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IS THE MARK LEVINSON 585
THE BEST INTEGRATED AMP EVER?



Mark Levinson Audio Systems No. 585 Integrated Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

What's more common than high-priced, heavyweight, high-end integrated amps? High-priced, heavyweight, high-end integrated amps that incorporate an internal DAC. You can argue about who was the first to offer a high-end integrated amplifier, aiming to offer the performance and advantages of (and thus monetise) their high-end brand identity at more approachable prices. If you really wanted to get archaeological on the subject one might brandish names like Lentek, but for me, the first company that actually made the concept work was Mark Levinson with their No. 383. It wasn't the first to market, but it was the first such product that embodied both the superb ergonomics and build quality of the flagship products with more than a slice of their musical qualities too. The fact that it still holds its own today is no mean feat and rather proves the point.

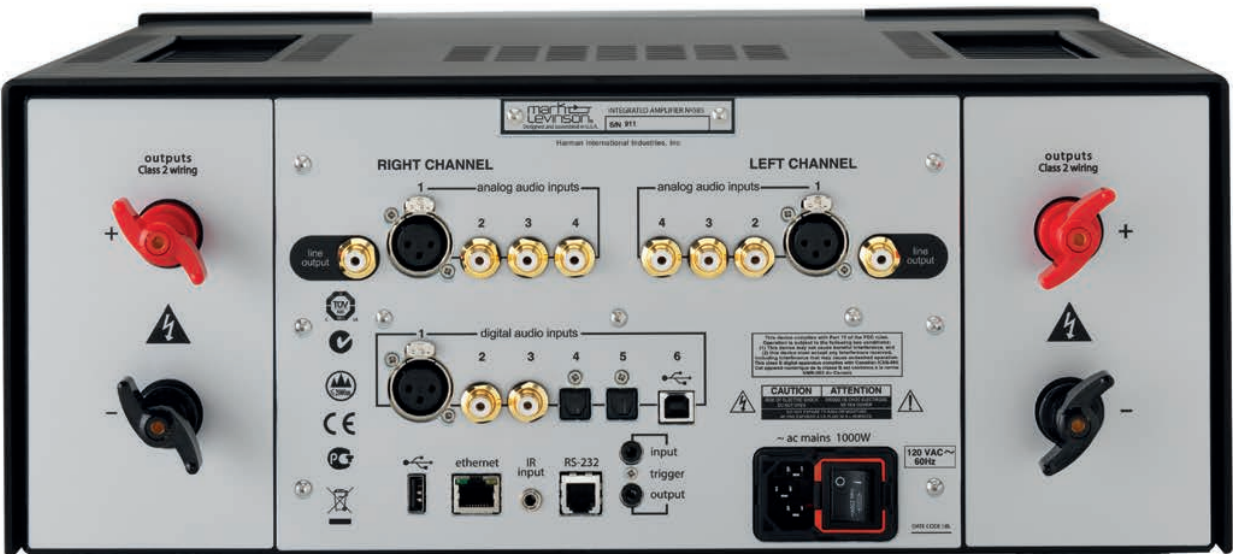
They say that history repeats itself and in this case, they're definitely right. Just as MLAS were far from first to the high-end integrated party, they've been pretty slow off the mark when it comes to the digital integrated market too, but once again, they've nailed it. Of course, that terminology – digital integrated – covers a lot of technological real estate and since the 383's hay-day we've seen the rise and rise of Class D amplification that offers huge amounts of cool-running power from diminutive dimensions. But by now you'll have gathered that I'm far from impressed with the vast majority of 'digital integrations' and the seemingly ubiquitous use of Class D, hybrid Class D, pseudo Class D, and every other kind of clever, not quite Class D you've ever come across has a lot to do with that. The archetypical example is the Devialet, a product that embodies everything good and bad with the whole concept – from its compact dimensions, stylish exterior, and multi-room, multi input versatility to its pan flat dynamic range and fractured temporal domain.

