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& Record Review

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Group Test

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Sutherland Ph3D (£800)

Outwardly the Sutherland Ph3D looks like any other slim, black full-width component. Pick it up and you will see that there is no mains cable, feel that it's surprisingly heavy, and hear a slight clunk or two, as the 16 Size-D dry cells inside shift a little in their holders.

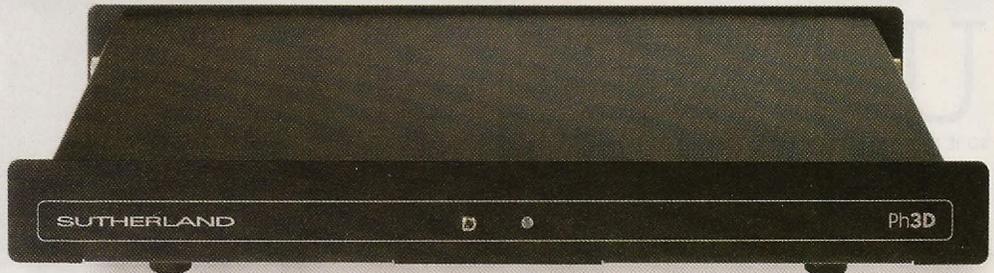
As it relies on batteries, the Ph3D is the only unit in the group to need a front-panel on/off switch. The pilot light next to this also serves as a simple 'battery low' indicator. When the voltage from the cells drops too far, the light won't come on.

A simple back panel carries only input/output phonos and a grounding post, and you need to remove the cover to set gain and loading options. Sutherland, like Moon, has avoided the usual DIP switches. Movable gold-plated jumpers are used instead, providing gain settings from 40dB to 60dB in 5dB steps and load options of 100, 200, 1k, 10k and 47kohm. These are so clearly laid out and labelled that you hardly need to consult the instruction book.

MOVING AIR

With the Sutherland Ph3D, the *King James* soundstage seemed even wider than with the Moon, and still seemed to have depth even at the corners. At the same time, James's solo trumpet has a little more crackle and fizz about it.

From the opening grooves of 'Motherless Children', the Sutherland seemed to convey a sense of urgency and push that was really stimulating, if almost too anarchic at times. There was a good, extended and air-moving quality to the bass guitar, combined with a sense of immediacy and better bass tune-playing ability than the Moon.



On 'Easy Money', I found the Sutherland very enjoyable, sounding almost jaunty. The familiar double-bass intro was nicely full but still rhythmically commanding. Rickie Lee's vocal was clear and limpid, with a feel of studio ambience around it. The rhythm throughout the song had a gently insistent bounce, and the drummer's brushwork was beautifully conveyed.

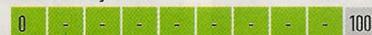
Above all, you could believe that these musicians were not just dubbing parts over existing tracks. They really were playing together.

Over on the moving-magnet setup, the Sutherland seemed to me, more noticeably than any of the other units so far, to display the same kind of character it had shown on moving-coil.

It sounded big, energetic and lively, the brass sounding punchy, and even, I thought, with a tendency to shout too much. The bass that was quite weighty yet not heavy-footed, really gave the music a bit of a bounce.

In fact for me, the Sutherland really shone on the James band's drum feature, 'Cherokee', where it seemed fast, responsive and foot-tapping, allowing big-hitting drummer Les DeMerle, surely a disciple of Buddy Rich, to put a smile on my face.

Sound Quality: 83%



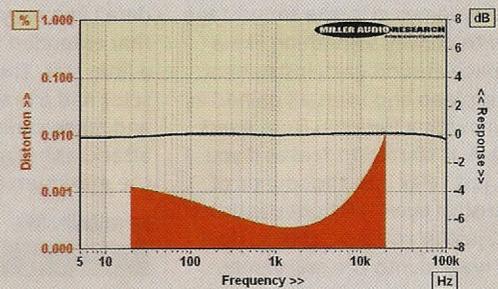
ABOVE: Rear panel connections are limited to the usual RCA phono input and output sockets and grounding post. Setup adjustments are to be found inside

ABOVE: The Ph3D should be turned off when not in use to avoid wasting battery life, hence the front-panel on/off switch

HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Much of Sutherland's literature is given over to the benefits of its battery PSU but we were provided with no numerical data by way of confirmation. Low noise is a key claim and, with an impressive 91.5dB A-wtd S/N ratio via its lowest 40dB gain setting, the Ph3D is up with the very best. Nevertheless, other phono preamp solutions with mains-fed PSUs still achieve as good if not better results (including Moon's 5.3RS). There's no questioning the calibration of the Ph3D's gain, however, with its 40dB, 45dB, 50dB, 55dB and 60dB options testing as +40.4dB, +44.9dB, +49.3dB, +55.2dB and +60.5dB, respectively.

