



STUDIO MASTERS

Lehmannaudio's highly customisable DIY approach to tailoring the Black Cube's settings reveals the brand's history in the pro-audio sector. Norbert Lehmann was a young audio engineer in Cologne when he founded Lehmannaudio in 1988. His early inspiration stemming from hearing amplifiers with seemingly identical specs producing music that sounded worlds apart. Such contrasting sounds led him to dig deeper into exploring the intricacies of circuit details, power supplies and components before going on to create his own phono preamps.

Launched in 1995, his first audio product was the original Black Cube, which was updated in 2006. Remaining a benchmark in the company's portfolio, the Black Cube still carries elements of its pro-audio heritage inside its case via its input stages, which can also be found in top-notch mixing consoles and professional microphone preamps. Alongside its phono stage product line, Lehmannaudio also produces a range of dedicated headphone amps.

Lehmannaudio Black Cube £400

With its utilitarian looks and pro audio backing, the Lehmannaudio's focus is on performance over style

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Lehmannaudio
Black Cube

ORIGIN
Germany

TYPE
MM/MC phono
stage

WEIGHT
0.7kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
113 x 45 x 108mm

FEATURES
• Optional gain
settings
• Fixed and
customisable load
settings
• External DC PSU
• Optional bass filter

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Compared with the other models on test, the Black Cube won't win any awards for its looks. But within its staid casing lies a very clever product. Sitting above the entry-level £300 Black Cube Statement, the standard Black Cube offers a number of upgrades, including a low-noise 2x 15V DC standalone regulated PSU, with shielded umbilical cord and Neutrik plug, instead of the Statement's AC wall wart.

It uses a passive RIAA equalisation circuit, which some favour over active designs, located between two linear gain stages using low-loss precision MKP foil capacitors. All resistors are of the low-noise metal film variety and the switches for gain and load settings have gold-plated contacts.

On the base are small DIP switches to configure the Black Cube for a range of settings, with 47kohm (100pF) for MM and high-output MC pick-ups, and 100ohm/1kohm settings for low and mid output MCs, while a third setting lets you select a custom load by installing your own resistors on its dual mono circuit board.

The gold-plated RCA sockets are well spaced on the front and rear flanks of its non-magnetic alloy case, which has a special anti-resonance treatment applied to its top cover.

Removing the lid via four screws gives you access to more customisable features, including removing jumpers to adjust the MM's +46dB gain and MC's +66dB gain by -10dB each, with more jumper options to activate a bass roll-off filter and bridge its output capacitors.

Sound quality

As soon as the needle hits the groove I can hear that the Lehmannaudio is able to conjure an expansive and open soundstage. But it's not just the size of the sonic landscape it paints which is of merit, where its strengths also lie is in how it lets instruments and voices work together as a cohesive whole, which really brings the music to life. The way Brett and Rennie Sparks' vocals in the Handsome Family track separate into the left and right channels before being joined back together at the centre of the soundstage largely passes me by with the other phono stages, as simply a quirk in the mix to keep me on my toes. But with the Lehmannaudio in the driving seat, I can hear how this technique subtly reveals each voice to complement the other as the Black Cube brings their unique tonalities to life, more so than any of the other phono preamps in this roundup.



Perhaps revealing its pro audio origins, it majors on a clean sound and its talents are also shown in its ability to clearly define instruments. On the cheaper phono stages, such as the MyGroov and Clearaudio, lead guitars on the Pixies' track sound rich and suitably dense, but not that well separated. Via the Lehmannaudio each chord change and riff is better defined and revealing, with sharper leading edges and a more balanced sustain and decay. At the extremes and when being driven hard via the Ortofon cartridge, it can lean towards emphasising the sibilance in Frank Black's voice, but this is a very minor dent in what is otherwise a superb all-round performance ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Open, detailed and lifelike sound

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Utilitarian case

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★☆ **WESAY:** Get past its dull box, and this is a very capable phono stage that's unbeatable for the money

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL

