

PHONO STAGES

LEHMANN BLACK CUBE SE

Listening out of the box

Lehmann Audio is a German firm closely associated with the professional audio world, where its pre-amps, headphone pre-amps and phono stages are highly regarded as reference-standard components.

The Lehmann Black Cube SE is a phono stage that looks deceptively simple. It consists of a very compact, coated aluminium box with a set of RCA inputs on the one side, and a set of RCA outputs on the other. A fixed cord, terminated with a Neurik XLR socket on the other end, links the unit to an off-board PWX power supply.

This power supply is, in fact, the main difference between this SE version of the Black Cube, and the normal model, which has a smaller, more basic power supply. The PWX power supply employs a 30VA toroidal transformer, and offers a kettle-type power plug, allowing an aftermarket power cord to be used.

Besides its conveniently compact size, the Black Cube SE's most important claim to fame is its ability to be tailored to suit most moving magnet and moving coil cartridges.

Four dip switches at the bottom of the unit allow changes to the gain settings between 46 dB for MM and 66 dB for MC cartridges, while also allowing a choice of input impedances: from 47 kOhm, to 470 ohm and 100 ohm respectively.

In addition, open resistor slots allow further tailoring of the input impedance to precisely match the requirement of a particular cartridge – although I wouldn't recommend this for novices. Rather have a dealer provide and install the necessary resistors.

Even without the resistor slots occupied, the Black Cube's dip switch settings allow most MM and MC types to be catered for. In addition, jumpers inside can be set to activate a low-frequency roll-off filter that attenuates bass frequencies below 60 Hz at a rate of 6 dB per octave – ostensibly to protect speaker drivers from damage due to excessive cone excursion.

Don't be fooled by the Black Cube's diminutive size. The internals bear testimony to a painstaking eye for detail and a focus on quality circuit components. Lehmann claims the input stages are identical to those employed in upper-end mixing consoles and microphone pre-amps.

RIAA equalisation is achieved via a completely passive network employing high-precision foil capacitors, while the resistors are low-noise,

metal film designs. Gold plating prevents losses at the dip switch points.

I was warned by Jade Services' John Topham that the Black Cube demands an extended run-in period, and so I duly powered it up and ran it for well in excess of 100 hours before embarking on any serious listening. Auditions were conducted using my trusty Linn Sondek LP12/Lingo/Ittok/Ortofon Kontrapunkt B record deck.

A variety of interconnects were tried during the course of the review period, ranging from Van den Hul The Second and XLO Signature, to a pair of Nordost Frey interlinks that happened to be on review at the time.

I'm happy to report that the Black Cube easily exceeds any expectations created by its rather diminutive, understated appearance. It may not look the high-end part (discounting, for a moment, just how well the internals are configured), but in sonic terms there's nothing small or simple about this unit's delivery.

I particularly enjoyed the ability of the Lehmann to open up the music. Every performance – from the Alan Parsons Project's atmospheric 'Tales of

Mystery and Imagination' to the plaintive Patricia Barber's special kind of jazz on 'Modern Cool' – seemed to be more accessible, and more cohesively dimensioned.

With the extra air of that open soundstage came an ability to resolve detail that could not be heard before. Or, more precisely, wasn't as obvious before. Not that the Black Cube adds anything; instead, it allows those subtleties to come to the fore because inherently, the component has a lower noise floor, and a more expansive soundstage.

Extracting such fine particles of sound enabled the Black Cube to weave a particularly taut and believable sonic picture. It always seemed to make the most of the signal extracted from a vinyl record's grooves, transforming it into a living, thoroughly believable performance.

With pin-sharp focus and clear imaging, it's no wonder that the Black Cube managed to create an almost eerie sense of presence – and not just from audiophile-grade vinyl. Plain old local LPs, many of them local pressings bought many moons ago, sounded more lively and believable than I could remember.



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VERDICT

Don't be fooled by the innocuous looking black box – this is a seriously good phono stage. Ability to fine-tweak parameters is a huge benefit. Needs lots of time to run in, however.

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Santana's epic 'Moonflower', for one, displayed more verve and energy than I had previously credited it with. And Pink Floyd's 'The Wall' had a haunting, melancholy quality that I had never noticed as vividly before.

Importantly, the Black Cube manages to extract, magnify and ultimately contextualise the music without losing sight of the need for overall balance. Part of this phono stage's magic is that it never sounds artificially boosted or skewed. If anything, the music becomes appealingly liquid and approachable.

While the Lehmann Black Cube scored high marks in staging, focus and accessibility terms, its talents on a tonal level shouldn't be ignored, either. Low frequencies, arguably the most

difficult of all to get right, had the authority and presence required to serve as a solid foundation for the remainder of the tonal spectrum.

Midrange textures and hues were real and gripping, while integrating linearly with the rest of the tonal scale, while the treble was lucid and approachable, sounding neither obtusely thick and creamy, nor thin and aggressive.

Like it or not, but vinyl retains a special charm, a unique intimacy, when played back on a decent system. There's a visceral tangibility to the delivery of a good record deck, and here, the Black Cube is very much part of that process.

Refined and sophisticated, this phono stage allows the meat, the impact, the punch and the scale of the original recording to come to its fullest right. Most of all, it grasps the essence of the music, and thus delivers not only sonic purity, but emotional impact, too.

For the money, there simply can't be a better phono stage. And you'd need to spend a lot, lot more to better it!

Deon Schoeman