

Lehmann Audio Black Cube Decade

Price: 1450 Euro

by Helmut Hack, Photos: Rolf Winter

If the phono preamplifiers from Lehmann were a football team, the Decade would bear the shirt number ten because it has the overview, can read the game and has the power to decide it on its own.

The Black Cube Decade from Lehmann Audio is a stopgap. At least in Norbert Lehmann's eyes there is a yawning gap between the Black Cube SE and the Silver Cube which can easily accommodate another phono preamp. However, it doesn't fit into the practical small box of its siblings, but rather needs a larger case just like the PWX II power supply. The latter was designed for the Decade, but is downward compatible and even offers a second output. A generous way of active customer retention. Connection to the Decade is made by a screened ca-

ble with Neutrik locking plugs. This connection shows clearly the foundation of the Lehmann philosophy: as much professional studio technology as the generally slightly esoteric cable charmer can bear at home without having his audiophile life-lies collapse. That was mean and not meant that way. Besides Norbert Lehmann never tires of stressing the importance of good cables. And I don't mind phono preamps with sixteen valves, wired freehand using cables made of metal relics from medieval alchemists - au contraire. The Decade only influences

me with its clear-cut lines.

I imagine the development process at Lehmann Audio being characterised by common sense rather than inspiration. Maybe similar to how it reportedly used to be at Quad's: one simply builds the best possible device, period. Pro forma you also make a listening check, but you already know that it sounds good. After all, somebody has taken care of the little details that are forgotten only too often: for example, the heavy aluminium top plate features a damping on the underside - the same goes for the power supply. In the Decade there is a double-sided PCB below it which amplifies phono signals in two gain stages. Between them we see a row of high-quality metal foil capacitors to provide the passive RIAA equalisation network. Such a linear amplification without any frequency response manipulation requires top-grade OP amps if you want a low-noise performance. The Class A output stage with no negative feedback is the same as in the Black Cube Linear and evidentially on par with it. The gain factor of the Decade is adjustable in four steps of 10 decibels each: An MC switch located on the front panel lets you select between 36 decibels for MM and 56 decibels for MC cartridges. Right beside it a high gain switch kicks in another ten decibels in both positions. The third



toggle switch on the front panel which again activates a relay is a so-called soft bass rolloff filter; it cuts the bass with a steepness of 6 dB/octave, thereby protecting the loudspeakers from potentially harmful subsonic frequencies. This is clearly audible which is why I was mostly taking the risk. The loudspeakers didn't complain anyway. Via DIP switches several capacitive (for MM systems) or resistive values of 100 or 1000 ohms (for MC systems) may be hooked up. Plus there is a free slot for the solderless insertion of a resistance of your choice.

Other than the review of the Statement some months ago, I had them send me some resistors in time which were matched to my system. Only to swap my Audio-Technica 33 Prestige for a contesting candidate from Grado

one or two fortnights later. At least I could notice that I liked the Audio-Technica much better when it was terminated with 330 ohms instead of 100 or 1000 ohms. It is definitely worthwhile venturing into this direction. But by no means exclusively: the Decade also doubles as a perfectly neutral basis for a pickup comparison. But I wasn't too keen on confronting it with my own Creek phono preamp, the OBH 15. (Whispered: after the first bars with the Decade I had a sense of foreboding and wanted to spare the Creek's blushes because it had already left kinda faint impression against the entry-level Lehmann. I hope you can do without this unfair comparison. Shush! It's peeping ...)

Well, the Decade is certainly not challenged to the limit by the Scheu Cello serving as the signal source. On

the other hand I always find it extremely exciting to integrate a component into the system which is objectively so much better than its team partners. I'm still looking back wistfully on certain outrageously expensive cables which, so I felt, doubled the engine size of my system. The Decade handles the phono signals in a quite similar way: the wealth of detail is instantly overwhelming and the dynamics jump like Popeye after a can of spinach. So far my Revox CD player has always been barely ahead by a nose with respect to the brilliance and stability of high notes. Now it can't stand its ground any more, it seems downright tired and cloudy. OK, that's a bit too radical. Compared to the CD, bringing the Decade into the phono chain is like lifting the lid off the boiling liver dumpling soup in an already seductive-smelling kitchen. Oh, so late already. I think I'm getting hungry.

