

Audio Note M2 Balanced Phono preamplifier

By Art Dudley • June, 2004 *Stereophile*.

The first time I heard an Audio Note preamp was seven or eight years ago, when I sampled their entry-level M1—a refreshingly musical thing that brought the same kind of color and drama to preamplification that Audio Note's more famous products brought to the driving of speakers. And the M1 cost only \$1250 at the time, with phono stage. (Newcomers, please don't wince: That's awfully cheap for what it was.)



upmarket M2 (\$2695 with phono), which sounded like a more refined version of the M1. Then came the very upmarket M3 (\$7500 with phono), which took all those strengths and presented them with a level of musical ease and rightness I'd never heard from a preamp before.

Now the Audio Note designers have worked their way back through their preamp line—which, incidentally, peaks out at the mighty M10 (\$40,000 without phono: go ahead and wince). The M2 has come up for redesign, resulting in a product that not only nips at the M3's heels but comes close to tying the race: the M2 Balanced, or M2B.

Description

As its name implies, the M2 Balanced can drive the balanced inputs of any amplifier so equipped (although it isn't designed for balanced throughput: all of its signal inputs are single-ended). Arguably, though, the M2B's greatest design distinction is that it speaks to the world through a pair of output transformers, just like a tube amp. That's something Audio Note has been doing for a number of years, beginning with their top-of-the-line M10.

As the company's Peter Qvortrup puts it, transformer drive "linearizes the entire dynamic envelope of the music passing through the preamp. Resistors and capacitors are imperfect in the sense that they all alter the relationship between amplitude and frequency. [But] a correctly designed interface transformer does not. It is, as the word indicates, a near perfect transformation of one voltage/current relationship to another, with minimal loss and distortion of the passing signal content." Consider also that an output transformer is a means of keeping output impedance low without additional active circuitry or, even worse, feedback. Audio Note looks at feedback the way GreenPeace looks at tuna nets.

Upstream, each channel of the M2B's line section uses a single 6922 dual triode tube (footnote 1), the two halves of each tube combined as a paralleled common cathode amplifier; their output is loaded by the primaries of the aforementioned output transformers (one for each channel), with separate secondaries for balanced and unbalanced output. The phono preamp comprises three dual triode tubes, split in this instance so that one half of each tube works for the left channel, the other half for the right. The phono input sees a cascaded 6DJ8 and 12AX7A, and the output is a 12AU7A. Between them is a passive RIAA equalization circuit.

Even further upstream, the M2B's power supply shares a family resemblance with those of other Audio Note products: It uses a rectifier tube (6X5WGT) for the rail voltages, and a traditional pi filter centered around a 20-Henry

choke smooths the power. DC for the various tube heaters is conditioned with separate solid-state regulators, each done up with nice-looking heatsinks.

The M2B's interior is a much tidier place than those of the earliest Audio Note UK preamps, with a neater and sturdier chassis in particular. An enameled metal shield keeps the power supply on the right from messing with the phono and line amps on the left. Sockets for the five dual triodes all appear on the same neat board, and two narrow sub-boards in front contain the volume and balance potentiometers, plus a motor for the former and the chips and other parts for a basic remote-control system. Low-level signals travel across short lengths of Audio Note AN-C interconnect cable, which is a shielded copper Litz type, and the output trannies' secondary windings go straight to the output board, with a pair of XLRs for balanced connection and two pairs of RCA jacks for unbalanced use.

Source selection is done with relays instead of a mechanical switch, these being mounted close to the input jacks to keep low-level signal paths short. The remote handset lets the user scroll through the row of five inputs (including phono) from either direction. Volume can be adjusted using either the remote or the front-panel control, and so can the mute—but the balance can be adjusted only at the preamp itself.

You know what I'm going to whine about now: I wish the M2B had a mono button and a channel-reverse switch. It doesn't. On the other hand, its balance control, which attenuates either channel by up to 9dB, isn't bad at all: Its effect on the clarity of the M2B's sound was only barely audible. A good enough compromise.

