



Two Budget phono sections compared!

Until now, the market for phono sections for less than \$1000 has been owned, in my opinion, by the Lehmann Black Cube (\$695 - Stereophile Oct. Vol.21 No.10). But the competition has heated up with the introduction of Musical Fidelity's X-LP2. And as I prepared for a shootout, what should show up but a new, improved Black Cube? The phono stage was set.

Both units were broken in using Thor Audio's Phono-Burn, even though the Musical Fidelity unit arrived ready to play, according to MF's Antony Michaelson, who hand delivered it. After burn-in, both units were left plugged in. The Black Cube was placed an Vibrapods.

The listening procedure was quite simple: I played each demo tune twice, once with each unit. Each phono section was set to 100 ohms impedance and maximum gain for the two low-output MC cartridges I used: an EMT TU2 special and a Clavis D.C. Of course, I ensured that levels were equal for both, and made sure that each unit had a turn at first place in the rotation to account for sonic differences induced by vinyl fatigue.

I used Classic Records' 45rpm versions

of Dave Brubeck's Time Out (Take Five") and Also sprach Zarathustra (part one), MoFi's reissue of Getz/Gilberto ("Girl from Ipanema"), Janis Ian's Breaking Silence ("All Roads to the River,"), and a mint British pressing of Elvis Costello's Punch the Clock ("Let Them All Talk"), among other selections. Audio Research's \$6000 Reference phono section (currently underreview) was my reference.

The Lehmann Black Cube (Improved): When I took the new Black Cube out of its box I was surprised by how lightweight it felt compared to the original review sample. What had the designer removed?

He'd changed the case to nonmagnetic aluminum and simplified the construction, removing two side walls of chassis bottom. Circuit changes include a reconfigured, higher-current (text corrected by Lehmann audio) power supply and a new, supposedly better-sounding op-amp from Burr Brown to replace the original one from Analog Devices. (For more circuit details see the original review.)

Once the Black Cube was broken in, I hooked it up with some trepidation. I'd raved about the unit in my original review, comparing it to phono preamps testing twice as much. Now, spoiled by the Audio Research Reference, I wondered if I'd gotten completely carried away in that original review. Oops.

It took only a few seconds of "Take Five" to wake from that nightmare. The «- Black Cube was every bit as good as I'd said the old one was. It developed soundstage off the speaker baffles where I'm accustomed to hearing it with more expensive phono sections, and offered a rich, sophisticated tonal balance similar to the ARC's. Sounding neither solid-state nor tubey, the Cube, like the phono section built into the Ayre K 1, sounded appropriately colorless yet sweet and full-bodied. The \$695 phono section's high-frequency presentation

was open, airy, and free of glare and grain. It was credible and listenable without reservation. The Cube's dynamic performance - particularly in the bass - was as good as I'd remembered it being. There was weight, solidity, texture, and a pleasing sense of control that let me relax into the music.

The Cube's spatial performance was surefooted, with outstanding image focus, appropriate size, and the kind of three-dimensionality and image layering one gets with far more expensive phono sections.

I chose Elvis Costello's "Let Them Talk" because of its musical complexity - there's a blaring horn section, an elegantly and appropriately largesounding Bösendorfer piano, female background singers, and a driving drum-kit-and-electric-bass line, all expertly arranged and mixed by Clive Langer and Alan Winstanley.

The Cube delivered it all with certainty, separating the instruments spatially and tonally while portraying the music's dynamic rhythmic drive. No smearing, mashing, or mushing. The ARC Reference does it too, and even better - but look at the price difference!

The Black Cube was a tough, low coloration act to follow - like closing for the Beatles - but that's where the Musical Fidelity X-LP2 was slotted to perform. On with the show.

The Musical Fidelity X-LP2 (A World Exclusive First Listen): I covered the \$295 X-LP in this column a while back (November 1997, Vol.20 No.11), and though it impressed me as a good value for the money and as an appropriate replacement for the Audio Alchemy VAC-in-the-Box (though it lacked the VAC's gain and loading options) and was therefore recommended, I wasn't able to work up a great deal of enthusiasm for it.

The three-chassis X-LP2 (\$800) is something else entirely. It's a pure dualmono design - each channel has its own tubular chassis - and the outboard

X-PSU power supply is essentially a large, high-current toroidal transformer with four sets of outputs. (This means that if you have another Musical Fidelity "X"-series product, you can plug it in as well.) I used the power supply with Musical Fidelity's X-24K 24-bit/96kHz DAC along with the X-LP2.

Compared with the X-LP, the X-LP2 is said to offer improved RIAA accuracy over a wider frequency range, improved signal/noise ratio, wider overload margin, and "perfect"



imaging. According to the accompanying literature, the X-LP2 has "lower distortion, wider bandwidth, and better stereo separation than any cartridge on the market, therefore any sonic limitations are those of the cartridge, not the electronics." Hmm. Among the unit's more interesting specs is the high-frequency part of the RIAA equalization, which follows the implied curve out to 100kHz. The back of each channel of the X-LP2 sports a pushbutton for switching equalization, which follows the implied curve out to 100kHz.

The back of each channel of the X-LP2 sports a pushbutton for switching between moving-coil and moving-magnet cartridges, an RCA output jack, and two input jacks: one each for MM and MC. There's also an MC loading switch that lets you choose between 100, 50, 25, and 10 ohms. Note that while 47k ohms is, of course, available at the MM input, you wish to run your MC at 47k you're out of luck. (The

same is true of the \$6000 Audio Research Reference.)

The X-LP2 more than gives the Black Cube a run for its money. Both offer very similar overall sonic presentations, though the X-LP2 is slightly sweeter on top and a bit richer in the midbass, but not to the point of adding artificial warmth or a sluggish rhythmic disposition. Tonally, the X-LP2's performance renders solid-state/tube comparisons almost meaningless - which is precisely what I can say about the Audio Research Reference.

(Though with better tubed phono sections you get a quality that I called "traction" in my review of the Conrad Johnson Premier 15, and more "bloom" and liquidity. The X-LP2 exhibited not a trace of hardness or etch on top, and the midrange was nicely fleshed out and harmonically complex.

The X-LP2's rendering of Classic's 45rpm version of Also sprach Zarathustra bettered the Black Cube's, particularly in the string tone, which was gloriously lush and full-bodied. The Black Cube, which has somewhat tighter, "faster" bass, did Costello with slightly more drive, though the X-LP2 did a great job of separating the instruments in space, and of capturing the tonal essence and weight of the Bösendorfer. Both did "Girl from Ipanema" equally well, getting Stan Getz's feathery sax to float convincingly in three-dimensional space. Spatially, tonally, harmonically, and dynamically, the X-LP2 sounds as if it's worth \$1600, not \$800. If you're

considering spending \$2000 or under, don't buy anything until you hear it.

Once I'd finished taking notes for this comparison, I ended up leaving the X-LP2 in the system for over a week, so convincing and pleasing was its overall sonic presentation. I think it's in the same league as the Black Cube - and, for that matter, the \$1200 phono-section option built into the Ayre K-1. The X-LP2 might sacrifice a bit of air, sparkle, and "speed" on top to provide richness and freedom from grain and sibilance, but overall it's a brilliant balancing act that provides absolutely stunning analog performance at a very reasonable price. \$800 for a three-chassis, dual-mono design with an outboard toroidal transformer? How can you beat that?

Wrap-Up: Both the Lehmann Black Cube (www.hyendaudio.com) and the Musical Fidelity X-LP2 (available only via mail-order from Audio Advisor, www.audioadvisor.com) have surprisingly sophisticated power supplies and very high build qualities. I can't recommend one over the other because I could live happily with either, but if you play mostly classical music, go for the X-LP2; if you listen more to rock and jazz, go for the Cube. But do yourself a favor and find a way to hear both - the rest of your system will help you choose.

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page 2 of 2

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