

manufacturer:	Mark Levinson
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Mark Levinson No. 433 Triple Mono Power Amplifier

Introduction

There are few high-end audio brand names that carry with them such universal admiration as Mark Levinson. The mere mention of Mark Levinson components conjures up feelings of quality, luxury and lust that I can only equate with brands at the level of, say, Patek Philippe, the Four Seasons resorts and perhaps even Lexus. Since the late 1970s, Mark Levinson gear has been the subject of many audiophiles' dreams and has kept consumers and even modest editors wondering how they can spend their tax returns to land such well-crafted audio reproduction gear. When you find out a Mark Levinson amp is coming your way, even if you are a jaded reviewer, you get excited.

The Mark Levinson No. 433 is a first for the brand, in that it's not only a true multi-channel amp, but also a long-awaited solution for the company's customers and dealers who have moved into home theater and music in high-resolution surround. Despite the slow to market style of the Levinson brand, I can't help but think of the old cliché "good things come to those who wait." For me, the wait for FedEx to get the amp across the country was nearly unbearable.

To the untrained eye, it would be hard to pick out the No. 433 from the rest of the Mark Levinson line of power amplifiers, as it shares the same stylistic flair, with its slightly bowed gray accent panels that flank each side of the faceplate. The No. 433 is also on the larger side of the spectrum, measuring 17-and-three-quarters inches wide by seven-and-a-half inches tall and 20 inches deep. One cannot ignore its weight, unless your name is Bruce Banner and you have a tendency turn green when you're angry. The No. 433 weighs a whopping 115 pounds. The reason behind the No. 433's substantial heft is its true triple mono design. In a nutshell, the No. 433 is actually three discrete amplifiers, each with its own low-noise toroidal transformer power supply in a single chassis. While this methodology is nothing new to the modern amplifier, this three-channel design is new to Mark Levinson and the No. 433. Each of the No. 433's channels output a solid 200 watts per channel at eight ohms and doubles to 400 watts per channel at four ohms. The No. 433 has a stated frequency response of 20Hz-20kHz at less than five percent total harmonic distortion, provided the user has adequate AC mains that can handle the No. 433's significant power requirements.

Getting away from specs for a moment, all this power, not to mention the presence of not one but three transformers, raises the question of heat. Heat is the enemy when it comes to any and all things electronic, especially amplifiers, which explains why a lot of today's modern amps are literally covered in heat sinks or use fans. Amazingly, the No. 433 isn't covered in heat sinks; in fact, it doesn't appear to have any. In actuality, the No. 433 does have internal heat sinks (one for each channel), which aid in the unit's convection cooling system that is basically achieved through the use of vents in the casing above and below each of the No. 433's amplifier sections. While my past experience with vent-like systems has been less than stellar, the No. 433's implementation of its convection cooling system works rather well, well enough that I wouldn't cringe at the thought of putting a No. 433 in a Middle Atlantic rack.

Turning my attention to the rear of the No. 433, I noticed a host of connection options for an amp. For starters, there are the binding posts, which are a wing-nut design capable of accepting only spade lug terminations, which is about par for the course for power amps in the No. 433's class. Next to each pair of binding posts is a set of single-ended and balanced inputs. You can select between each option by either leaving in or removing the small metal bridging straps located in each of the balanced inputs. When the straps are in, it means you can only use the single-ended inputs and vice versa. Along the far right edge is the No. 433's 12-volt trigger and Mark Levinson's own RJ-11 and RJ-45 communication ports, which allow the No. 433 to speak to



other Mark Levinson components via a proprietary cable system that looks very much like a phone cable. Lastly, there is the 120-volt power cord receptacle. Along both the right and left side of the No. 433 is a pair of handles to aid in positioning the No. 433 in your room or equipment rack. All in all, the No. 433 is rather Zen in its design and layout and can be had for a cool \$10,000 retail.



Set-up

The No. 433 arrived at my new house just as my contractors and installers were putting the finishing touches on my new reference home theater. Before help could get away, I employed a few extra hands to assist me in getting the No. 433 onto the bottom shelf of my Middle Atlantic rack. I connected the No. 433 to my Meridian G68 surround sound controller via a complement of Ultralink HT Reference interconnects. I decided to power the front left, right and center speakers with the No. 433, with my trusty Outlaw Audio 7200 amp powering the rears. All of the speakers, Meridian 300 series in-walls, were connected to the No. 433 and 7200 via Ultralink HT reference in-wall speaker cable. While I did the bulk of this review using my Meridian in-wall system, I did have a few other loudspeakers on hand, mainly the mighty Magnepan 3.6s and Definitive Technology Super Towers, to double-check my findings with the No. 433.

