

The ModWright LS 36.5 Linestage

by Marc Phillips

I've been in a bit of a preamplifier quandary since I sold my Yamamoto Sound Craft CA-03L a few months ago. I knew I wanted to continue with an all-tube design, but I was also craving something with a little less delicacy, and a little more heft. I wanted a line stage, since I've been lucky enough to sample a variety of excellent phono preamps over the last couple of years. And more than anything in the world, I wanted a preamplifier with a remote control, which the Yamamoto lacked. Once you go infrared, you never go back.





I'd been hearing some buzz about Dan Wright's upcoming flagship preamp for sometime, and having had limited experience with his excellent SWL 9.0 SE preamplifier, I knew I'd have to place this on my short list. After all, I know Dan. I've been to his house, I've stood in his kitchen and I've petted his dogs. He's been to my house as well, the only manufacturer of high-end audio equipment to do so. (Before you accuse me of any shenanigans, know that this was because he lives nearby, and dropped his new preamp off in person.) In other words, Dan got the first chance to impress me with his wares.

The ModWright 36.5 line stage is quite unlike any other preamplifier I have used.

It is truly a substantial beast, weighing more than some of the power amplifiers I've had in my listening room lately (and no, I'm not talking about those class-D amps that weigh 6 pounds and offer 500 watts per channel). Much of this is due to the thick aluminum casework, including a half-inch thick faceplate and solid yet removable side panels. Okay, there's a hefty power transformer inside as well, but the entire chassis is evenly balanced from side to side. For a minute I thought

the 36.5 referred to the weight of this lineage, and was amused to learn that it was actually the weight of Dan's young son Spencer (the line stage weighs a mere 29 lbs. in comparison).

The 36.5 is tube-rectified, using a Sovtek 5ARG/GZ34 rectifier tube in the power supply. The tube complement is also unique in that Dan chose a pair of Sovtek 6H30 signal tubes, which is becoming increasingly rare in preamplifier design. Dan told me that he chose the 6H30 purely for the sound it produced, as well as its linear behavior, and I have to admire a designer who goes against the grain for those purposes. The 36.5 also uses teflon tube sockets, pure Class A circuitry, and Dan's custom-designed MWI oil-impregnated and Teflon capacitors. Needless to say, the quality of the parts inside the 36.5 is unusually high for a \$4995 line stage.

What I like best about the 36.5 is its many features.

This is clearly not a minimalist design. The remote control, for instance, is small and rounded, and fits comfortably in the palm of your hand. You can adjust the volume, of course, and mute as well.

And I really dug the phase inversion button which allowed me to toy around and hear the differences (this may be an excellent educational aid for those audiophiles wishing to train themselves to recognize incorrect phase). My only real quibble here is that I really like being able to switch sources via the remote, you know, so I can show people how much better LPs sound than CDs. That's a bit of a luxury, and I really don't want to sound that lazy, but if Dan truly wants my feedback, there it is.

But Dan really did think of everything else. The 36.5 has five sets of inputs marked BAL (XLR), CD, Tuner, DVD and HT/BP (which can be used as an input for a home theatre surround processor). You can choose between XLR and RCA connections to the power amp (I used both). The volume control, a high-quality Alps potentiometer, automatically turns itself all the way down every time you turn the unit on. And a pair of blue LEDs light the inside of the chassis when the unit is powered, which definitely adds to the coolness factor.

The 36.5 is a certainly a great-looking preamp, but you need to admire it closely.

From my listening position, the features of the front panel tended to blend into a homogenous silver blur, which may be more of a function of my progressively-fading vision as I get older than Dan's styling prowess. Up close, however, you can really appreciate the quality of the 36.5, from the inset logo on the faceplate to that rather showy vents on the removable top plate, which is again are the form of the distinctive company logo.

During the first serious listening sessions with the 36.5, the word that came to mind was weight. In fact, I do not believe that I have ever used that word to describe a stereo component, save for maybe a big whomping loudspeaker or two. But the 36.5 provided weight to the sonic presentation, something I had been missing since I moved to Portland. My new listening room is somewhat smaller than the sprawling, irregularly shaped room I used back in Los Angeles.

