

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Mark Levinson No.585, Vienna Acoustics Liszt, Chord Co. Sarum T

By Roy Gregory

Hi-fi, just like any other arcane (and borderline obsessive) activity has generated its own set of 'rules'. One that pretty much everybody seems to agree on is that the shortest route to sonic suicide is to assemble a system consisting entirely of the latest and greatest. Yet, look at the cast list for this system and you could be forgiven for assuming (admittedly within the context of our own reviews) that this is almost exactly what we've done.

Mark Levinson's No.585 is only the company's second-ever integrated amp. It steps straight into the shoes of the much-loved and highly respected No.383, a product that enjoyed a lifespan of over ten years, and remained a capable and competitive performer until the day it was withdrawn. Where a lot of companies have looked at reducing product dimensions, often by resorting to Class D output stages, MLAS have headed in the opposite direction. The 585 is an

inch taller, an inch deeper and, at 200 Watts Class AB watts per channel, boasts twice the output of its predecessor. At 72lbs it is also around 15% heavier than the 383 it replaces and, if it's lost one of the 383's balanced analogue inputs, it's gained a sextet of digital inputs instead, including the currently all-important USB. That's ten inputs in all, with three single-ended and one balanced analogue connection, two S/PDIF (RCA), an AES/EBU and two TOSLink as well as the USB – and believe me, those digital inputs are a big, big part of the 585's impressive performance.

Putting a DAC inside an integrated amp might seem like a good idea, but it's remarkable how seldom it works, with one half of the partnership seemingly, inevitably upsetting the other, so you either end up with an underperforming DAC or an uncomfortable amp. The Levinson is the rare exceptions to that rule – and how – but as we'll see that's something of a theme with this particular system. ▶



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► Which brings us to Vienna Acoustics’ Liszt, one of a series of recent speaker releases that have both redefined what’s possible for £10K and made it one of the most hotly contested price-points in the speaker market. The striking, slim, and beautifully finished Liszt is very much the conceptual, functional, and aesthetic offspring of the company’s flagship The Music, a speaker that is itself a considerable bargain when compared to the pricier and way-less pretty competition. The junior model shares the overall format, fit, finish, in-house drivers, and remarkable attention to detail of the flagship, at less than half the price. What you lose is a little sophistication in geometric adjustment and a lot of physical volume: what you keep

is most of the bandwidth, as well as the same standout, unobtrusive neutrality, and sheer musical integrity. So great looking, with superb performance and domestically unobtrusive, the Liszt might as well have Best Buy carved on its baffle – except that would mar the beautiful piano finish.

The third element in this stellar, three-box, ‘source-plus’ system solution is the least obvious, but in some ways the most remarkable. Cables get a pretty rough time and the higher the price the denser the flak. Chord’s Sarum cables have long represented the sensible face of the silly cable spectrum. They are far from cheap, but they’ve always stood shoulder to shoulder with cables at two or three times ►





▶ the price. Except that now – and very much in the same spirit of ‘trickle down’ that informs the other components in this system – they’ve received a major material and performance boost in the shape of Tylon insulation, previously only (and by “only” I do mean ONLY) present in Chord’s flagship CHORDmusic cables. Nobody else uses this ultra hi-tech, high-performance (and high-priced) dielectric, with its claim of superior, zero phase shift characteristics – at least not in audio circles. Precision guided weapons are of course, another thing altogether. Sarum T looks set to raise the bar in this ultra-competitive sector of the cable market – and not by a little.

When it comes to the pairing of components and the construction of systems, it’s never long before the notion of product ‘synergy’ raises its head, as if putting systems together is a magical mix of proscribed knowledge and the dark arts. In fact, rather than being a case of creating a whole that’s somehow greater than the sum of its parts, great systems are simply the result of putting pieces together that don’t hinder each other, instead allowing each one to give of its best. It’s all a question of understanding the internal workings, the relationships between the various parts, their true nature, what they need, and the demands they place on each other. The problem is, that’s exactly what the marketing smoke and mirrors so often set out to blur and obscure. So here we have three best buys; three genuine trickle-down contenders and a trio of products that collectively tempt with their top-notch status, their heritage, unique technology, and the promise of genuine high-end performance at (almost) affordable prices. It’s a heady cocktail, but the real question is, for all the hoopla, the metaphorical shaking, and pink umbrellas, do they deliver the subtly seductive musical intoxication of perfectly blended ingredients – or does it all fall a bit flat?

In many ways the core ingredient in this system is the Mark Levinson 585 integrated amplifier. Not only does it offer a range of analogue and digital inputs to satisfy virtually any need, there’s the tantalizing prospect of an internal phono-

option to come. Tantalizing because, if the sheer quality of the internal DAC’s performance is anything to go by, MLAS have actually achieved the undiluted incorporation of their impressive top-end digital technology into a one-box, do it all amplifier. Levinson’s DACs have always offered amongst the most musical of digital reproductions and the 585’s internal unit is no different. It delivers a sound that is spatially, dynamically, and musically coherent – warm and inviting with tremendous presence and impact when required, but with a beguiling intimacy and delicacy, too. Hooking it up to the digital output of several serious one-box CD players and comparing that to their analogue outputs quickly established its superiority to all but the best standalone DACs – and that’s before you factor in the amplifier itself.

