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OUR GUIDE TO THE BEST LOUDSPEAKERS

MBL Radialstrahler 101E Mk II

floorstanding loudspeaker

Alan Sircom

Let's get this out of the way first. The MBL Radialstrahler 101E Mk II is not a new loudspeaker. It's been around for many a long year. And yet, because of availability and the complexity of the project, it got placed in the 'must get round to...' file. Now, thanks in no small part to premier London dealer KJ West One, it's time to address that gap in the speaker line-up.

The MBL 101E Mk II showcases a cylindrical design that is immediately striking. OK, so most people in the audio world know of MBL, know it makes omnidirectional loudspeakers and even know roughly how they work, so the absence of traditional drivers and cabinet configurations might not prove too shocking. But to someone not quite as 'dunked' in the audio environment, the 101E Mk II raises the Eyebrows of Curiosity (sadly, I never got to see the Eyebrows of Curiosity, as they split up before they even formed, which was the way of most bands in the 1980s).

You see, instead of conventional drive, the 101E uses a 360-degree radiating approach that employs a series of tulip-shaped omnidirectional drivers. These are circular emitters, which in the joyously compound-noun friendly German language becomes, 'Radialstrahler'. Each tower stands nearly six feet tall, comprising a unique combination of a 12-inch bass driver in the base section, two midrange drivers, and a high-frequency driver, all aimed at delivering a seamless audio experience both in terms of frequency response and round-the-room performance.

You think that's imposing?

Two large boxes with a giant shiny melon hidden from view by grilles cuts an imposing figure in the listening room... until you place them next to the 101 X-Treme, which has recently been upgraded to Mk II guise. Now that's imposing!. By that standard, these are just... a pair of guard Daleks.

On the rear, the speakers feature a complex set of inputs and adjustments, allowing for versatility in connection, personal taste, and room acoustics. There are three sets of jumper connection, two for the bass and mid section, and one for the HF. Curiously, these are not boosts or cuts to the frequency response or changes to the crossover; they are alternate cabling routes to the crossover using different internal wiring, so that the lower end can be smoother or

have more attack, the midrange can be richer or more natural in approach, and the top-end can be smooth, natural or fast. Using them is more extreme fine tuning than 'what did you change?' but it allows you to dial in the sound well.

They are also biwireable and biampable, and almost every pair you'll ever hear or see will be professionally installed and generally hooked to a set of MBL electronics, so I wouldn't be too fussed about setting them up or hooking them up. At this level, that's someone else's problem. They are beautifully put-together though from the feet on up. The finish is also sublime, even if the standard gold on black livery has a distinct 1970s F1 car aesthetic (you know which one). While they can be placed near walls, the best results come from a more open placement that allows the speakers to disperse sound freely throughout the room.

Careful experimentation and adjustment may be necessary to achieve optimal results. Importantly, these speakers thrive in larger, dedicated listening spaces where they can truly stretch their legs and showcase their capabilities. But, once again, price and size are self-sealing here. No-one's going to put these in a box room and most of that experimentation in installation is done by 'people,' not the buyer. They come with footers that allow accurate placement, because height adjustment is paramount. If you think those omnidirectional melons are like eyes, if you end up with an 'Isiah' system ("one isiah than the other, geddit?") the dimensionality of the sound will be compromised. Remember this if you plan on putting them on different levels of a split-level room.

Astonishing

Once the MBL 101E Mk II is set up, the experience begins. And listening to these speakers really is an experience. After doing so, other loudspeakers seem to be holding something back. The first impression is immediately striking: the soundstage is expansive, enveloping the listener in a 360-degree auditory experience. Whether it's a solo piano piece or an orchestral symphony, the speakers create a sense of immersion that few other loudspeakers can rival.

What grabs you first is the scale of the thing. It holds your attention, totally. The first track played is an unforgettable experience, and if you 'get' what MBL is doing, even if you

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decide not to go with them, that recording is forever marked as your 'MBL' disc or track. For me, that track is 'Like What' by Tennyson. The abrupt synth beats and the track playing with dynamic range has always been a workout for a system. Here, it's a workout for your ears. I thought I had accidentally put on a demonstration track for the MBL's, that's how good that track sounded.