Setup

Installing and using the Audio Note was easy as pie. The silver-plated input jacks fell easily to hand at the preamp's back, and the extra pair of unbalanced output jacks even let me take my Linn Sizmik subwoofer out for a spin. The chassis never became more than a little warm to the touch, which encouraged me to leave it powered up most of the time. Just remember: With its large, frame-type power transformer, two hefty output transformers, and a good-sized power-supply choke, this iron-rich preamp is, at 32 lbs, heavier than the norm: A flimsy little shelf just won't do.

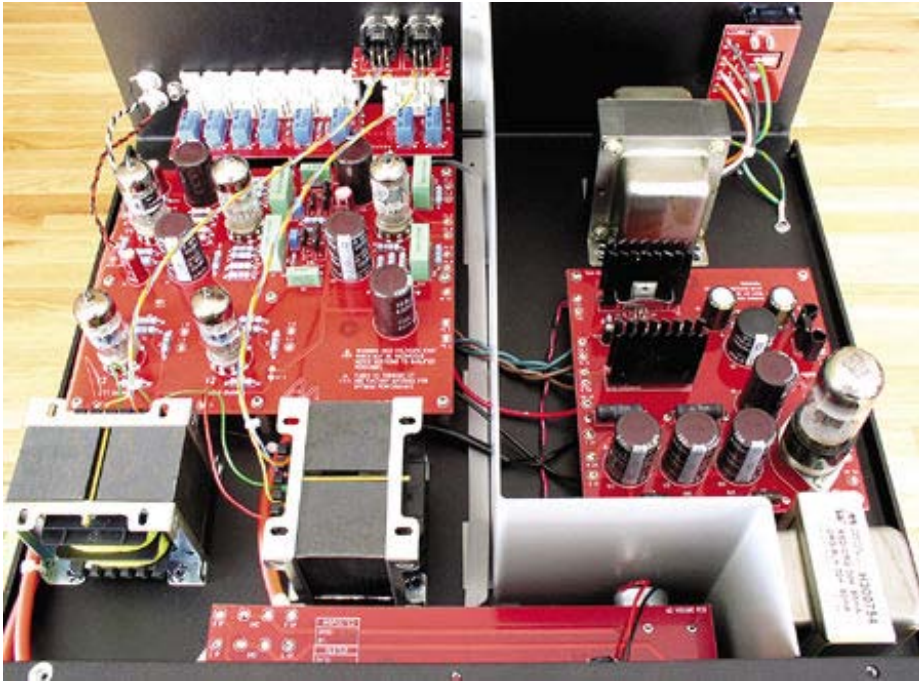
Listening

Now that I'm done with renovations to my main listening room (new hardwood floor, built-in record shelves, a relocated door, miscellaneous cosmetic details), my listening habits have evolved (footnote 2): Rather than doing all my listening in just one room, and regularly schlepping lots of associated components in and out, I can now have two very different systems set up more or less permanently, in two different rooms. These are shaping up to be:

- one room for a low-power system built around Lowther horns
- one room for a high-power system built around the Quad ESL-989s

This happy plan has also benefited from my decision to keep the superb EAR 890 amplifier, which I wrote about in the April 2004 *Stereophile*: After its trip to New York City for measurements and photographs, John Atkinson shipped the 890 back to me, and I've bought it from the importer. In addition to giving me a high-power reference, the EAR and its switchable balanced inputs now allow me to comment on that mode of operation, where applicable.

In any event, my listening impressions of the M2 Balanced are distilled from my experiences with it in two quite different contexts. Also, thanks to a loan from Peter Qvortrup, I still had an M3 sample on hand during the first couple of weeks of the M2B review period. I was even able to find my old review notes from when I had the original M1 and M2 in for review at *Listener* magazine. (I'm well organized in some areas, disturbingly helpless in others.) Thus I can say, with hand on heart: The new, \$4400 M2B is closer in sound to the \$7500 M3 than to the \$1250 M1. Much closer.



I don't think anyone who's recently bought an M3 is going to bang their heads and curse themselves for not buying the cheaper preamp and just spending the rest on records or dope: The M3 still sounds even bigger, easier, and more organic than the M2B. But, as I heard it, it's not that huge a gap.

