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Digital killed the full-function preamplifier. In the pre-digital era, virtually all preamplifiers were equipped with internal circuits designed to amplify the tiny analog signal emitted by the phono cartridge, and convert the LP's RIAA-equalized signal back to an unequalized form suitable for playback. Early in the post-digital era, however, preamplifier manufacturers came to the realization that many of their potential customers, having recently sent their LP collections to that big pressing plant in the sky, had neither the need, nor the desire to pay for, an internal phono stage. And so the phono-less line stage preamplifier, along with its awkward cousin, the separate phono stage, was born.

Despite the best efforts of many,



the digital era has not spelled the death of vinyl - the high prices being paid for vintage classical and jazz LPs on internet auction sites like eBay is proof enough of that. After a turn for the worse in the early nineties, vinyl is, once again, alive and well and poised to continue its recovery well into the new Millennium. That said, lowering the cost of an entry-level analog playback system and, therefore, attracting new enthusiasts to the fray, is critical to vinyl's continued success. Leading this charge are

companies like Germany's

Lehmann Audio Products who, with their Black Cube Phono stage, have raised the bar for performance in the sub-\$1000 phono stage category - and, quite possibly, well above.

The diminutive Black Cube is really comprised of two black boxes (neither of which is actually a cube, but why quibble.) The first is a 1.5 mm-thick steel case housing the passive equalization and gain stages.

The second (made of plastic) houses the unit's regulated power supply. The two boxes are tethered by a 1.5 meter, shielded, non-detachable cable, which allows the power supply to be placed sufficiently far away from the sensitive equalization and gain circuitry.

For a \$695 phono stage, the Black Cube is surprisingly versatile. Via a set of four internal DIP switches, one can select one of two gain settings (40 dB, for moving magnet and high-output moving coil cartridges, and 61dB for low-output moving coils), and four pre-set impedance settings. To achieve an input impedance that is different from one of the pre-set values, one need only solder a resistor of the required value to the spare slot provided, then switch it on in parallel with some (or all) of the other onboard resistors using the appropriate set of DIP switches. An elegant and flexible scheme for such an affordable device.

The user's manual supplied with the Black Cube is beyond reproach, explaining fully every facet of the

Cube's operation. The two-and-a-half pages of operating precautions gave me a good chuckle, however, as they read like an old Saturday Night Live/Phil Hartman sketch I remember ("Do not touch super fun ball, do not play with super fun ball...") Just remember not to "allow water to enter the Black Cube, especially when raining or snowing, or near a body of water. Otherwise fire or electrical shock may result." I'd better remember to take the Black Cube out of my Old Navys the next time I go to the beach.

I took advantage of the generosity of Leo Massi (owner of Hy End Audio Imports, the U.S. importer of Lehmann Audio Products) and hung onto my sample of the Cube for nearly twelve months before putting finger to keyboard. Why? So that I could audition the unit with a selection of phono cartridges in order to be sure that my initial impressions, which were highly favorable, were not simply the result of one particularly synergistic combination. They weren't.

With the help of The Analog Room's Brian Hartsell (who graciously loaned me two different cartridges when my Benz-Micro L0.4 came down with a terminal case of stylitus), I was able to audition the Cube with the Transfiguration Spirit and a van den Hul retipped Benz-Micro Ruby 2, both of which worked remarkably well with the one-third as expensive Cube. The less expensive Benz-Micro MC Gold also some action.

From the outset, the Cube impressed with its ability to swing. Music with a strong rhythmic foundation was driven forward by

the Cube's terrific sense of flow and pace. On Sonny Stitt sits in with the Oscar Peterson Trio, the awesome rhythm section of Ed Thigpen and Ray Brown provide enough raw energy to heat a small American town - and the Cube communicates all of it in brilliant fashion. On Pat Metheny's Question and Answer (a digital recording rescued from binary hell by Bob Ludwig's skillful mastering), the dynamic duo of Roy Haynes (drums), and Dave Holland (bass) kicks things into high gear, putting Metheny's guitar picking prowess to the test. Throughout, the Cube never missed a beat.



While not as warm and full-bodied as a tube phono stage (like the romantic, but beguiling, EAR 834P), the solid-state Cube was free of grit and grain, and exhibited neither a chesty nor particularly thin coloration (it was also supremely quiet, not unexpected for a solid-state device.) From the raspy Billie Holiday (Lady Sings the Blues), to the tender Sarah McLachlin (Surfacing), to the angelic Enya (Watermark), the Cube was faithful to each unique vocal character. There were times when I pined for a bit more of that meat-on-the-bone feeling that one gets when listening to a tube or hybrid device, but the Cube never thinned midrange textures so far as to sound bleached or bright.

The Cube surprised with its ability to portray soundstage depth in

convincing fashion. The exceptional backing given Billie Holiday on Lady Sings the Blues (comprised of none other than Wynton Kelly, Kenny Burrell, and Paul Quinichette, to name but a few), was placed well back in the soundstage, subjectively some tens of feet behind Holiday's microphone. Burrell's guitar floats out of the background with beauty and clarity. Holiday is stage front and in proper relative scale.

Through the Cube, it's fairly clear that the session was minimally miked, with neither spotlight solos nor a lack of hall ambiance around and between the soloists. Image focus was top-notch (somewhat better, in fact, than the hybrid phono stage in my Audible Illusions Modulus 3A), the outlines of Holiday and her backing musicians being drawn with true precision. If you get off on being able to pinpoint the precise location of squeaking chairs, yawning opera patrons, or musicians breaking wind, the Cube is sure to satisfy.

Soundstage width didn't fare quite as well as depth, lacking the breadth heard through the hybrid MC phono stage in the Audible Illusions Modulus 3A. Through the Cube, instruments placed at the extremes of the soundstage often clung stubbornly to the outside edges of the loudspeakers. While this never bothered me, those who crave a soundstage wide enough to accommodate life-size images of Carreras, Domingo and Pavarotti (is that guy ballooning or what?) may need to adjust to the Cube's slightly narrower rendering.

At the bass and treble ends of the spectrum, the Cube was hard to

fault. The top end, in particular, was highly refined for a device in this price range. The high registers of the piano twinkled and sparkled beautifully - no glassy textures here. Only at extreme playback levels (in my terms, that means SPLs bordering on 100dB) did a hint of hardness creep into the picture that was not heard with the Modulus 3A's hybrid phono stage. A minor quibble, but worth mentioning for those who make a habit of listening at high levels (watch those ears!) At the low end, little seemed to escape the Cube's grasp. From the lightly plucked bass of Dave Holland on Question and Answer, to the subterranean thuds on the opening track of Enya's Watermark, the Cube never failed to deliver.

Black Cube designer, Norbert Lehmann, has done the analog world a great service. He has brought to market an affordable phono stage that competes with units costing far more (no, it's not a Herron VTPH-1 or a Conrad-Johnson Premier Fifteen, but it's not ridiculously far off.) Anyone interested in vinyl playback should make the effort to hear this unit before buying anything else. It may surprise you what can be done for under \$700. It shocked me.

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Magazine: groovenoise
Issue: Feb. 2000
Author: Andrew Chasin

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