

Product Review

Mark Levinson No 326S Stereo Preamplifier

Part I

July, 2006

John E. Johnson, Jr.



Specifications:

- Fully Balanced Circuit
- Inputs: 3 Stereo XLR, 4 Stereo RCA, RJ-45 Link, Trigger
- Outputs: 1 Stereo XLR, 1 Stereo RCA, RJ-45 Link
- MFR: 10 Hz - 40 kHz \pm 0.2 dB
- THD+N: 0.001%
- Gain: 0, 6, 12, or 18 dB; 0.1 dB Steps
- Input Impedance: 100 kOhms
- Dimensions: 2.92" H x 17.75" W x 13.58" D
- Weight: 30 Pounds
- MSRP: \$10,700 USA

Introduction

I think all audiophiles know the name Mark Levinson, and I don't mean because the founder used to be married to a movie star (Mark Levinson the person is no longer affiliated with the Mark Levinson brand, now owned by Harman International).

Levinson gear is renown. Quality with no compromise.

It's all solid state, and restricted to players, preamplifiers, surround sound processors, and amplifiers. No speakers, no accessories. Just the main stuff.

You won't find Levinson in electronics stores like Circuit City or Fry's. Not that they don't carry excellent quality hi-fi. It is just that Levinson equipment, because there are no compromises, is very, very expensive. As a result, the customer base is limited. So, you have to look in the dedicated high end shops.

If you are familiar with their product line, you know about the legendary No 32 preamplifier. It is in two chassis: one for the control (input selector, volume, etc.) and the other for the audio circuitry. At \$15,950, it is for the connoisseur.

The No 436S preamplifier, a more recent product, has the features of the No 32, but it is all in one chassis. As you will find in the Bench Tests, it performed so well, I can't see how anything might be compromised compared to the No 32. The specifications - besides the \$5,000 price difference - indicate that the No 32 has somewhat less residual noise because of the two chassis separating the power supply and the audio circuitry. But that seems to be about all. Since the noise of the No 326S is - 94 dB, well, that is still way below my ability to hear it. Even the output is about the same: 16 volts RMS.

This is really a lot of potential output, but you will likely never need more than about 3 or 4 volts, which is well within the linear range of both preamplifiers.

The Layout

The front panel of the No 326S is simple.

Click on the photo above to see a larger version.

Starting from the left are the Power On/Off button, the Input Selector, Setup, Enter (Setup and Enter are used to go through the configuration menu), Display Intensity, Balance, and Mute. Then comes the Volume Control and Standby button.

Each input is configurable with 0 (Unity), +6, +12, or +18 dB of gain. This takes into account the variable output between numerous sources.

The rear panel has the inputs and outputs for each channel on opposite sides, because it is a dual-mono design (pure Class A, fully balanced).

Click on the photo above to see a larger version.

There are three XLR inputs, four RCA inputs, one XLR output, and one RCA output for each channel. There is also a record loop for each channel. A set of RJ-45 communication jacks lets you connect other components to the 326S, such as power amplifiers, so that when you turn on the preamplifier, the other components power up as well.

The inside of the chassis is packed with electronic components. No space is wasted here.

The remote control is heavy in spite of there not being many buttons on it.

The remote functions reproduce what is available from the front panel buttons.