Listen, for instance, to the nice recording of the Beethoven Septet in E-flat Major, Op.20, that Decca made in 1959 with members of the Vienna Octet, and which King Records/Cisco Music offered in a good vinyl reissue a few years back (KIJC 9111). I've never heard that record sound less than fine, but with the new Audio Note M2B in my system, the music tumbled out hypnotically, from the first bar to the last: It was impossible to resist hearing the whole thing in one listen. If this were a review of a new car, it would be like heading for the test track and finding myself at the state line instead.

Pitches and pitch relationships in the Beethoven were superb, and the timing was equally so—but it sounded as if it was the musicians who controlled the performance, not the playback gear: There were no restrictions of any sort, nor did an unnatural or exaggerated sense of order or pacing seem to be forced on the music. The Septet was simply played, as if live. Surely the sound was imperfect, as reproduction always is; just as surely, it would be difficult to imagine a more convincing and affecting performance short of a concert setting.

It was also interesting how the M2B—which, if it departed at all from tonal neutrality, would have to be described as just a wee bit dark overall—simply and easily exuded details of the music making. The line of eighth notes played by the cello under the first movement's main theme showed how clear and quick the M2B sounded in the critical registers of the upper bass and lower midrange: Pitches were precise, and the rhythm was bouncy and correct—yet each note had substance, color, and a fine, believable sustain and die-away. (Juxtaposing "bloom" and "decay" is just too depressing for me—like something out of Shelley.) Later on, in the Tempo de menuetto, the M2B's lower-mid clarity and pitch certainly helped me make sense of the horn's own occasional flurries of eighth notes. Poor preamps—and, I'm sorry to say, poor tube preamps in particular—can often be heard to smear them some.

The solo violin, the sound of which is never very far forward on this record, was warmly expressive, yet not overly airy or phasey sounding, as happens with other gear. The M2B let it have body and color, and kept it from sounding wispy and insubstantial. In the Adagio cantabile, the textures of all of the string instruments—and the woodwinds, too—were pleasantly audible. And the astonishingly perfect pitch of horn player Josef Veleba at the beginning of the movement's second half (signaling the change to C) was beautifully rendered. Later, during that bit's recapitulation, when the double bass takes over the horn's background role and the latter becomes the solo voice (sadly, without the same good intonation as in his earlier appearance), the M2B presented it naturally, in every way: with good flow, the right color, and good integration into the fabric of the music as a whole.

I also enjoyed the big string-bass sound the M2B pulled out of Ella Fitzgerald's "S'Wonderful," from the landmark Speakers Corner LP reissue of the 1959 Verve set Ella Fitzgerald Sings the George and Ira Gershwin Song Books (MG VS-6082-5). It was colorful and appropriately heavy, but with no less jauntiness or snap than my Naim preamp and amp—acknowledged rhythm champs—can find and deliver.

But I remained most impressed that a piece of playback gear with a sound so big and easy and apparently realistic could also get the notes so right, to an extent that's rare. Certain audio components call your attention to cufflinks hitting music stands, or trains running underneath the hall—sorry if I seem to pick on that one, but it's so notoriously foolish and irrelevant—whereas the Audio Note called my attention to such things as Fitzgerald's remarkably subtle mood shifts within the course of a song, or the way the strings switch the beat to play in threes behind the second verse of "The Man I Love." That, at least, is what I mean when I use the adjective musical—not just the same old "warm colorations" wheeze...

And in the first few minutes of Purcell's 1694 Te Deum (Choir of St. John's College, English Chamber Orchestra, Argo ZRG 724), the M2B left no doubts whatsoever as to its superior sense of scale. The solo voices sounded enormous—much larger than with any other preamp I have to hand—as befitted such hugely joyous music and the voices of the angels it means to represent. The children's voices were, by contrast, much smaller, and impressed me with the delicacy and poise of their own very different sounds. Again, the size distinction was greater than I've experienced with other gear, and the entrances of the sharply drawn trumpet lines did nothing to spoil this distinction, or to interfere with the singers' own poise. Beautiful, beautiful music making.

