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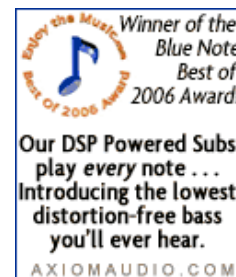
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# Manley Lab's Shrimp Pre-Amplifier And Snapper Power Amplifier

Tony Goes Fishing For Tube Equipment

Review by Tony Maresch

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While touring the **2002 Montreal Festival Du Son audio show** I got my first exposure to Manley Laboratories tube equipment. The audiopathic crew were having fun putting these cool stickers proclaiming "TUBES RULE" all over the place on the 7th floor at the Delta Hotel. Further investigation revealed what all the fuss was about. Hooked up a pair of Maat Audio speakers was a Manley Shrimp pre-amplifier and pair of Manley Snapper power amplifiers. The sounds this combo produced were wonderful, even under show conditions, which are less than ideal. EveAnna Manley, CEO of Manley Laboratories, was there to introduce her equipment to the Canadian market, and explained with quite a degree of technical expertise what was involved in developing and manufacturing that makes this combination sound so wonderful. EveAnna Manley firmly believes in the superiority of tube circuits in audio. Her company manufactures a plethora of tube equipment, including a large line of highly respected professional recording equipment, which, like their audiophile equipment, is built to last. Manley Labs also produces discrete solid state recording equipment under the Langevin moniker. They also manufacture the famous GML discrete line of peripheral



processors for George Massenburg.

MANLEY LABS

## Not Minced Meat

The Shrimp is Manley's new entry-level tube pre-amplifier. It features a short and minimalist signal path using two 12AT7's and two 7044 dual triode tubes. Interestingly, the volume control is after the 12AT7 gain stage and then buffered by the 7044's in a "white-follower" output stage with no global feedback, and just a touch of local feedback. It contains more high quality audiophile parts than usually found in entry level products, like Noble volume and balance pots, MIT/Multicap polypropylene capacitors including two huge 30uF capacitors on the output stage. It also features oversized power supply capacitors, which help it let through more dynamics than less expensive designs. The tube filament supply is floated 80V above chassis ground for quieter operation and longer tube life. Their design goal was for a quick and alive sounding pre-amplifier with good rhythm and extension.

The Snappers are Manley's newest power amplifier offering. They produce 100 Watts each with an ultralinear (partially triode wired pentode) push pull parallel EL-34 output stage. They feature a true balanced signal path from the input stage to the center tapped output transformer. This topology reduces B+ voltage variations from degrading its performance by canceling power supply artifacts and increasing the signal to noise ratio. Although it is a more expensive than an unbalanced circuit to manufacture, when balanced circuitry is done correctly, the advantages are clearly worth the effort and expense.



The output transformer was specially designed for the Snappers, with special attention to the getting the flux just right. Manley winds their own transformers as well as builds all their equipment including circuit boards in house, which is not as common as you might think in this industry. Good job! Count on more knowledgeable support both now

and over the next 30 years or more from Manley Labs because of that with their equipment. With 180 joules of energy storage in the main B+ supply, there is plenty of reserve for explosive, dynamic transient response. The input and driver tube filaments are DC powered for further noise floor reduction. The input is switchable from RCA to XLR, allowing the user to use two different inputs, switch cables without turning them off, or use as a mute, a nice touch.



The Shrimp and Snappers both look very stylish. The thick metal faceplates are "gunmetal blue" which is very appealing. The pre-amplifier control layout, including the larger volume dial, is very intuitive. The amplifiers with their large transformers, and uniquely sculptured chassis, incorporating four vibration controlling spiked feet are quite attractive. The backlit logo's on both the pre-amplifier and amps are a nice touch as well.

Before hooking anything up, I always read the manuals because sometimes there are useful bits of information in them, and I like to be careful with equipment that is not paid for yet. Blowing up equipment while it is on loan is usually frowned upon. Most manuals could be clinically classified as a temporary fix for insomnia, requiring some effort to get to the end, after all, how hard can it be to hook up an amp and pre-amplifier? The Manley manuals however, are a blast, reflecting the company's approach of having fun with audio, sure there are the warnings about the negative effects of "becoming one with the circuit," but even these had me chuckling to myself. The tube FAQ is a side splitting cure for all the stress listening to solid state equipment has given you (tubes rule, as they say). I wish all manuals were both as informative and entertaining as these were.

