

Mark Levinson N°523/N°534

They may typify Stateside heavy-metal hi-fi, but this pre/power amplifier from one of the high-end's best-known names is really all about simplicity and directness

Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Depending on your point of view, what you see before you are either objects of absolute hi-fi aspiration or a symbol of everything that's wrong with high-end audio in the 21st century. Along with compatriot Krell, Mark Levinson is one of those names that's likely to be known even by those with only a passing interest in hi-fi and – though the marque has undergone several twists and turns in its near-50-year history [see boxout, p41] – it remains one of the best-known in the audio business.

Big, heavy and undeniably purposeful-looking they may be, but the £16k N°523 preamp and £21k N°534 power amplifier are far from the priciest examples of their kind in the company's range. What's more, anyone expecting those still very appreciable price-tags to bring plenty of complexity in features and facilities is going to be disappointed: what your money gets you is a combination of solid audio engineering and 'less is more' thinking.

THE PURE PATH

And that plays into the hands of those who'd have you believe that hi-fi these days should be all about simple computer components and high-efficiency amplification wrapped in compact boxes that you can hide away in the most bijoux of rooms. Although these are up-to-the-minute designs from the company's dedicated development unit in Shelton, Connecticut, they are resolutely old-school in their thinking, even to the extent of the N°523 being an all-analogue design, with not a sniff of a DAC board or streaming module in sight.

It's not that Mark Levinson doesn't do digital, even if one of its more notable launches of late has been the N°515 turntable [HFN Oct '17], developed in association with VPI and rolled out last

year to celebrate the company's 45th anniversary. But it also has the N°519 CD/network player/DAC [HFN Jul '17], while the N°526 preamplifier [HFN Dec '16] has the company's 'Precision Link' DAC built-in and 'computer audio' capability, as do the N°585 [HFN Apr '15] and very new 585.5 (with phono) integrated amplifiers.

However, what the N°523 aims for is the simplicity of the mighty two-box N°52 preamp [HFN May '14] – yours for £31,500 – but at around half the price. It's a preamplifier dedicated to analogue audio sources, with both three sets of RCA and two pairs of XLR inputs, plus a built-in phono stage. Like the rest of the preamp, this phono section – which offers user-selectable gain, loading settings and an infrasonic filter, is built on the company's Pure Path principle, which adopts discrete components

throughout its direct-coupled, fully balanced, dual-monaural signal path.

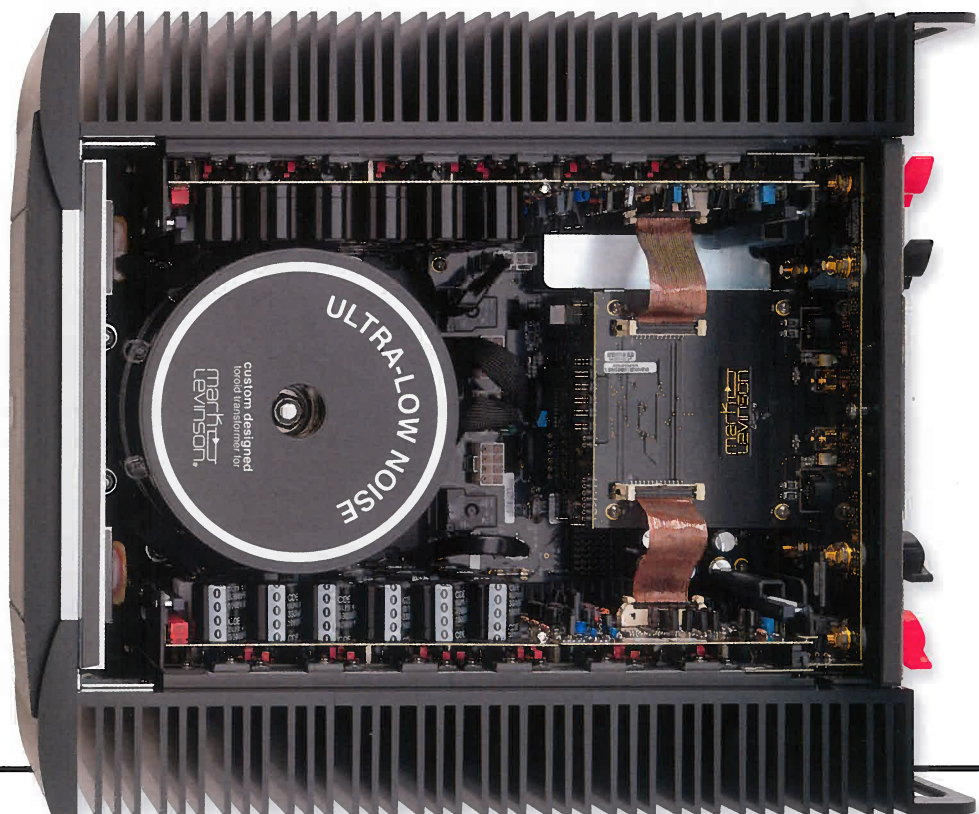
ON WITH THE GLOVES

The volume control here is of a resistor-ladder design, digitally controlled but fully analogue in its implementation, and while the amplifier does have both USB and

Ethernet connectivity, these are for firmware updates and third-party control, not for audio use. On the output side there's the usual choice of balanced XLRs and single-ended RCA phonos, the

positioning of the left and right channel sockets at opposite ends of the rear panel emphasising that dual-mono layout. The outputs can be independently set as full-range or with a high-pass filter – so you could connect a power amp via the XLRs and use the RCAs to connect a subwoofer.

