker. The loudspeakers are located about six feet seven inches from the rear wall measured to their front panel and twenty one inches from the rooms side walls to the middle of their front panels. The loudspeakers are placed twelve feet apart forming a triangle with the listening position that is also angled at twelve feet from the center of the front of each loudspeaker to the center of the listening position. In the corner of each short wall behind them are a pair of Klipsch Klipschorn loudspeakers which are also sometimes used when reviewing audio gear. If the Klipsch loudspeakers are in use I would then reposition the three acoustical panels to slightly behind the listening position one to the left, the other to the right with the third being placed in the opening leading to the hallway just right of the right loudspeaker.

Review Equipment

Mystère pa11 Amplifier
 Loudspeakers: Legacy Focus 20/20
 Samsung HD-841 CD/SACD/DVD Audio universal player
 Acoustic Revive RPT-2 Ultimate Power Distributor with Mr. Cable "Musician power cord"
 PS Audio power port receptacle
 Two Blue Circle Audio Mk III power line conditioners
 Interconnects: Cardas Musician's Reference
 Loudspeaker cables: Kimber Kable 4TC with matching jumper cables
 Cherry Synergy Twin S30 Salamander audio rack

My Ratings

Please take into consideration that the equipment under review is being measured in my room, with my equipment and heard through my ears. As always you should be the final judge as to what works for you in your environment and measured against what traits you value most. The following was how I rated the equipment based on a rating system that does not take in to consideration the cost of the product, until the very last question, "Value For The Money". Before that all products are rated against others in its category, regardless of financial considerations with a highest rating of 5.

Tonality	
Sub-bass (10Hz - 60Hz)	
Mid-bass (80Hz - 200Hz)	
Midrange (200Hz - 3,000Hz)	
High Frequencies (3,000Hz On Up)	
Attack	
Decay	
Inner Resolution	
Soundscape Width Front	
Soundscape Width Rear	
Soundscape Depth Behind Speakers	
Soundscape Extension Into Room	
Imaging	
Fit And Finish	
Self Noise	
Value For The Money	

Specifications

Type: Vacuum tube stereo preamplifier
 Frequency Response: 8 Hz to 200 kHz
 Noise: 104dB
 Gain: 9x = 19dB
 Distortion: 0.05% @ 100mV output, 0.12% @ 1V output
 Input Impedance: 150 kOhm
 Output Impedance: 592 Ohm
 Crosstalk: -94dB
 Weight: 33 lbs.
 Dimensions 320 x 370 x 200mm (LxWxH)
 Warranty: Two years parts and labor, six months tubes
 Price: \$1795

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