I rounded out my system with a Sony BDP-S1 Blu-ray player and Meridian G98 DVD Transport as sources, with all high-definition and standard-definition television coming by way of Dish Network's HD DVR. I went ahead and EQ'd the whole set-up with Audyssey's new stand-alone sound equalizer (review pending), with all power filtration coming by way of Monster Cable's HTPS 7000. My display of choice was a 92-inch acoustically transparent Screen Research screen, with the epic Sony 1080p SXR "Pearl" projector providing the visuals.

Movies And Music

To start out, I opted for one of my favorite piano recordings of all time, Keith Jarrett's *The Out-of-Towners* (ECM). Piano in many ways is a most challenging test for an amplifier. In a well-designed system, you can hear so many levels of resolution and detail. In a lesser system, things are less clear, dynamic and believable. Through the No. 433, Jarrett's piano sounded amazingly realistic, with air around the individual notes and with power behind the chords that had an overall three-dimensionality normally reserved only for the live experience, not prerecorded music. During the track "Intro," the entire front wall of my room was seemingly transformed into the Munich State Opera House, with me parked in a front row seat. With the No. 433 in the loop, the tone of the piano reproduced beautifully with an extremely realistic soundstage. The recording didn't sound overly warm and there were no signs of excess reverberation or maladies caused either by the venue or the recording. The sense of air that surrounded the piano itself could easily be felt and allowed for the sheer size of the instrument to better be conveyed within the soundstage, which was also quite impressive. Jack DeJohnette's drums synchronized beautifully with the magic of Jarrett's magnificent piano. The two instruments held their own and, through the No. 433, were given their appropriate due. The cymbals sounded natural and full without a hint of the usual compression that can often make the sound seem somewhat crunched and tinny. The double bass was articulate and ripe with detail and showed the No. 433's propensity for bass reproduction, seemingly allowing my speakers to dig a little deeper in terms of their overall bass output. While the No. 433 may have made my speakers sound more full-range than I was used to, it didn't do it at the expense of control, of which the No. 433 has plenty.



Next, I opted for something a bit more modern-sounding and went with Imogen Heap's second solo album, *Speak for Yourself* (RCA/Victor). I chose *Speak for Yourself* for its varying musical styles, which are complimented beautifully by Imogen's unique and wonderfully recorded vocals. On the opening track "Headlock," the No. 433 proved to be one smooth operator. The track opens with a small ensemble of bells, strings and Imogen's own subtle vocals. Right off the bat, the No. 433's reproduction of high frequencies, mainly the bells, was topnotch, each carrying its own unique sonic signature, rife with detail, air and ultimately extension into the listening space. The subsequent ambient details were equally impressive and musical, leading up to Imogen's beautiful vocal track. Imogen's vocals were appropriately raspy and the No. 433 showed no signs of editorializing, allowing her unique sound to flow freely from the Meridian's drivers. The midrange was tantalizingly decadent, with just a hint of warmth that made the music go down just a little smoother. At first, I wanted to chastise the No. 433 for being dark or soft-sounding, but I came to realize that it's simply more organic and three-dimensional in its sound; when compared to most of today's solid-state-in-your-face amps, the No. 433 can sound a bit distant at first. However, listen to a track or two with the No. 433 in your system and you'll soon realize it's anything but distant or soft. Dynamically, the No. 433 seemingly has no equal, with its tremendous power output allowing it to beautifully bend any speaker to its will in its quest for musical purity. The No. 433 was able to handle the tune "Headlock's" vast dynamic shifts with ease, stopping the music as readily as it produces it with nary a sign of overhang. Speaking of overhang, the bass through the No. 433 was as taut and detailed as anything I've heard in recent memory. "Headlock's" bass track isn't your standard fare, in that it doesn't come by way of a traditional drum kit. Instead, the bass is comprised



of several sampled and synthesized elements that play off one another like droplets of water striking the pavement. I use the analogy of water because, through the No. 433, these elements, while sounding deep and weighty, were quite agile and moved effortlessly if not organically throughout the soundstage. I found this to be quite a feat, considering that I was using in-walls.

Next, I moved onto the extremely unique track "Hide and Seek," in which every part of the song is comprised of only Imogen's voice. Through lesser amps, the track plays out more or less like a traditional two-part harmony, which couldn't be more inaccurate. For starters, it's hard to determine just how many vocal elements are really present in the song, except to say that there are a hell of a lot more than two. The true scale and weight of the track through the No. 433 is brought to life in ways that sent chills up my spine. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. The hauntingly beautiful sounds of Imogen's vocals stirred my emotions and tugged at my heartstrings. I simply closed my eyes and basked in the music that encompassed me. The sense of air and space the No. 433 brought to the presentation was staggering. This is not a song that plays out like traditional two-channel fare, where the artist is locked down between the left and right speakers. Imogen is seemingly everywhere and nowhere all at once. Wherever she "appeared," the No. 433 rendered her voice with grace and conviction. I could speak to each of the No. 433's amazing attributes in regards to high frequencies, midrange and bass reproduction. However, I feel it's more important to speak of the No. 433's greatest strength, which is its emotional accuracy. The No. 433 doesn't simply give you the music, it unwraps it for you, allowing it to grow and spill out for you to journey through and discover the music's idiosyncrasies for yourself. The No. 433 is the only amplifier I've encountered that seemingly has no agenda of its own. It doesn't care if you like one sound over another, it's not tube-like or solid state, yin or yang, it's simply, for lack of a better word, right.