In many ways the £10,500 Levinson 585 is both a contrast and a direct response to products like the Devialet. Traditionally beefy, its substantial casework houses a classic fully differential, load tolerant, high-current Class AB output stage that will happily pump 200 watts into an 8 ohm load

(twice the rated output of its predecessor), while its 33kg dead-weight will come as a distinctly unpleasant shock to Class D fans. This amplifier looks and feels like it means business and that's something that carries over to both its connectivity and, as you'll see (and hear), its sound. As well as one balanced and three single-ended analogue inputs, the 585 offers six digital inputs (asynchronous USB, two Toslink optical, two S/PDIF on RCA, and, thank the Lord, AES/EBU). Each output can be named and have its level set. The analogue inputs can each be configured for use with a surround sound processor, while you can choose the PCM filter characteristics for each of the digital inputs as well as whether or not to apply Harman's proprietary Clari-Fi circuitry, designed to restore dynamic range to compressed file formats like MP3. There's also a set of outputs (on single-ended RCAs) that can be set as fixed, variable, or pre-out (power-amp disabled). Finally, there's a high-pass option on the main speaker connections, for use in systems with a sub-woofer.

But the real clincher here is not the sheer range of options, but the ease with which you can access and control them. When the 383 first appeared back at the turn of the century, it embodied the state-of-the-art user interface and menu system from the Levinson Reference products. Super intuitive and incredibly straightforward, it has yet to be bettered, and in a world where systems are starting to seriously resemble computers, with all the opaque operational complexity and software glitches that implies, you can imagine how pleased I was to discover that the 585 has inherited the 383's control logic lock, stock, and barrel. Throw in a display that's big enough and clear enough to read from across the room and that can be dimmed or set to switch off after ten seconds, and you have pretty much the perfect interface. You can even define how quickly the volume control responds to input...

The rear panel is the same model of clarity, with well-spaced and clearly labelled connections on a silver panel that makes things easy to read; even upside down in the back of a rack. One welcome change is that the wings on Harman's butterfly binding posts have been profiled to accept thicker spades, while their centre plugs can be removed to take ▶





“Only a fool underestimates the difficulty of building a DAC and an amplifier into the same box.”

surprise to discover that the balanced line inputs of the fully differential 585 were noticeably cleaner, more dynamic, and more musically expressive than the single-ended option. What WAS a surprise was just how much better the AES/EBU input sounded than the balanced analogue alternative. Crisper, more transparent, more dimensional, and more immediate, it brought a sense of vigour and purpose to playing where it was needed, a stately calm where that was appropriate, extending the rhythmic flexibility and expressive range still further. This is high-end music making as it should be, the system receding into the background and the performers taking centre-stage.

Only a fool underestimates the difficulty of building a DAC and an amplifier into the same box, with successful examples countable on the fingers of one hand, virtually all limited to pre-amplification/control duties and all at prices considerably higher than the not-inexpensive 585. Whilst I can name a number of impressive integrated amps with genuine high-end aspirations, in the case of those that offer an internal DAC option it is generally best deployed as a stop-gap until you can afford something better. Rarely does an internal DAC compete with the analogue outputs of an even half-decent CD player, let alone standalone designs. Which is fine, because the internal options score on price where they lose on performance. Until now: Levinson has always made great sounding and above all, highly musical DACs and the one inside the 585 is no exception. This thing sings! It requires no excuses or apologies, no claims as regards value for money. This thing is just plain great, with a fundamentally musical quality that is right at the heart of and perfectly matched to the performance of the 585 as a whole. Based around an ESS Sabre chip-set, Levinson has executed the implementation with its normal attention to power supply arrangements and engineering detail. Able to accept data rates up to 32bit/192kHz it might not be fully signed up to the latest round of escalation in the digital numbers game, but if you can drag yourself away from the numerical claims of high-res long enough to actually listen, you’ll discover just how remarkably convincing even Red Book CD can be when it’s played through a really good decoder. And lest you think that ‘acoustic music’ translates to ‘warm and woolly’, just try a bit of Deadmau5 with the DAC filter set to Fast. The 585’s 200 Watts might not be quite as muscular as the sort of Watts that

▶ bananas. In fact, about the only operationally retrograde step relative to the 383 is the switch from the latter’s ‘soap-bar’ remote to a more conventional rectangular design, although I guess that’s just a case of personal preference.

