

Lehmannaudio Decade Jubilee

This artisan phono stage from Germany has been on a journey of refinement lasting rather longer than a decade, culminating, for the time being, in this Jubilee version
 Review: Adam Smith Lab: Paul Miller

With the notable exception of flatscreen TVs and very high-end hi-fi, generally speaking, technology is enabling smaller product solutions. German brand Lehmannaudio has been leading the charge for bijou components since its founding [see boxout, p63], and the principle is perfectly illustrated by the Jubilee variant of its evergreen Decade phono stage, released to celebrate the brand's 30 years, and retailing for £3149.

The Decade Jubilee phono stage and PWX II LC power supply come in matching cases, far deeper than they are wide or high, but our pictures might give the impression they are half-width components, like the Exposure XM series [HFN May '17 & Apr '18]. A glance at the Jubilee's rear panel [see p65], where the gold-plated input/output RCAs are locked into place, provides a much-needed sense of scale – each enclosure measures just 110x50x280mm (whd).

STRING THEORY

So these are very compact but also very classily designed, which is to be expected as they command a rather hefty £1550 premium over the standard – and lookalike – Decade phono stage. There is a visible difference, however, as both phono stage and the PWX II LC power supply unit sit on Lehmannaudio's new 3S ('3 String') device feet. These comprise a central three-piece 'suspension' combined with additional absorption materials that the company claims convert micro-vibrations effectively into heat. The result of this is 'improved dynamics and clarity, enhanced bass control and more realistic stage imaging'. Four different variants of these feet are available separately, with a black or silver finish, and start at £159 for a set.

RIGHT: Top – linear PSU connects to the RIAA phono amp via an umbilical. Centre – the phono stage combines a FET-input OPA134 op-amp with passive RIAA [centre] and high performance 1510 IC preamp [far right]. Bottom – under the phono box, DIP switches set MM/MC loading

The power supply has been improved over the standard Decade's PWX II model with the addition of thicker copper PCB tracks and a sprinkling of high performance Mundorf capacitors. A 28VA shielded toroidal transformer supplies the main AC section and the unit has twin DC PSU outputs offered on 4-pin XLR connections.

Internally, the Decade Jubilee also claims significant differences over the standard model, not least because the passive RIAA equalisation circuitry is lifted directly from Lehmannaudio's flagship £4599 Silver Cube [HFN Jul '15]. This circuitry comprises, among other things,

a low-noise input op-amp, a brace of foil capacitors in the RIAA equalisation section, and a dedicated output drive IC, which permits longer cable runs than might normally be recommended.

GOOD VIBRATIONS

All of this componentry is mounted on a four-layer PCB. The main function of these layers, according to company head Norbert Lehmann, is to quell any micro-vibrations that find their way into the board. The circuitry is laid out as dual-mono channels, even extending to dual control relays, rather than using one double-pole type.



LEFT: Minimalist chassis are all part of the Lehmannaudio DNA as are simple front panel toggles, here selecting MM/MC input sensitivity, +10dB gain, and a steeper subsonic filter. The PWX II LC PSU [bottom] sits below or to the side

£176 special order option. For auditioning, the Decade Jubilee was fed by my Michell Gyro SE/SME 309 set, using both Clearaudio MC Essence [HFN Aug '17] and Ortofon 2M Black [HFN Mar '11] cartridges.

BIG IMPRESSION

The multi-layer PCB and the new feet are all about minimising the adverse effects of vibration, and while it's impossible to confirm its efficacy in this respect, the Jubilee still makes for a beguiling musical companion. The suppression of background noise is impressive in both MM and MC settings; the lack of hiss when silent, and absence of background noise during playback, are very noticeable indeed. And at times it seemed difficult to associate the largescale, precision performance I was hearing with the compact box(es) on the shelf, because this preamp's sonic stature exceeds its modest physical presence.

Typically, there's no sense of artifice from the Decade Jubilee, which sounds dynamic without subjectively augmenting bass, mid or treble. This doesn't make it sound boring. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth, as it lets your chosen cartridge do the work while faithfully revealing the

'Its sound is typically pure, open and enthralling'

Naturally, the Decade Jubilee maintains the key functionality of its cheaper sibling. In its most basic form, the unit offers 36dB of gain for MM cartridges and 56dB for MC types, with these options selected by the right of three switches on the front panel. The next switch adds 10dB of extra gain to either setting, and the third activates Lehmannaudio's 'soft bass roll-off filter'. This acts rather more drastically than its 'soft' name might suggest [see PM's Lab Report, p65] but will surely eliminate any large bass cone 'waffle'.