Seeing as how the No. 433 is a true multi-channel amp, I thought it best to move on to multi-channel music, starting with the DVD-Audio version of Metallica's Black album (Elektra). Beginning with "Nothing Else Matters," the opening guitar solo was beautifully textured with snap and reverb that one might expect to hear at a live performance. The bass through the No. 433 was palpable with extraordinary impact and weight, while retaining all the requisite extension and decay without any signs of overhang or bloat. The highs were vividly detailed, bringing with them a greater sense of texture not usually heard through lesser amps. The No. 433 has a way of pulling the musical elements apart like layers of an onion and then presenting them to you in ways that allow all of the elements to exist independently while blending beautifully together at the same time. One only has to listen to the No. 433 with high-resolution audio, such as Metallica's Black album on DVD-Audio, to truly get a sense of what I'm talking about. Rock music is all too often compressed or flat-sounding. However, through the No. 433, this is not the case for the amp's power and power reserves, which allow for the music to unfold effortlessly and truthfully, something I don't think a lot of listeners associate with the genre. The No. 433 is simply a dynamic juggernaut; there were seemingly no limits to its explosive potential. It took my speakers and my room and made them its bitch. In terms of multiple speakers, the No. 433 was seamless throughout the main front and center speakers and I found it blended quite nicely with other amplifiers for the rears, mainly my Outlaw Audio 7200. The No. 433's ability to play nice with other amplifiers speaks volumes about its usefulness in a multi-channel set-up, where a user might not wish to spend as much as the No. 433 costs for the side or rear channel amplification. Also, the No. 433 produced a very vivid and well-defined soundstage that extended uniformly to the right and left, as well as behind through all but my in-wall speakers.

Moving onto the track "The Unforgiven," I was struck with just how easily the No. 433 brought to light even the most minute musical elements. Every track through the No. 433 is a new and unique experience, as if you are hearing your old favorites anew. The No. 433 isn't an amp that likes to revel in presenting you with just the details the way that's become so in vogue with today's higher-end products; instead, the No. 433 opts for overall accuracy and musicality, which to me makes more sense aurally. The music always takes center stage through the No. 433. The high frequencies were again effortless and free from strain and glare, even when the volume approached ear-splitting levels. Try as they might, James Hetfield and Kirk Hammett's roaring guitars couldn't jostle the No. 433, which remained incredibly poised and resolute in the face of the onslaught that ensued. The bass was raw and powerful and really got to the heart of the music, as well as my own heart, and propelled the track into the stratosphere, slamming me into the back of my chair. The No. 433 simply exists without limitations. I felt as if my walls would rupture from the sound pressure before the No. 433 would. Normally one wouldn't describe James Hetfield's vocals as inviting, but with the No. 433 in tow, they felt a bit more three-dimensional and textured, which went a long way in aiding the overall palpability of the otherwise chaotic nature and tone of his voice. For a soothing-sounding amp, the No. 433 proved as versatile with metal as it was with small ensemble jazz.

Moving on to another exceptional multi-channel album, I turned my attention to Sheryl Crow's The Globe Sessions (A&M/DTS). On the track "Favorite Mistake," the somewhat jam session-like opening, complete with tambourine, was a sheer delight. The overall sense of air and space the No. 433 lent to the performance was epic. The treble sparkled and blossomed faithfully as the rest of the musicians tuned up to play. Sheryl's subsequent vocals were warm and soothing, despite her inherent penchant for raspiness. Crow's voice was rendered with accurate timbre and weight and had an excellent in-room presence.

On the track "There Goes the Neighborhood," I was able to hear further into the recording and recording space than ever before. The soundstage the No. 433 dishes out is staggering. The scale the No. 433 gives the entire performance is awe-inspiring in the rock-solid

grip it exhibits on every aspect of the performance and soundstage. In fact, every other amp feels unnaturally compressed compared to the No. 433. More impressively, the No. 433 retains all of its aural magic regardless of the volume, which is a feat I can't claim for other, lesser amps. Believe me, compared to the No. 433, most amps are in fact lesser.