Yet, despite all this versatility the 585 remains at heart a purist device. As it stands, it offers no streaming or network connectivity beyond its USB input (although you can expect that to become an option, along with an internal phono-stage, at a later date). For all its configurable inputs, filters and offsets, these are set and forget options rather than constant invitations to fiddle. Which is just as well because once you start listening, the desire to adjust the 585’s set-up quickly recedes. Like the 383 before it, the 585 is so inherently engaging that you soon forget about functionality and lose yourself in the music. Its sound is big, solid, and dimensional, with a presence, shape, colour, and dynamics that really breathe. For what it’s worth and after exhaustive comparative listening, I set the digital filter to its Minimum Phase position (exactly as suggested by Levinson for the predominantly acoustic music I listen to). But my investigation wasn’t entirely wasted time, as it left me seriously impressed by the 585’s internal DAC. Carefully controlled listening to the digital inputs as compared to the balanced and single-ended analogue connections (you’ll need to trim the offsets to match levels) established a clear hierarchy. Fed by the analogue and digital outputs of the Audio Research Reference CD9 – no slouch itself when it comes to digital decoding – it was no

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► come from similarly rated mono-blocs at six or so times the price, but they still deliver exactly the sort of slam and attack, weight, and slab sided dynamics that take dance beats from bouncy to compelling, stopping by addictive on the way. Just as you’ll never have to apologise for the 585’s digital inputs, you’ll never have to apologise for the way it drives speakers either. Its marriage with the Ubiq Model One, a speaker dedicated to delivering musical bandwidth, presence, and above all level, was surely made in heaven; for as supremely subtle and coherent as the 585 is, when required it will get down and get seriously messy with the best of them.

If one musical experience sums up the 585 it has to be the sheer gusto with which it delivered Berglund’s typically barnstorming rendition of Sibelius’ ‘Karelia’ [Warner], especially the opening intermezzo, a piece that starts with an almost schizophrenic combination of stately meter and underlying urgency, building and building and building to one of the most intense crescendos that Sibelius ever wrote. If you start this at realistic listening levels then more often than not you soon find yourself backing off the volume control. I decided to risk giving the 585 its head – with remote close at hand just in case – but I needn’t have worried. This might be Levinson’s junior amplifier but it drove Focal’s Sopra No.2s within an inch of their life without the slightest sign of strain, congestion, or compression: it just got louder – and louder – and went on getting louder right up to the climax. That’s pretty impressive in a number of ways, but it’s not just the sheer volume but the consummate grace that’s the thing. The energy, vitality, substance, and intent that informs the impressive, in-the-room presence the 585 brings to a Vivaldi Cello Sonata or intimate female vocal simply scales up with larger pieces and bigger bands in a way that few systems can manage.

Levinson describes the 585 as its Swiss Army Knife and, while I get where that’s coming from, I think it’s selling this product short. The classic do-it-all tool will allow you to get most jobs done – just about. The 585 does pretty much everything and does it so well that it really does deliver on the simple is better promise of integrated electronics solutions. This is the heart and soul of a genuinely great, genuinely high-end system: just add source components and speakers, and you’ll end up with a set up that doesn’t just stand head and shoulders above its peers, it will easily better many bigger,

more complex, more ambitious, and far more expensive rigs. Perhaps I haven’t spent enough time discussing not just how capable the 585 is, but how genuinely engaging and musically satisfying it is. There’s a rightness and completeness, a coherence, and authority to its delivery that renders the musical performance separate from the system recreating it and actively encourages listening. It’s elegant, versatile, and utterly unflappable, allowing you to enjoy what it does without worrying about (or even noticing) how it does it. Once again, Levinson has set the high-end integrated benchmark. Stepping into the shoes of the 383, the 585 is bigger, even better, and much more versatile. It’s the real deal, the genuine article in a world where many promise and so few deliver. In fact, ‘genuine’ pretty much sums up what is a superbly complete and accomplished product: one that actually does deliver on the musical promise that so many of us spend so much time and money pursuing. One amp to live with, in sickness and in health? Right now, the 585 is it! +

TECHNICAL PANEL

Type: Class AB integrated amplifier with built-in DAC

Inputs: 6x Digital (AES/EBU, 2x S/PDIF, 2x TOSlink, USB),
1x Analogue line-level balanced XLR, 3x Analogue
line-level single-ended RCA

Bit Depth/Sample Rate: 32bit/192kHz

Outputs: 1pr RCA configurable for fixed, variable
or pre-out

Rated Output: 200 Watts/8 Ohms
350 Watts/4 Ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 438 x 193 x 507mm

Weight: 32.6kg

Price: £10,500

Manufactured by: Mark Levinson

URL: www.marklevinson.com

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