SOLDERING ON

Further adjustments are available underneath the unit – I would grudgingly concede that there really isn't room for

much else on the Decade Jubilee – via two sets of DIP switches [see pic, p62]. These select in-built loads of 100ohm, 1kohm or 47kohm, plus a fourth option that switches in an empty resistor location to which a value of your choice can be fitted. Lehmannaudio provides a hex key to open the case, but the operation is probably best left to your dealer unless you are confident with a soldering iron. The remaining options on the DIP switches allow the selection of capacitive loads from 47pF to 1.367nF.

Fit and finish of both units is excellent and they are available with black or silver front panels as standard, or chrome as a

essential character of both pick-up and music. Few cartridges are without some 'colour' of their own, after all...

Using the Clearaudio MC Essence, and with the Decade Jubilee set for MC gain and 100ohm loading, the result was a performance with alluring insight. Lehmannaudio's phono stage brought the main performers to the fore, ensuring their contribution was maximised, but did this without projecting into the room unduly. Rather than attempting to place the action right in your lap, it spread it out slightly further back and between the loudspeakers themselves, giving the music a fine depth perspective and scale.

The Decade Jubilee put Danielle Haim's close-mic'd, delicate vocals at the heart of the action in 'Summer Girl' from HAIM's *Women In Music Pt.III* [Polydor 0250813817], while the tuneful, backing bassline was accompanied by tight, rhythmical drumming. On the subject of bass, however, I would steer clear of Lehmannaudio's 'soft bass roll-off', ↪

GERMANY'S VINYL ENGINE

There is a strong argument to be made for Germany being the 'Vinyl Engine' of Europe. Admittedly, Austria's Pro-Ject holds the European crown for sheer production volume when it comes to turntables and phono stages, but the number of different vinyl-related companies that hail from Germany is still surprisingly extensive. Back in the LP's original heyday, the likes of Dual, Perpetuum Ebner and ELAC led the field, and all three companies still exist in Germany today, the latter returning to turntable manufacturing in recent years [HFN Jul '17 & Feb '23]. In addition, the likes of Transrotor, Clearaudio, Acoustic Signature, Acoustic Solid, AMG, Dr. Feickert, Scheu Analog, Brinkmann, TW Acoustic, STST and more recent arrivals like Langer Audio, are all turntable specialists. Even larger manufacturers more famous for their electronics, such as AVM and Burmester, have added turntables to their model ranges in recent years. Lehmannaudio Vertriebs GmbH, to give the company its full name, may not make turntables, but still remains an active member of this community. The brand was founded in 1988 with its first product being released in 1995 – this was the Black Cube phono stage, a model that is still in production to this day.

LEHMANN AUDIO DECADE JUBILEE



LEFT: The PWX II LC power supply [bottom], connects to the Jubilee phono stage [top] via an umbilical and 4-pin XLR plugs. A second power outlet is also provided

as it does affect low-end output noticeably; conventional rumble filters are far more subtle in their action. Really, if you need the Decade Jubilee's filter to assuage any bass issues, then you have more serious arm/cartridge matching problems to investigate.

And besides, with filter switch firmly off, the Decade Jubilee crafts an enjoyable bass performance. It doesn't dig quite as deeply in pure 'welly' terms as some of its competitors; for example, I have heard Christine and the Queens' 'Tilted' from the album *Chaleur Humaine* [Because Music BEC5610119] rattle my ornaments more effectively on occasion. However, the unit's sound doesn't ever approach 'lightweight', and more than compensates for a slight lack of ultimate impact with its subtle, revealing bass handling.

Playing Jah Wobble's 'The Sun Does Rise' 12in single [Island Records 12IS 587], the Decade Jubilee captured the reggae-influenced bassline with a lightness of touch that allowed the track to bound along joyously. The bass on this track is deep and lesser components can get a little bogged down by it, but the Decade Jubilee danced through it with ease.

FROM MC TO MM

Switching cartridge for the Ortofon 2M Black and dialling up the Decade Jubilee's MM settings proved to be something of a revelation. Using a £3000+ phono stage for around £600-worth of MM cartridge might seem overkill, but it's not often I've heard any unit close the gap between MM and MC quite so effectively. The 2M Black is, of

course, a highly worthy design, but through Lehmannaudio's phono stage it seemed to gain an extra sense of scale and clarity. The result was an enthralling treble performance, with a purity and openness that made everything a compelling listen. Yukimi Nagano's singing on 'Come To Me' from Koop's *Koop Islands* LP [Compost Records 234-1] was breathy and vivid, and locked solidly in the centre of the soundstage, flanked by insistent percussion and lush keyboard and brass.