'Its combination of grip, grunt and finesse is entirely spine-tingling'



RIGHT: Massive 1800VA toroidal transformer is at the heart of a PSU that drives two fully symmetrical (balanced) Class AB amp modules, each hosting 12 high-current transistors. Temp reaches a warm 45°C across the finned heatsink



The partnering N°534 power amp is in essence a stereo version of the N°536 [HFN Sep '16], and represents a healthy saving over the price of a pair of these monoblocks – £21k vs. £32k – but with no shortage of ability when it comes to driving and controlling even the most recalcitrant of speakers [see PM's Lab Report, p43]. Its 56kg mass and rather sharp heatsink fins are sufficient to have you heeding the warnings in the manual that this is emphatically a two-person lift, and 'Knit gloves with special gripping surfaces on the palms and fingers' are included with the amplifier. 'Wear these gloves when

lifting' says the booklet. The provision of a strap under the amp to aid taking it from its box is also appreciated.

HURRICANE WINGS

Again there are the same control ports on the power amp, along with unbalanced and XLR inputs, and the speaker outputs are on two pairs of Mark Levinson's 'Hurricane' terminals, with 'wings' to make them easy to tighten should you be using spade connectors. And inside? Well, our 'lid off' shot [p40] more or less tells the whole story: the N°534 is built around a massive toroidal transformer – which shouts on

ABOVE: Sharing the elegant industrial design of the N°526, the N°523 [top] is also menu-driven but features phono and analogue line-ins only (no digital). The massive N°534 amp [below] is a stereo version of the N°536 monoblock

its top-plate that it's an 'Ultra-Low Noise' design – mounted centre front, and of an entirely dual-mono construction with those amp boards, plus 12 power transistors a side mounted straight onto the heatsinks, to the left and right of the housing. While other amps stick to aluminium for their casework, the N°534 supplements it with cold-rolled steel. You know: just in case it wasn't already weighty enough...



UNSTOPPABLE POWER

How does this Mark Levinson N°523/N°534 pre/power duo sound? Well, let's put it this way – this combination could only appear more purposeful were the power amp to be fitted with a pair of chromed smokestacks, complete with pop-up lids, which belched plumes of black smoke when it was thundering out a bass line!

That's how unstoppably powerful this pre/power amp is whenever required, with rock-solid bass reaching deep and ripe, yet above it a remarkable agile midband and treble that makes a wide range of musical styles spring to life in totally vivid manner. 'Unflappable' doesn't really cover it. In ☞

A SAMSUNG BRAND

The Mark Levinson brand has been through several hands since it was founded in 1972, including a period in the 1980s when the founder lost the use of his own name! It has been part of Harman International since 1990, and came under Samsung ownership in a deal completed last year [HFN Jan '17]. Todd Eichenbaum, Harman's Luxury Audio division Director of Engineering, has been designing Mark Levinson products for some years, and says that 'From my perspective, there has been no change in the day-to-day, both Samsung and Harman automotive groups recognising the importance of maintaining our "halo" brands'. He adds 'There are plans to incorporate the AKG name and some of its related technologies into Samsung-branded products'. But he confirms that, for now, none of Mark Levinson's R&D is being trickled through into other Samsung ranges. Indeed, 'with the completion and successful launches of eight new N°500-series products – all featured in HFN – the Mark Levinson engineering group has been very hard at work on the next big thing. Stay tuned!'

LAB REPORT

MARK LEVINSON N°523/N°534

The N°534 power amp is sufficiently richly biased to raise that substantial 56kg casework to 45°C in various (heatsink) hotspots. It's also more powerful than the 250W/8ohm rating suggests at 300/8ohm and 550W/4ohm, and has headroom for 335W, 638W and 1245W under dynamic conditions into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads [see Graph 1, below]. Short-circuit protection limits its output into 1ohm loads to 480W. Meanwhile, although the N°534 uses the same amplifier 'module' as the N°536 monoblock [HFN Sep '16] the bridged/balanced topology of the latter confers a different distortion 'fingerprint'.