I ended my evaluation of the No. 433 with the Blu-ray release of the World War I epic *Flyboys* (MGM). *Flyboys*, while being a good rental at best, does have its share of visual magic, accompanied by a stellar soundtrack. I turned my attention to the blimp sequence where our heroes, led by the brooding James Franco, are charged with bringing down a massive German dirigible before it reaches Paris. The scene features an epic dogfight between the French air patrol and the German bandits, with likewise awe-inspiring visuals and surround sound performance. Sonically, the No. 433 may have one-upped the action on the screen, as my reference room was transported thousands of feet in the air for harrowing battle. The No. 433's incredible resolution clearly delineated the differences between the German and Parisian-based hardware, with the German airplane engines carrying with them a bit more grunt, adding to their overall menacing demeanor. The same held true for the planes' roaring gunfire that at the barrel was rather low and throaty, only to transition to a more high-pitched whirring noise as the guns zeroed in on their targets. This transition was handled wonderfully and without incident through the No. 433 and was clearly audible amidst the chaotic environment of the dogfight. When it came time to really do some damage, the No. 433 didn't shy away from the fight. During the scene's climax, involving the

blimp's inevitable demise, the No. 433 didn't simply sit idle as my sub rocked the floorboards. Instead, the No. 433 fleshed out the explosion, giving the already impressive event more scale and impact as I could hear down to the very canvas of the blimp tearing itself apart. The most impressive aspect of the No. 433 wasn't its ability to track the varying elements of action clearly and effortlessly, but again rather its ability to play nice with the other amps in my system. This single aspect really cements the No. 433's overall value in a state of the art system, giving potential owners a clear upgrade path instead of insisting they fork over all of their money to better compliment the No. 433's abilities. Throughout the film, the No. 433's way with dialogue was topnotch, making doubly sure that each of the characters' unique timbres was maintained and reproduced faithfully, be it in a subdued scene or mingled with action. The film's score was beautifully balanced throughout the film and, through the No. 433, was given ample precedence that made it more of a dramatic element than an ambient one.

Overall, the No. 433 proved as talented with movies as it was with music. It is an incredibly nimble amp, which seems to fly in the face of the fact that it's also got gusto. Above all, the No. 433's true X factor is that it has soul, not one that is artificially created out of an overly accentuated midrange, but instead one that is forged from its ever-constant quest for musical truth, no matter what the source material.

Downside

Normally, with an amp like the No. 433, the easiest downside would have to be heat. However, this time around, it isn't. The No. 433 gets warm, but not so much that I'd have to label it as a downside. Instead, I took issue with the No. 433's overall ergonomics. First, it's a beast in terms of weight. While I can power-lift it myself, maneuvering it is a whole other story. Be sure to employ the help of a friend or two or, better yet, have your dealer/installer place it in your home to avoid any unsightly injuries. (Although I hear hernia surgery is quite painless and routine these days.)



I didn't really like the No. 433's binding posts. While the wing-nut style has been a staple for many years for Mark Levinson, I find its lack of acceptance of other wire a bit elitist. Not only will it only accept spade lugs, but you'll have to make sure yours are the right size, a fact that I didn't take into account until the amp arrived at my home. A quick trip to a local dealer was able to remedy this minor inconvenience. However, the binding posts are something to be aware of if you are considering connecting your old speaker cables with a new Mark Levinson amp.

Lastly, there's the issue of the No. 433 unbalanced vs. balanced inputs. While there has been considerable debate on both sides for years, the No. 433 does sound noticeably better through its balanced outputs than through the unbalanced. Now, before you go off replacing your surround sound controller or preamp, be aware that there are adapters out there for a few bucks that will have you enjoying all that the No. 433 has to offer in no time.

Conclusion

With a retail price of \$10,000, the Mark Levinson No. 433 exists in a category where words like absolute, benchmark, pinnacle and reference are commonplace. The No. 433 is all of these things and rightfully so, for it is truly a benchmark product, not only for Mark Levinson, but also for all price-no-object amplifiers everywhere. While the No. 433 has stiff competition, I think you'd be hard-pressed to find a better all-around performer. Its ability to integrate in more ways than one into an existing system, be it high-end or budget, really speaks to the No. 433's ultimate value.

I've been a fan and follower of Mark Levinson products for decades. I've spent ample time with almost every amp in their stable since the 1990s, including their Herculean mono blocks, and I must say, as impressed as I was over the years, nothing could have prepared me for the No. 433. Dollar for dollar, the Mark Levinson No. 433 quite possibly is the finest amp Mark Levinson has ever produced and, without hesitation, I am investing in the amp for my reference system.

reference software:	Keith Jarrett - The Out-of-Towners (CD) • Imogen Heap - Speak For Yourself (CD) • Metallica - Metallica (DVD-A) • Sheryl Crow - The Blode Sessions (CD) • Flyboys (Blu-ray)
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