Reputedly, beefy integrateds are ten a penny these days. Do-it-all amplifiers loaded with digital inputs are even more common, but a genuinely big, unquestionably beefy amplifier that really does it all and does it all really well – now that’s a rare beast. If that was all the 585 offered it would still be a steal. But the Levinson integrated has another trick up its ▶



▶ sleeve – one that makes it very special indeed. Are there better sounding amps than the 585? Yes there are – but they are all, without exception more expensive and much more demanding (or fussy) when it comes to set up and partnering equipment, especially cables and speakers. In stark contrast, you can hook up the 585 with anything and everything and it never, ever sounds less than engaging, unflappable, and yes, downright fun! You remember fun: well, you will as soon as you start using the 585. This is a genuinely powerful and musically authoritative amp – and it likes nothing more than delivering that power, no matter what the situation, the source, or the speakers.

Talking of speakers, it's time to factor in Vienna Acoustics' contribution to the party. The Liszt is carefully considered and beautifully built, but in this day and age, it is seriously unusual in that it trades sensitivity for bandwidth. This speaker goes deep: much deeper than you expect – which in turn makes it very critical of placement and demanding of power. Fortunately, a large part of what makes the Liszt so impressive is the amount of thought that's gone into optimizing its set-up and interaction with the room. Throw in the 585's absurdly generous power delivery and ability to control a speaker's bottom end, and you've got the perfect recipe for serious scale and musical impact in a whole range of different rooms.

But as impressive a pairing as the 585/Liszt combination so obviously is, the addition of Sarum T cables raises the system performance to another level entirely. Of course, cables can't improve your system – they can only damage and diminish its performance. The question is how much damage they do to the fragile patterns and relationships that make up music and make up a great performance? CHORDmusic, the original Teylon cable, was notable for its utterly effortless and seamless continuity, both top to bottom and in temporal terms. It simply made other, comparably priced cables sound

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constricted, disjointed, clumsy and musically constipated – to such a degree that it offers a stern challenge to all comers, irrespective of price. Well, it turns out that Sarum T has inherited that character in full.

This cable really lets the signal breathe, pushing the musical performance to the fore and the system itself well into the background. So, the bigger the system's performance envelope the more effectively it is able to disappear – and this system has a big envelope, both in terms of bandwidth and dynamic headroom: big is no problem, loud is no sweat. In fact, the presentation is so open, the tonality so natural and devoid of edge or harshness, and the dynamics so uninhibited and engaging that it likes nothing better than to have its volume control well advanced. Unlike a lot of systems, you don't have to play this one loud, but boy are you going to get full value when you do. ▶



► Circumstances conspired to underline just how big a contribution the cables were making. Sarum T is new – so new that this system required the gathering up of all the existing product and the rapid manufacturing of some more. This meant I started off with a complete set of Chord’s next model down, the established and well-regarded Signature which served for a week or so as the system settled down and warmed up. The sound was comfortably familiar, impressively, big, bold, and fun. All of which made the transformation wrought by the arrival of the Sarum T all the more astonishing. A single example will suffice...

Around the same time that I put the original set-up together, the *La La Land* soundtrack [Interscope] dropped through the letter box, meaning that not only was it used for the burn in process, allowing me to hear how the system’s performance evolved, I’d only heard the disc on this system. Verdict? A nice enough recording, but a bit veiled, thin, and lacking presence and colour: pretty much par for the course for a modern CD. Emma Stone’s voice has been widely criticised as weak and you could certainly hear why – until I inserted the Sarum T! It wasn’t just like hearing a different recording, it was like swapping from a mediocre CD to a really good vinyl record: life, dynamic impact, presence, immediacy, tonal, and dynamic range – the whole thing just came to life. Stone’s voice is NOT weak – at least not on this showing. The dance numbers gained jump, pace, and drive; the band sounded like a much bigger and better band; the whole performance sounded more natural, more human, and way more engaging. The good news is that their hand-built nature means that original Sarum interconnect, digital, and power cables can be rebuilt to full Sarum T spec for around 45% of the price of the new cable. That’s not just unusual: once you hear the difference, that’s a slam-dunk.

Taking the system as a whole, I can reel off a laundry list of sonic attributes, from its dimensionality and a soundstage that’s expansive but not overblown, to its remarkable tonal differentiation, and the intimacy of its vocal delivery, its deep, powerful yet tuneful bass, and natural instrumental textures – but none of that is really the point. Time and again, playing familiar recordings, I was astonished just how readily this system fastened on and projected the quality, the sense

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Mark Levinson No.585 Amplifier: £10,500

UK Distributor: Karma AV

URL: www.karma-av.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1423 358846

Vienna Acoustics Liszt Loudspeaker: £10,999 per pair

UK Distributor: Audiofreaks

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)20 8948 4153

The Chord Co. Sarum T Cables

1m Interconnects (RCA): £2,100

3m Speaker cables: £3,600

1.5m Power cable: £2,400

Manufacturer: The Chord Company

URL: www.chord.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)1980 625700

of purpose, humanity, and common cause that drove the performers captured on the disc. It’s an object lesson in what happens when you take an excellent set of electronics and an equally accomplished set of speakers – and then wire them up with a product that eliminates a major error mechanism, one which afflicts most other set ups. The Chord Company’s Tylon cables demonstrate emphatically just how much damage most other cables (even pretty good ones – even their own) can do. That realization is far from pretty. Sarum T is a product that demands to be heard, by cable sceptics and advocates alike. In fact, I’d go further than that – this is a system that demands to be heard. It serves as a timely reminder of just how musically arresting and how thoroughly enjoyable great hi-fi can be. Really good systems have an all-embracing, “can-do” quality. This one goes beyond that: it’s a “will-do” system: a system that will do the business whatever you feed it – big, bold, small, or intimate. Sit back and enjoy the ride – it’s quite a trip! +