In a completely relaxed mood the Lehmann keeps the balance between lush timbres and imperative neutrali-



Professional craftsmanship, high-quality components, a sophisticated power supply, easy capacitance and resistance matching via DIP switches

Listening chain components

Turntable:	Scheu Cello
Tonearm:	Scheu Classic
Pickup cartridge:	Audio-Technica 33 Prestige, Grado Statement Sonata
Phono preamp:	Lehmann Audio Black Cube Decade
CD player:	Revox C221
Tuner:	Sansui TU-X701
Preamplifier:	Unison Research Mystery Two
Power amplifier:	DNM PA3S
Loudspeakers:	LUA Con Fuoco, Audio Physik Scorpio II
Cables:	DNM, Transparent Musiclink Super

Test Phono preamplifier

ty, between temperament and cool analysis. Or, to tell the truth, it can stay out of this and refrains from peculiarities. Because the mentioned extremes are roughly the opposing poles near which I would locate the two pickup cartridges Audio-Technica 33 Prestige and Grado Statement Sonata. The Decade virtually sends a challenge for a pickup comparison as it meticulously sticks by its specifications. It places notes, which the AT appears to deliver one by one like a clockwork, with a firm hand exactly where they belong according to the delivery slip. On the contrary, the Grado sends off the music to the front in a soap bubble which the Decade will burst at the precise moment.

Yet despite the apparent enthusiasm for their differences the little tone cartridges may not play old Harry with the Decade. It always reserves the final control. With the result that the output signal is not too quiet and undistorted at all volume levels I know, up to the max. Furthermore, it's silent - I mean there's not only a little noise, but no noise at all. Subject to an adequate material, nothing but a deep darkness comes from the lead-in groove. This is indeed amazing, the

more so as I have a notion the Lehmann amplifies linearly and with no limiting at the end of the frequency range. In return, substandard recordings are almost stringently exposed without mercy. Certain albums from the eighties, when records and ties had to be slim, sound pitifully pinched compared to a modern, thick record with quality ambitions like e.g. the new Portishead. Production methods certainly also play their part here. Anyway, on the third side of Portishead's Third after "Deep Water" - a sad blues and maybe the most beautiful piece on the album - on "Machine Gun" the beats blow up right in your face like shots. One really feels put up against the wall. This may not be nice any more, but it is truly frightening and so electronically cold like only CD players can sound otherwise. Who feels faint-hearted now should better use the subsonic filter. This will in fact not produce more warmth either, because the chillness doesn't come from the Lehmann, but is eternalised on the recording. Yet the Decade shows no tendency to soften this. It only gets warmer with Ella Fitzgerald and the Cole Porter Songbook. Yawn, very original, I know and this comes to my mind every time before I put it on. Which is what I do pretty often, though, since the heavy Verve pressing sounds outstanding, a true reference and a record which never gets boring, much less so at the moment. The past few weeks have seen a tenacious survival of my hasty verdict that the Decade sounded a tad too cool. Ella is vigorously brushing this phantasm aside. To me it's not a question of tonal balance, spatial rendering and dynamics involvement here, for you'll never have to reflect again about those things as soon as you're the owner of a Decade. It's about the meta level of music - not

about what it is, but what it can be when it works. While I'm barely holding the upper hand in my struggle against the tears, in such unobserved moments my loudspeakers seem to make a hollow back and slightly bend their knees with brass movements - too darn hot. ●

image x-trakt

What we like:

Addictiveness.

What we miss:

Addiction counselling.

What's surprising:

Everything that comes out of the groove.

What to do:

Turn on, tune in, drop out.

image infos

Phono preamplifier Lehmann Audio Black Cube Decade

Inputs:	1 x RCA
Outputs:	1 x RCA
Input impedances:	47k Ω /1k Ω /100 Ω
Input capacitance:	47 pF - 1370 pF
Output impedance:	5 Ohm
Special features:	external power supply, free slot for custom impedance, high gain switch, soft bass rolloff filter
Dimensions (W/H/D):	140/44/280 mm (power supply: same dimensions)
Weight:	audio component: approx. 850 g power supply: approx. 1550 g
Guarantee period:	2 years
Price:	1450 Euro

image contact

Lehmann Audio
Richard-Zanders-Str. 54
51469 Bergisch Gladbach
Phone (+49) 2202/2806240
www.lehmannaudio.de