The Shrimp and Snappers were hooked up to a Theta Miles (used as a transport) and a Theta Gen Va 24-bit/96kHz DAC, digital coaxial cable was Kimber D-60, interconnects and speaker wire were Cardas cross. Loudspeakers were Amphion Xenons' and Totem Forrests'. Both of these loudspeakers have a nominal 8 ohm impedance and work very well with either solid state or tube equipment.

### Goin' Fishing

After getting the system set up, break in was comprised of an EL34 Acid test, classic rock, psychedelic rock, etc., at high volume. This would surely get those electrons excited and flowing. The pre-amplifier had already been warming up for a few hours. Even during this amplifier warm-up the system was shining. Some may dismiss

these amps because of their tube layout, thinking they are suited to female vocals and small jazz ensembles only. They would be doing themselves a disservice to do so, as this was not what I consider a typical EL34 amplifier sound. The plan was to put the CD on repeat and go away for a few hours, but sitting down for a quick check was not so easy. I found myself pulling discs from my collection to see what the next one, and then the one after that would sound like. What was intended to be a stress test and break in exercise proved very revealing of this combination's sonic signature. A few things were missing though, like rolled off highs, tube rush when no signal was present, compressed dynamics and loose "flubby" bass. I could not help but listen to the system during the recommended 45 minutes warm-up. What was quickly revealed was this equipment shines with any type of music played through it. Well made recordings sound great, vocals come through with purity of tone and texture, acoustic guitars breathe life into the room, electric guitars with all their grit and glory come through that way marvellously.

Edgar Winter Group's "Frankenstein" from *They Only Come Out At Night* was powerful, dynamic, controlled, and a heck of a lot of fun to listen to, as was Iron Butterfly's "Inna-Gadda-Da-Vida" (the long version, obviously), and all the other rock and roll that was played. Moving right across the sonic spectrum, came Anne-Sophie Mutter's classic violin from *Carmen-Fantasia*. The strings sounded delicate, holographic and smooth. The beautifully extended, articulate and silky highs from these digitally reproduced violins were wonderful. This is not an easy task for equipment that shines with rock and roll, but the Manleys have that all too elusive and versatile character that works well with all types of music. While listening to "Spente Le Stella" from Emma Shaplin's *Carmine Meo* I was immersed in a huge soundscape with terrific pace, the vocals floating in the air wonderfully. Closing ones eyes was all it took to imagine being in an ancient cathedral with the elements raging outside.

The soundscape seemed to extend beyond the boundaries of my room, both horizontally and from way behind the speakers to past my listening position. My 16.5 by 40 foot room is already a large listening environment, and a room of this size does help with this kind of soundstage and soundscape presentation, but the room cannot do this by itself. The contributions of these well-crafted Manley pieces were clearly very much responsible for these invigorating and at the same time hypnotizing sounds. The midrange performance was absolutely stunning. Pulling artists from the collection such as Faith Hill, Lorena McKennitt, Dianna Krall, Patricia Barber and Holly Cole rendered each with an intimate character I am at a loss to qualify further, except for how appealing the presentation was. Recordings that emphasized more precise imaging made localizing musicians an easy task, more so than much other tube equipment I have played with. Track 4 on *The Best Of Kodo* (Columbia CK 91204) revealed incredibly explosive dynamics and control. This is a great "woofer workout" disc, which while spinning showed no straining from the amps, even at neighbor annoying levels. The Sub-bass was extended, quick and had a great degree of control. Mid bass blended seamlessly with the same characteristics. The intellectual portion of the review was put on hold as the pure emotion of these recordings

came through in such an involving way.

Next, the Snappers were hooked up to the main system, between the Audio Research Reference 1 and Infinity IRS Beta Panels using balanced (XLR) interconnects. The panels are four way, 4 ohm and 87dB speakers, usually a difficult load for tube amplifiers under 200 watts. These amazing Snappers stood up to the challenge to a degree I was unprepared for. Since they had already seen good use shortly before, they were hooked up, plugged in, turned on and listened to right away. After a few minutes, they were a bit loose and uncontrolled (which is what I was expecting in this configuration).