Distortion is very low through bass and midrange (down to 0.0003%) but increases sharply to 0.013% at 20kHz [red infill, below] even though input overload margins are generous at 81mV (+40dB setting). Both the Ph3D's output impedance (19.2ohm) and RIAA-corrected response are very flat and, in the latter case, hugely extended at 5Hz-100kHz ± 0.3 dB [black trace, below]. Subsonic signals, including LP warps and arm/cartridge resonances will not be attenuated by the Sutherland. PM



ABOVE: RIAA-corrected response (black) from 5Hz-100kHz plus distortion versus frequency (red) from 20Hz-20kHz

Input loading (MM/MC)	10k-47kohm/100pF / 100-1kohm
Input sensitivity (MM/MC re. 0dBV)	9.41mV / 0.89mV
Input overload (MM/MC)	81mV / 7.7mV
Maximum output (re. 1% THD)	8V
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 5mV/500µV in)	91.5dB / 74.5dB
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.10dB to -0.32dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, re. 0dBV)	0.00023-0.012%
Power consumption	N/A
Dimensions (WHD)	432x51x305mm

GROUP TEST VERDICT

• CD PLAYERS • TURNTABLES • CARTRIDGES • PHONO STAGES • AMPLIFIERS • HEADPHONES • SPEAKERS •

Our six phono candidates naturally split into two groups, three falling below the £1000 price point while the other three will stretch your finances further.

Of the less expensive contenders in this group, the one that has been around longest is the Acoustic Signature Tango mkII. It's still a satisfying piece of industrial design offering good sound for the money, and could still be a good buy if you want a great-looking phono stage that you can fit without fuss.

Almost the opposite is the Aqvox Phono 2 CI. It can give a more layered sound than the Tango and is a tweaker's delight. Its front-panel gain controls will have you endlessly fine-tuning, while its balanced inputs will lure you into re-cabling your turntable. Judged on its single-ended performance alone, it is fairly good value, and if you are tempted by the balanced route it could certainly be a good way to go.

Completely different again, the American Sutherland Ph3D is really a lower-cost version of the designer's ultimate phono stage, doing without the big model's power management and rechargeable batteries. If you remember to turn it off when not in use, the Ph3D's 1200-hour non-rechargeable battery life should be enough for at least a few months'

listening. As for sonics, the Sutherland delivers an arrestingly lively sound, not matched by any other product in this group.

UP IN PRICE...

Of the three higher-priced units, the newest design is Thorens' TEP 302. It produced a sound that could seem bustling and vivid but I felt it did not quite measure up to what could be done at this price. It was almost as if there was a good phono stage inside trying to get out, and I suspected it could have been transformed by a better power supply. A suitable choice if you're pairing it with a big Thorens turntable, but otherwise not the greatest value for money. Also made in Germany is the Lehmann Black Cube Decade. It offers a very high standard and majors on precision, detail retrieval and perfect balance in terms of frequency response. Combining excellent build with sensible features, it is the only unit in this group to offer MM/MC switching from the front panel,

along with an additional switchable 10dB gain and a subsonic filter.

Finally, we come to the Moon LP5.3RS. The LP5.3 has been around for some time, but products with the 'RS' suffix are said to benefit from better materials and parts, such as gold-plated circuit boards together with better capacitors.

This may contribute to the Moon's refined sound with good and natural imaging, better in this respect than the Lehmann, though still with a

certain subtle quality of restraint. The Lehmann wins if neutrality and accuracy are high on your list of priorities.

FIRST CHOICE

If absolutely forced to choose a single winner,

I would personally have to choose the Moon LP5.3RS, though the Lehmann Black Cube Decade will be first the choice for many.

And even then, it would still be nice to have a Sutherland on hand for special occasions. ☺

'Our six phono candidates split into two groups...'



ABOVE: Outstanding – Moon LP5.3RS
LEFT & BELOW: Lehmann Black Cube Decade and Sutherland's Ph3D

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