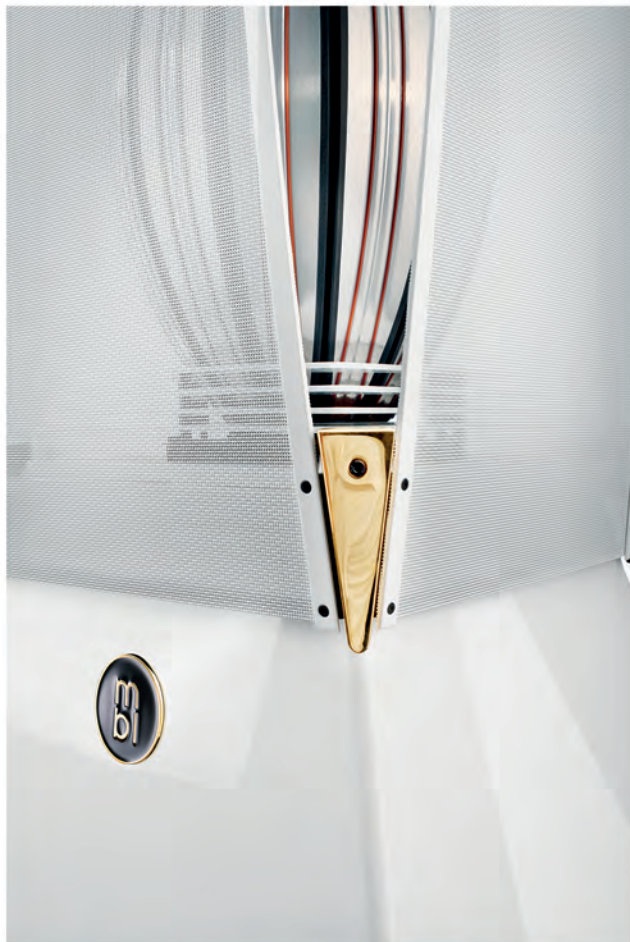
However, unless I got really lucky, I was picking test tracks every time. After about the fourth or fifth, I realised that it wasn't me beating the odds; the things just sound impressive whatever you play on them. I went through everything from 1930s blues to techno, from Mahler to Metallica and back again and nothing phased it, nothing sounded bad. I tried torture test tracks, I tried things that would sound good on a broken portable radio. I played everything from ABC to ZZ Top. Short of Rick-rolling myself or playing some Klingon opera and the Cantina band from *Star Wars*, I gave it my best, I gave it my all, and it shook everything off.

Dynamic range is clearly a forte of the MBL 101E Mk II. The speakers adeptly handle soft passages with the same ease as more intense crescendos. We take it for granted, but the ability to transition from quiet moments to explosive climaxes without distortion or loss of detail is an indicator of top high-fidelity design. This dynamic ability comes naturally to the 101E Mk II and to render music in its 'red in tooth and claw' state is to deliver a compelling and emotional auditory experience that leaves you breathless.

Transients are similarly impressive. Notes spring to life with energy and clarity. Each pluck of a guitar string or crash of a cymbal is perfectly defined and articulated, providing a greater sense of being involved in a live musical experience rather than a recording of the event. In the concert hall, music, the cues we get from transient and dynamic information are what immerse the audience in the experience. And – while seemingly 'out of bounds' when discussing a loudspeaker that big thing is omnidirectionality of image – when you take away the spatial information, what tells you a piece of music is a live event is that dynamic and transient information. It's why if you hear a guitar being played on the other side of a crowded bar, you know almost immediately whether it's a recording or a live musician. The audience of the MBL get something far closer to that live event. It's just an audience of one.



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» The high-frequency response of the 101E Mk II is impressive, too. When you get past the omnidirectional bit, the tweeter exhibits remarkable clarity and detail, effortlessly reproducing the subtle nuances of the recording. Instruments like cymbals and strings shimmer without harshness or sibilance. Of course, saying 'when you get past the omnidirectional bit' in an omnidirectional loudspeaker is a bit like saying "Apart from that, Mrs. Lincoln, did you enjoy the play?" The omnidirectional nature of the tweeter (and midrange) are the reason this loudspeaker exists, so describing it in conventional terms is, ultimately, hobbling. And in that context, it is phenomenally good. But let's stay with the conventional descriptions for now.

Wax lyrical

Despite waxing lyrically about its dynamic range, transient information and treble, in fact the midrange is perhaps the standout feature of the MBL 101E Mk II in a traditional sense. The midrange is rendered with a lifelike presence that draws you into the performance. Listening to everything from classic rock and blues to jazz and vocal performances— out comes Joyce Di Donato again – reveals extremely fine detail and layering. The speakers excel at reproducing the slight variations in a vocalist's phrasing, to such an extent that you feel you could only have a closer relationship with a singer's vocal cords if you were their coach or their surgeon! In particular, the 101E Mk II's ability to reproduce the harmonic overtones of a voice creates an intimate listening experience, making it feel as though the artist is performing right in front of you. It's an uncanny experience... in a good way.