As each subsequent track was played, these classy 65 lb. amplifiers just kept getting better, more controlled, more refined, and more holographic. After an hour the big system was rocking to more of those neighbor annoying levels with the Snappers, and I backed off increasing volume before they showed any hint of strain, fearing my ears would give out before the amps would. This level of performance far exceeded my expectations in this configuration, both for how well they made music and how well they controlled this difficult speaker. The characteristics of the amplifiers stayed the same as noted above, but with an added level of refinement for every quantifiable parameter except for the Sub-bass which was reproduced by separate woofers and amplifiers.

The amplifiers and pre-amplifier are cut from the same cloth. They share a transparent and see through quality, dynamic in their attack (explosive when turned up), as well as delicate and liquid in their decay, leaving notes just hanging in the air. I found this presentation very appealing and addictive. The Snappers did not project quite as large a soundstage as the larger 300-watt Audio Research M300 Mk II mono-blocks did in the main system. In comparison, the Snappers revealed a bit more of the delicate and subtle cues with a hair more transparency than my amps and with considerably more dynamics than I thought possible from 100 EL34 watts. I would be negligent to say that one sounds more correct than the other, because the contribution of each component into the whole of a systems' synergy must in all fairness be evaluated and weighed by the owner of that system. I can say the resolution and extension of both the high and low frequencies, flawlessly combined with the layers and layers of soundstage through to the soundscape, as well as their excellent speed and decay made the combination a true chameleon, enticing me into spending hour after hour with all types of music from classical to jazz to rock and back again.

### Catch Of The Day

While I played with this combination, they grabbed me, planted me in the listening chair and encouraged me to pull out the audiophile standards, classic rock, and a bit of every type of music on hand. They pulled me into the music more than anything I have encountered so far at anywhere near this price range, and impressed me greatly. They saw a lot of use while in my care with as much varied music as I

could dig up from my collection. Well after the review was written they were still running because they were so much fun to listen to. It was with regret when I had to return them to the distributor. Perhaps I could justify building a reviewing system that was not as stratospherically priced as my main system. I would start by making the Shrimp and Snappers the foundation of that system. Yes, that is it, and then I would need to get another turntable, phono stage, speakers, etc. What a great idea! Put these on your short list of must audition components before Manley Labs discovers what I did. These are under-priced for their build quality, performance and the pure enjoyment they will inject into your system. Inject like an audiophile drug, for these are truly addictive components. Highly recommended!

## Sidebar

### The Fall And Rebirth Of Tubes

Ask any audiophile about tube equipment and you will likely get an opinion, ask any two audiophiles about tube equipment and you will likely get three opinions (you had to see that coming). The history and significance of tube equipment in the evolution of high fidelity equipment is quite interesting and worth examination. Obviously, tubes came first. Unfortunately, virtually all manufacturers replaced tube equipment with solid state by the late 60's to early 70's. Why did this happen? Was it because solid state was more reliable, required less maintenance, or was sonically superior to tubes? The answers to those questions are emphatically no, no and NO. Sure, some non-audiophile at marketing was telling consumers this. "Newer technology is better" they would tell us, "and you do not have to replace the tubes", but the truth is that early solid state transistors were more problematic, and sounded awful compared to the tube circuits of their day. Then why would manufacturers do this? The real reason tube equipment was replaced by solid state is simple economics, solid state gear cost less to build and manufacturers were charging consumers more for it.

Transistors age and fail as well, but are obviously not user replaceable. So consumers usually replaced their components. The cost of tube output transformers far exceeded the cost of the entire signal path in comparable wattage solid state amplifiers, and the power transformers were less expensive as well since they did not have to step up the voltage like tube amplifiers required. Nevertheless, most consumers (I can not bear to use the word audiophiles here) were duped into believing the significance of distortion specifications relating to musical enjoyment, and that the added convenience of not having to change tubes was indicative of the superiority of solid state equipment. In time the component quality, reliability and sound quality of solid state would improve, but early models were awful.