But some of you want to know: Could it play "Clash City Rockers"—the first Clash song many of us heard, with its great Who-like riff and weirdly trad-sounding bridge? Indeed it could, with the same natural and musically convincing sound it brought to everything else I tried. The recording itself is a bit pinched (the best vinyl version I've heard appears on The Story of the Clash, Vol.1, UK Columbia 4953511, despite its being speeded up a half-step and slightly undercut), but the M2B made the bass line sound believably full nonetheless. The Audio Note's ability to sound BIG helped pull this one off, too—again, with no diminution of impact.

I considered the M2B's stereo imaging performance to be adequate—like most of my favorite gear, it was convincing in this regard without being fussy—but audiophiles who place a greater emphasis on this may be a little disappointed. Some quite good gear does a better job of making individual images more precisely distinct from one another, as on Del McCoury's "A Far Cry," from The Family (Ceili Music CD 2001), where the voices, mandolins, and banjos can sound more solidly delineated. By comparison, through the Audio Note, not every image popped out in that way: The M2B simply gave prominence to lead vocals and/or whatever solo instrument was centered in the mix at any given time.

A note about the M2B's timbral balance: I hinted earlier that this preamp was fractionally darker than neutral. It may or may not sound that way in a given system, but unless it's installed properly, it certainly will make the best-sounding recordings seem timbrally dead and blunted, because it inverts the phase of the music signal overall. If this is going to be the only phase-inverting component in a system, the speaker leads must be swapped, hot for ground, at both channels.

Conclusions

Like the EAR 890 amplifier, the most spectacular thing about the Audio Note M2 Balanced was how unspectacular it was: You could put it into any good system, I think, without hearing a tremendous change from another decent preamp—and yet, over time, its easy and natural way with music couldn't help but make itself known. During its months here the M2B sounded consistently big, easy, organic, and involving. It didn't have a mechanical, tizzy, or boring bone in its body.

Is there enough on tap—enough music, sound, or technology—to justify its price? I think so, although it's not quite the bargain those very first M1s and M2s seemed to be in their own day. Things have changed, I suppose, and while the M2B isn't a steal, it's priced reasonably for what it is. (I mean for those observations to be taken in the larger context of the perfectionist hi-fi market; viewed in the context of Audio Note's product line, and directly compared to the M3 in particular, the M2B actually is a steal.)

I do, however, suggest that Audio Note consider offering a less expensive version of this preamp, without the remote control. As much as I enjoyed being able to mute it or turn it up from the proverbial comfort of my seat, I would just as happily do without if it meant saving a few hundred bucks. (Being able to switch the inputs from my seat means nothing to me, because I almost never have more than one music source operating at any given time.) Nor would the M2B's otherwise serene appearance be at all harmed by the removal of the infrared window on the faceplate.

There's one other way to save: Music lovers who don't need a phono preamp can do so by buying the line-only version of the M2B, which sells for \$3750. I'll take the charitable view, and assume that such buyers already have a very good phono stage at home—or, better still, perhaps they listen mostly to open-reel tape.

The Audio Note M2 Balanced, like its more expensive stablemate, the M3, is a preamp that all but transcends considerations of timbre and tone, mostly by sounding consistently, supremely right—and then by doing the arguably more important trick of playing music in a consistently involving fashion. Impressive, and very highly recommended.

Specifications

Description: Tubed stereo preamplifier. Tube complement: two 6DJ8/6922/7308 dual triodes (line stage), one each 6DJ8/ECC88, 12AX7A/ECC83, 12AU7A/ECC82 (phono stage), one 6X5WGT full-wave rectifier (power supply). Inputs: 5, including phono. Frequency Response: 20Hz-20kHz, ± 0.5 dB (phono and line). Input impedance: 47k ohms. Output impedance at 1kHz: 600 ohms balanced, 150 ohms unbalanced. Line amplifier gain: 23dB balanced, 17dB unbalanced. Phono preamp gain: 53dB (to tape outputs). Line stage inverts polarity.

Dimensions: 17.5" W by 5.5" H by 15.75" D. Weight: 32 lbs.

Serial number of unit reviewed: M2B0032.