Bass performance is another area where the MBL 101E Mk II shines. The 12-inch bass driver generates deep, extended low frequencies that are both impactful and well-defined. The speakers reproduce the rumble of a kick drum with authority while maintaining control and precision, avoiding 'one-note' bass effects that can plague other designs. As deep bass isn't directional, this is the one part that can fall to conventional cone drivers. However, their biggest issue is trying to deliver the same scale at the same speed as the rest of the speaker. The bass does well here in both aspects. It shares the 'force of nature' intensity of the rest of the loudspeaker's presentation. It trades a bit of speed and doesn't have the kind of attack/release precision that would make the 101E Mk II the first choice of electronica lovers (the endless 'thump' of the bass line of Infected Mushroom's 'End of the Road' was a little more like 'tha-wump'), but it keeps up and fills the room, and integrates perfectly with the rest of the speaker.

Dancing around

We're dancing around the main subject though; the omnidirectional sound itself. And that's both the reason these speakers exist and the reason they are so damn good. For two reasons, and one is also about dancing!

The great advantage to an omnidirectional design is the need for a hot seat is reduced. Yes, it still sounds best when you are in the prime location equally between the two towers/guard Daleks/flying melons. But if there's a group of you listening, or you are apt to take your music 'on the hoof' and pace around, or even if you are a fine host to regular parties and people love to dance in your



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MBL throws down a gauntlet: those who are serious about their audio will find the 101E Mk II to be a worthy investment.



» listening room... the 101E MkII is perhaps the best choice for you because that traditional 'sweet spot' is almost uniformly around the room.

Then there's the listening critically part. And this is where the loudspeaker shines. Music is just 'right' here. Instruments have a physical presence in a way few conventional speakers achieve. Rather than a series of precisely layered instrument sounds in a well organised hologram, the sound is more spatially cohesive. You feel like there's a group of musicians playing together with focus and intimacy. Comparing this sound with 'cone and dome' direct designs is like comparing a jet with a helicopter. They both do the same job of putting people in the air, but they do different things, and they do them for different people. And those who listen to the 101E Mk II and like what they hear are bonded for life. Those are the people who will listen to these speakers and think conventional designs are poor analogies for the real thing.

And what if you go even bigger? My most recent MBL experience (aside from at Munich) was with the big 101 X-Treme, although the previous version, This has a thunderous level of dynamic range and scale that makes

the 101E Mk II seem small. Of course, physically they are small compared to the X-Treme. There are moderate-sized limousines that are small compared to those speakers.

The bigger models are better. Much better. But the 101E Mk II has an ace up its sleeve. It's less demanding of music. If you have a less than wonderful recording, you'll know instantly on the X-Treme, but it's liveable with on the smaller model. If you can call it smaller. I have to admit, I tested this on some Taylor Swift and some Beyoncé recordings because I have no shame! If your collection extends way past the audiophile, the 101E Mk II might be better for you.

MBL throws down a gauntlet: those who are serious about their audio will find the 101E Mk II to be a worthy investment. This speaker does not just reproduce sound; it brings music to life, evoking emotions and experiences akin to live performances.

I began this review of MBL's 101E Mk II saying it was not a new loudspeaker. There's a reason why it has staying power; there's nothing to change. That doesn't mean these living-room Daleks are the perfect loudspeaker because that doesn't exist. But for many, this would be their forever loudspeaker and feel no need to change. One thing's for sure, you can't go back. You are forever changed by the experience. The MBL 101E Mk II is the omnidirectional proof of concept taken to the ultimate degree.+

Our thanks go to KJ West One for its assistance in facilitating this review!

Technical specifications

Type: Four-way floorstanding omnidirectional loudspeaker

Drive units: 24-segment unilinear carbon-fibre bending-mode tweeter, 12-segment woven carbon-fibre bending-mode upper-midrange unit, 12-segment woven aluminium bending-mode lower midrange unit, 12" aluminium cone subwoofer/bass unit.

Frequency response: 24Hz-40kHz

Sensitivity: 81dB/2.83V/1m

Nominal Impedance: 4Ω

Finishes: Piano Black, Piano Silver, Piano White, chrome or gold-plated accents

Dimensions (HxWxD): 152x45x54cm

Weight: 80kg

Price: £65,800, \$91,000, €75,400

Manufacturer MBL Akustikgeräte

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This changes everything!



“ MBL Radialstrahler speakers provide a listening experience, ”
an appreciation of detail unlike any other.

Tony Cousins, Mastering Engineer, Metropolis