By the early 1980's tubes had all but vanished for audio stores, except for a few companies like Audio Research and Conrad Johnson. Both started manufacturing tube equipment just as solid state was becoming the norm in audio retailing. There were more

than a few audiophiles who trusted their ears enough to know that all this tube equipment that was being replaced was worth scooping up. Unfortunately, many were in Japan, and that is where most of the vintage McIntosh, Marantz and other manufacturers tube equipment went and is still in active use or being collected today. The prices this vintage hifi fetches on the current market far exceeds their original purchase prices, sometimes by a factor of ten or greater. The solid state equipment that replaced it is virtually worthless today.

History repeats itself, and audio is no exception. The introduction of the CD was launched as "perfect sound forever" (which in its context of the time it was offered gets my vote for the dumbest quote in audio history) in the mid 1980's, and by the early 1990's turntable sales had all but disappeared. We had another non-audiophile from marketing telling us how much better CD's sounded than records, and that CD's would last forever (they said this like it was a good thing!). Once again consumers took the bait, hook, line and sinker. Why did they introduce the CD? The same simple economics, they cost considerably less to manufacture, and were sold for more than records. It never had anything to do with sound quality, just profit. Most consumers replaced their entire library of analogue with digital, another bonus for CD manufacturers.

Hardware manufacturers are happy, because digital playback has put the average audiophile in a constant neurotic state of flux, always looking at the latest CD player or DAC, as digital is always improving (it needs improving!). To be fair, CD recordings and players have improved greatly over the years, as has solid state electronics, but the first few generations of CD players were dreadful. From my point of view, the single largest benefit from the introduction of the CD was its contribution to the tube revival. Audiophiles found the detrimental digital truncating of harmonics could be greatly helped with tube equipment, and the hard steely highs could be tamed with the same tube equipment. Today most high-end stores have at least one line of tube gear. In my mind tubes still sound significantly better than solid-state equipment. Very few pieces of solid-state equipment can capture the harmonic integrity that comes so easily with tube gear. Tube equipment has also improved with time, and those who remember tubes as midrange prominent, with little highs and substandard bottom end response, should listen to some newer tube offerings.

Tube amplifiers still clip far more graciously than their solid-state counterparts. It may not be for everybody, but listeners should listen to a few different and well set-up systems before they form their own opinions regarding the sound of tubes. Soundstage just comes so much easier with tubes and listener fatigue was never heard of before solid-state equipment became popular. I do not want to single out audio and recording manufacturers as the only industries that are making newer products to lesser build quality and reliability standards than before, as we see this all the time, but what we sometimes lack is an overview and you now have mine. I love what tube equipment does and I hope that qualifying my listening preferences and sharing my opinions will help you get more out of this review. You can disagree with my opinions, but at least you know where this

audiophile is coming from.

Tonality	88
Sub-bass (10 Hz - 60 Hz)	90
Mid-bass (80 Hz - 200 Hz)	90
Midrange (200 Hz - 3,000 Hz)	90
High-frequencies (3,000 Hz on up)	90
Attack	92
Decay	88
Inner Resolution	90
Soundscape width front	88
Soundscape width rear	88
Soundscape depth behind speakers	90
Soundscape extension into the room	90
Imaging	90
Fit and Finish	95
Self Noise	95
Value for the Money	93

## Specifications

### Shrimp Pre-Amplifier

Tube compliment: two 12AT7 and two 7044

Inputs: five RCA line level

Features: Mute switch and warm-up muting delay

Accurately tracking NOBLE volume control

Center detented NOBLE balance control

Record Output

Two sets of unbalanced RCA main outs

Gain: 11.8dB

Frequency Response: 10Hz - 80kHz

S/N Ratio: typically 95 dB A WGT 20-20K

Input Impedance: 250 Kohm

Output impedance: 50 ohms

Dimensions: 19" x 11" x 3 1/2" (WxLxH)

Shipping weight: 15 lbs.

Price: \$1,880

### Snapper Amplifiers

Power Output: 100 Watts in "Class A/B"

Frequency Response: 18Hz to 24kHz

RCA Input Sensitivity: 800 mV RMS for full output.  
XLR Input Sensitivity: About 4V RMS for full output (can be modified  
by factory to 0.775 or 1.22 or 1.8 V RMS]  
RCA Gain: 32dB  
S/N Ratio (A-weighted): about 110 dB  
Price: \$4,250

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