

Review: Mapletree Line 2m Preamp by Chris Thompson on the Head-Fi Forum

I had the pleasure of receiving a new Line 2m preamp from Mapletree Audio Design last week, and I thought I'd write a review, since there's been a lot of interest in this forum in Mapletree products. The Line 2m doesn't have a headphone jack, but I've been using it with headphones as well as speakers (the amplifier section of my NAD C350 is connected to a headphone jack through a voltage divider network; this setup definitely has enough current to drive Grados with authority).

I'll get to the point... this preamp sounds phenomenal! I've never heard anything like it at this price point (\$330). If you've gone for a passive preamp looking for superior detail, this will make you a believer in active preamps again.

Here's my story: I'm really into headphones, and based on some of the advice on this forum, I got a Melos SHA-1 locally for a good deal about six months ago. While it sounds great with headphones, I found that it was only a reasonable preamp. It's very "airy," but the bass is not especially deep or powerful, and with rock it can sound as if it's losing control over the bass. Also, the Melos is only mildly sweet; the midrange as a preamp isn't anywhere near as magical as I'd like.

So I went passive. I built myself a passive preamp using a high-quality potentiometer. The detail and speed of the passive preamp were incredible, and the bass was deeper and more solid than with the Melos. But something was missing. The sound from my speakers wasn't bad, but there was an indescribably subtle lack of energy (dynamics). Also, the midrange didn't have any "magic," and the highs were kind of harsh.

I tried using my MG Head as a preamp with an adaptor from Radio Shack, and it had sweetness in spades, but there was no detail and both highs and lows were rolled off.

I decided I needed a proper tube preamp. Thought about the Decware Z-SLA active line stage, but it had poor reviews on Audio Asylum, and I felt that Decware was being disingenuous about its price. They advertise it as costing \$375, but if you actually try to order it, the price is \$100 more (even before shipping costs). Also thought about waiting for the new ASL Wave L1, but it seemed too much like a chintzy bargain-basement contraption than a legitimate preamp. I wanted quality parts and a solid basic design. Plus, the amount of noise my MG Head had before moving the power wires and inverting the polarity, as well as its bizarre global negative feedback scheme scared me away from ordering another ASL product.

Based on Nick Dangerous' nice comments about the Mapletree headphone amps from this forum, I decided to take a risk and order the Mapletree Line 2m. Dr. Peppard was a pleasure to deal with, and he kept me informed as he was building the preamp (it took just under a week). The design uses two 12SN7GT tubes with no global feedback and a small amount of local feedback on the first stage, like the Manley Stingray.

Construction is good. It looks nice, not too DIY but definitely handcrafted. If I place the two halves of the unit side by side, it's exactly the width of a standard stereo component, so it fits nicely on top of my rig. A minor niggle is that one of the ends the power cord connecting the two units has a metal shield that is loose enough to slide backwards on the cable if you pull on it.

How does the Line 2m sound? Incredible. The bass is very deep and solid; there's never the feeling that the power supply is straining to deliver the lows. It's coherent and deep and controlled, precisely the opposite of the Melos as a preamp. The highs are extended and incredibly sweet; not at all harsh. The midrange is incredible. It gives the MG Head a run for its money... unlike the MG Head, voices are very magical but don't seem overly glowing or fake.

Listening to the title track of Jewel's "This Way," she sounds absolutely like she's in the room with me. It's nearly frightening. The midrange is that good. Sumi Jo's rendition of the Queen of the Night's revenge aria is similarly stunning.

The amount of detail is amazing. (There is also absolutely no audible hum.) I thought my previous passive preamp could not be beat for detail, but I've been proven wrong. I'm noticing low-level details in the background of recordings that I've never heard before. This, coupled with the superior dynamics of the Line 2m, has made me a believer in active preamps again.

One minor flaw: the volume control is imbalanced at the lowest volume levels (around 7 o'clock). The right channel cuts out before the left. This makes it a little difficult to listen to music very quietly. In the grand scheme of things, though, this is a minor issue.

I'm just amazed by this preamp. There's no way that it sounds like a \$330 component. It just sounds so phenomenal. Kudos to Dr. Lloyd Peppard for offering such a solid design at such a low price point.