For the first month I've lived here, I've been tweaking and toying with everything, trying to recover that loss sense of scale, especially in terms of soundstage depth and deep bass.

The 36.5 proved to be the last piece of the puzzle. Once I inserted Dan's linestage into the system, I heaved a big sigh of relief. The panoramic soundstage I'd been accustomed to back in LA came back to me like one of those family dogs that had been lost on vacation and then had to walk 1000 miles to get home. Not only was I able to recapture that stunning front-to-back imaging that my Devore Fidelity Gibbon Super 8 speakers usually provide with ease, but the Gibbon's surprisingly deep bass performance showed up on my doorstep as well, panting and wagging its tail and licking my face.

This is not to say that the 36.5 is a brute.

If anything, the 36.5 is a tactful diplomat. Over the last few months, I've been using both a McIntosh 275 and a Nagra PSA in my main system. I found that with many preamps, the 275 could be a little too soft overall for my tastes, and the PSA could be just a shade too dry. With the 36.5, however, both amps were much more enjoyable, albeit very different. The 36.5 allowed the 275 to shine, making everything sound warm and glowing and always listenable, even if the recording itself was rough around the edges. And with the Swiss amp, I could hear deep into the original performance, and extract an amazing amount of detail and perspective. The 36.5 seemed to bring out the best in both amps, and at the same time impart certain qualities that I knew were unique to this line stage, such as bass authority, just the right amount of warmth, and a seamlessness from top to bottom.

For instance, I've been quite smitten with MFSL's new pressing of the Pixie's first album, *Surfer Rosa*. I know there are a lot of Pixies purists who think this is their best album. I've always considered *Doolittle* their masterpiece, however, as well as one of my all-time favorite albums.

With the 36.5 in the system, however, I had a greater sense of Kim Deal's considerable participation in each and every song, and now I know why she felt increasingly angry with her diminished role in subsequent recordings, which lead to the demise of the band. I started to agree with the purists that this album was indeed their finest hour, since Kim really did add something special to the mix. And I gained this insight courtesy of MFSL and the 36.5.

This is not to say the 36.5 is best suited for Sturm und Drang. I pulled out one of my favorite Baroque CDs, *Boccherini's Quintets I, II & III for String Quartet & Guitar*, on the Harmonia Mundi label. For the next seventy minutes, I was hypnotized and transfixed by the subtle textures of the strings, and the tactile sensation provided by Richard Savino's lovely guitar. Even my next door neighbors had to come over to check out the source of this extraordinarily beautiful music. They had honestly thought that their new neighbor was a classical musician, and had invited some friends over to play.

I had a long talk with Dan when he dropped off some extra rectifier tubes to play with. To say that Dan Wright is proud of the 36.5 is an understatement. I could hear the excitement in Dan's voice as he talked about the 36.5, and what it meant to the future of ModWright. I've been told to keep this on the down-low, but suffice it to say that ModWright will continue to grow, and offer some new surprises very soon. (My vote is for a killer \$3000 integrated, which I think would definitely impact that market in a big way.)

Then again, Dan could probably rest on laurels for a few years after producing something as good as the 36.5. I could see this linestage emerging as *the* preamp for \$5000 in the same way that his SWL 9.0 SE is *the* preamp for \$2500 among those in the know. Take five, Dan, and enjoy that blue LED glow.

The ModWright 36.5 Linestage MSRP: \$4995

MANUFACTURER

ModWright Instruments
21919 NE 399th St.
Amboy, WA 98601
360-247-6699
www.modwright.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

Michell Orb Turntable/SME
V/Koetsu Rosewood

Power Amplifiers

McIntosh MC275, Nagra
PSA, Clayton Stereo 40

Digital Source

Naim CDX2

Interconnects Cardas

Golden Reference

Speaker Cables

Wireworld Equinox III

Power Conditioner

Running Springs Jaco