GRAND DESIGN

Equally, on Mozart's 'Eine Kleine Nachtmusik', performed by the Berliner Philharmoniker conducted by Herbert von Karajan [Deutsche Grammophon 139 004], the Decade Jubilee threw a spotlight on the rich mass of violin strings while offering a formidable sense of scale and grandeur to the whole performance. So, just as a good CD player can bring out the best of every silver disc, Lehmannaudio's diminutive Decade Jubilee phono stage does exactly the same for vinyl. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Given the size of Lehmannaudio's Decade Jubilee, it might be tempting to dismiss it as a cute gadget rather than the formidable phono stage that it is. This flexible two-box solution not only makes the best of MC cartridges, but turns in one of the best MM performances I have heard at any price. If your budget extends this far, then it surely ranks as a 'must hear'. As a bonus, it's bound to fit on your shelf...

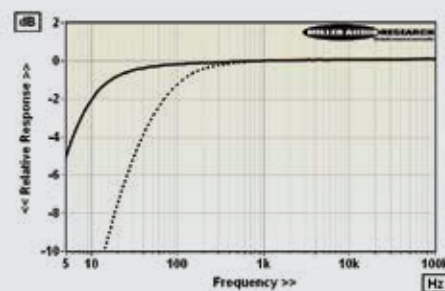
Sound Quality: 85%



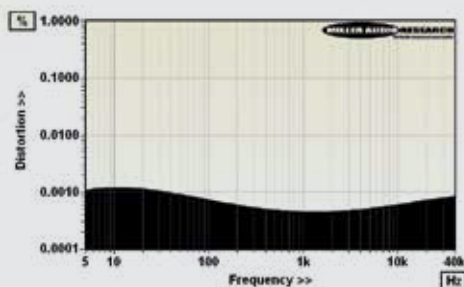
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First tested over 15 years ago [HFN Sep '07] and then again three years later [HFN Apr '10], the two-box Decade phono preamp has been on a journey of evolution. This new 'Jubilee' model includes the enhanced PWX II LC power supply together with upgrades to the component selection generally, and to the passive eq network in particular. The latter now bears comparison with the costlier Silver Cube model [HFN Jul '15] although the Decade's 'hallmark' technical features, including its super-low distortion of <math><0.001\%</math> [20Hz-20kHz, see Graph 2] and extended HF response of $\pm 0.1\text{dB}/300\text{Hz}-100\text{kHz}$ [see Graph 1] are retained in the Jubilee. As before, this Lehmannaudio phono stage already has a sub-100Hz bass roll-off that reaches 20Hz/-0.8dB (7Hz/-3dB) before the subsonic filter option kicks-in at an early 110Hz/-1dB, dropping to a low 20Hz/-7.5dB and providing a full 17dB attenuation at typical sub-bass warp frequencies [dotted trace, Graph 1]. Unless you're hosting large-cone reflex-loaded speakers on a lightly suspended floor, the LF filter will likely be left off.

Again, Lehmannaudio's specifications rather under-value the technical performance of the Decade Jubilee which offers impressive 'real world' A-wtd S/Ns of 86.9dB (MM) and 77.5dB (MC) together with higher input margins than quoted. In practice the rated 36dB/46dB (MM) and 56dB/66dB (MC) gain options arrive at +35.4dB/+45.1dB and +56.1dB/+65.7dB, respectively, while the maximum 45mV (MM) and 4.5mV (MC) inputs in 'high gain' mode are a more generous 50mV and 4.6mV. The clipping limits in standard gain mode are 151mV (MM) and 14mV (MC), the former yielding a solid +30dB headroom if used with a 5mV/1kHz MM pick-up. Finally, residual noise is a low -93dBV (22µV) and maximum output a very high 8.7V. PM



ABOVE: RIAA-corrected frequency response from 5Hz-100kHz re. 0dBV (subsonic filter, dashed trace)



ABOVE: Distortion versus frequency re. 0dBV from 20Hz-20kHz (MM standard gain setting)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Input loading (MM/MC)	47kohm/100pF-1nF / 100ohm-1kohm
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV)	17.0mV / 5.6mV / 1.58mV / 519µV
Input overload (re. 1% THD)	151mV / 50mV / 14mV / 4.6mV
Max. output (re. 1% THD) / Imp.	8.7V / 9.1ohm
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	86.0dB / 77.5dB (MM/MC)
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	-0.8dB to +0.04dB / +0.11dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.00045-0.0011%
Power consumption	7W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	110x50x280mm (each) / 2.4kg (total)