ML's specifications do not acknowledge this difference and so both the N°536 and N°534 are presented with the same response (10Hz–20kHz, ± 0.2 dB), gain (+26dB), S/N ratio (>85dB) and distortion (<0.3% to rated output). In practice the N°534 has a slightly more pronounced HF roll-off (–0.2dB vs. 0.0dB/20kHz), a lower gain (+24.6dB vs. +25.6dB), and slightly lower, but still fabulous, A-wtd S/N ratio (95.7dB vs. 98.7dB re. 0dBV). The differences in THD are more telling: while the N°536 offers a reasonably consistent 0.0025–0.01% over its 400W bandwidth (at 1kHz), the N°534's THD increases steadily from 0.0035%/1W, 0.016%/10W, 0.035%/100W and 0.06%/250W. Versus frequency, the N°536 and N°534's patterns are very similar, however, and reassuringly 'flat' through the majority of the audioband [red trace, Graph 2]. Distortion via the partnering N°523 preamp is far lower still at ~0.0001–0.0004% from 20Hz–20kHz [black trace, Graph 2] while the A-wtd S/N is impressive at 97.1dB (re. 0dBV). Maximum output is 21V (balanced), full gain is +13.5dB and the response flat from 3Hz–100kHz (+0.0/–0.3dB). PM



ABOVE: The preamp (top) offers five line inputs (three on RCA, two balanced on XLR) and one MM/MC phono input, plus line outputs on RCA and XLR. The power amp (below) has 'hurricane' cable binding posts that support bi-wiring. Single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) inputs are joined by Ethernet, RS232 and 12V system triggers

practice the Levinson duo always sounds not just in its comfort zone, but as if it's saying 'That all you got?'. However hard you think you're pushing it, whether with the choice of music or the levels you select, you're really only ever at First Base Camp of the abilities here.

EASY TO LIVE WITH

That's as true when you're playing the full-on weight of Gov't Mule's live *The Deepest End* [Evangeline/ATO Records; GELD 4070] – which is a total low-frequency-fest complete with a starry roster of guest bassists – or unleashing the Wagnerian power of Friedman Dressler's *The Symphonic Ring* [Acousence Classics; ACO-CD21309; 192kHz/24-bit].

The latter, also a live recording, delivers the sensational dynamics and drama of the Duisburg Philharmonic Orchestra under Jonathan Darlington in a really visceral manner, and when you combine that with the N°523/N°534's remarkable combination of grip, grunt and finesse the result is entirely spine-tingling.

Yes, this duo will do polite when you want, and works as well with a small jazz trio as it does with solo piano, or even those wispy singer-songwriter recordings displaying just a little too much earnestness for their own good...

If there's a criticism, it's a small one: those who like their music lush and tamed may find they're just a bit too keen to deliver all the information they're given with equal force, which can make them sound

a little brash with some overly lively speakers. However, where they really excel is with music that's built on a foundation of thunder and serious atmosphere. They charge into the final few tracks of Fleetwood Mac's *The Dance* [Reprise 9362-46702-2], turning on the big smiles when the USC Marching Band kick in on 'Tusk', the blare of the brass shooting through the great big gorgeous rich mix of this track and its successor 'Don't Stop'.

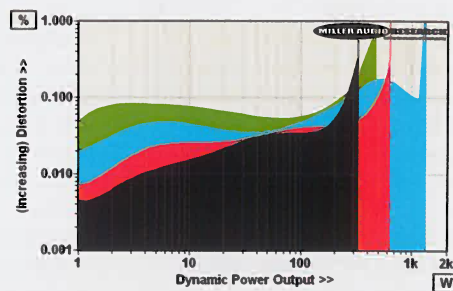
Even after several runs at that, the heatsinks of the N°534 were only warmish to the touch. So this is a well-mannered powerhouse, as easy to live with as it isn't to lug from the packaging, partnered with a preamp fully able to deliver the music in a manner that's sympathetic to the N°534 doing its stuff. And that 'stuff', I'm bound to say, is really rather addictive. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

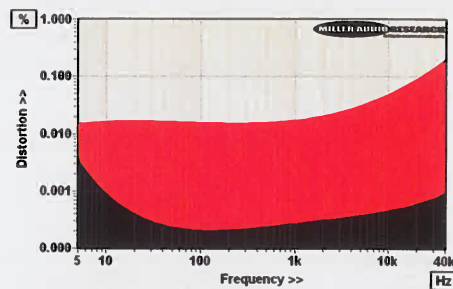
Overkill for many systems, but this amplifier combination is resolutely old school in its styling and sheer mass, rewarding those able to accommodate it with a sound as revealing as it is room-shaking. It's no great surprise that Mark Levinson amps are still on many a wish-list, with enviable kudos – you only have to hear the N°523 and N°534 pre/power to realise that its hard-won reputation is in very safe hands.

Sound Quality: 86%

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ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 25.0A



ABOVE: THD vs. extended freq for N°523 preamp (1V out, black trace) vs. N°534 amplifier (10W/8ohm, red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Continuous power (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	297W / 550W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	335W / 638W / 1245W / 480W
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	74ohm / 0.040–0.048ohm
Freq. resp. (20Hz–100kHz, pre/power)	+0.0 to –0.3dB / +0.0 to –2.7dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBV/0dBW)	211mV (pre) / 165mV (power)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV/0dBW)	97.1dB (pre) / 95.7dB (power)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 1V/10W)	0.0001–0.0004% / 0.016–0.090%
Power consump. (pre/idle/rated o/p)	58W / 315W/975W
Dimensions (WHD, Pre/Power)	438x102x457/451x197x508mm