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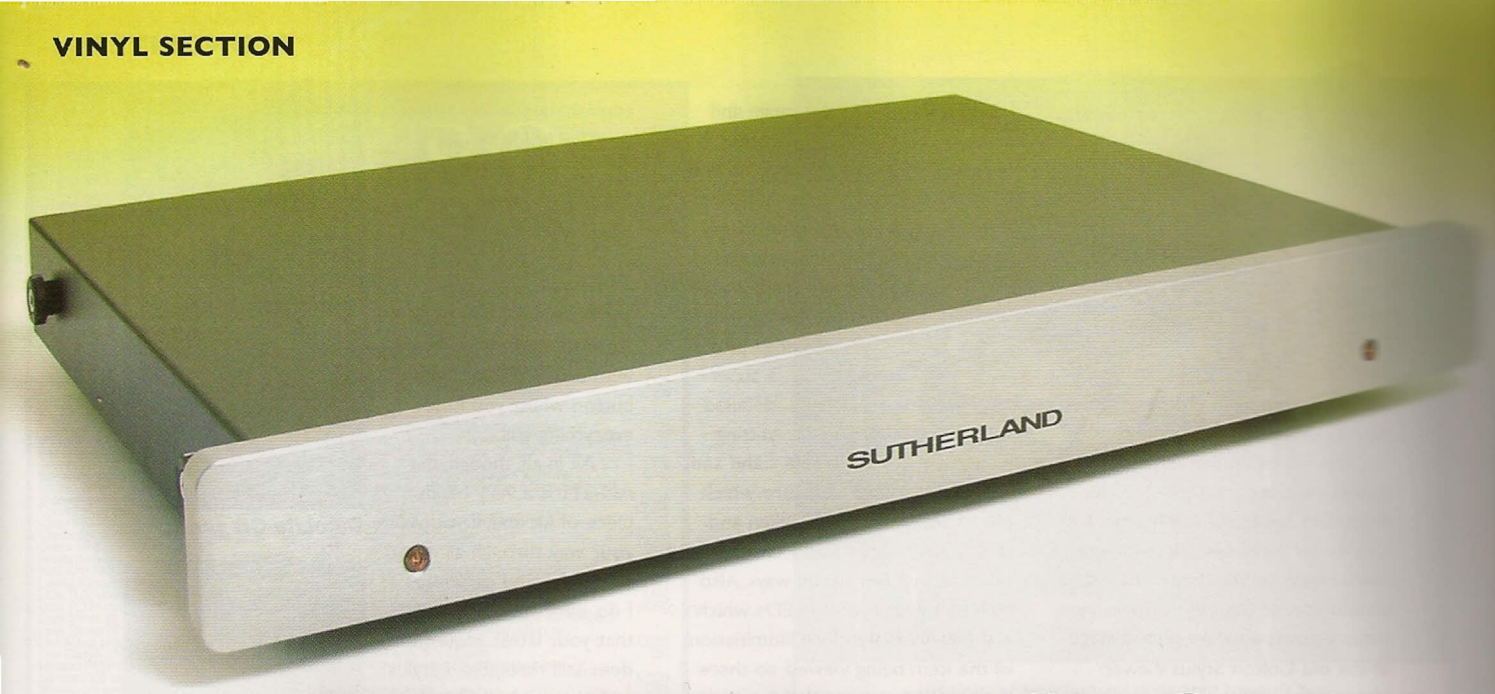
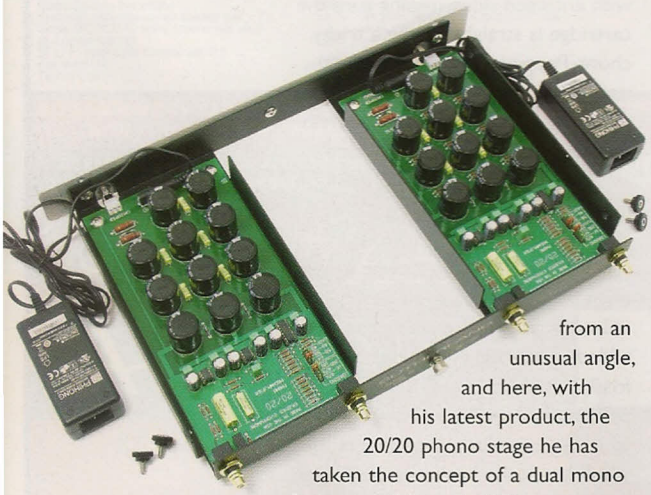


20/20 Vision

Tony Bolton casts his gaze at the new Sutherland 20/20 phono stage...

A couple of months ago I mentioned that I like to approach a review with as little prior knowledge of the product as possible. Unfortunately in this case that was not possible. To start with there was a great big stars and stripes flag, and the logo 'Made in the USA' on the box, and I happen to know that designer Ron Sutherland has a long standing presence in the hi-fi industry, being one half of the partnership that created the Martin Logan range of loudspeakers. The somewhat idiosyncratic approach to the design of these speakers should give the reader some idea of Ron's ability to approach a design issue from an unusual angle, and here, with his latest product, the 20/20 phono stage he has taken the concept of a dual mono design possibly to its limits...



There are a lot of 'dual mono' phono stages and amplifiers around, but I know of no other that takes that concept as literally as having two completely separate units, each having its own separate power lead, and whose only connections to each other are the lid and front and back panels of the casework which houses them. Sutherland refer to this as 'two mono'.

The casework is reassuringly substantial, a lot of the 11lb (5kg) weight being accounted for by the 14 gauge cold rolled steel chassis, and the 1/2 inch thick anodised aluminium front panel. The unit measures 17 x 2 1/4 x 12ins (w x h x d) so should fit onto most racks without any problem. The front is ornamented by the name and a pair of gently glowing pale orange LEDs that signify power is present. The back is nearly as sparse with a centrally mounted earthing post, and two sets of gold plated, Teflon insulated phono sockets for the signal input and output. Power comes from a pair of 'regulated tabletop power supplies', that seem to be a step up from the more usual 'wallwart'. These have an IEC socket at one end and a captive lead which plugs into the phono stage at the other. To do this, the inside of the phono stage has to be accessed (easily done by undoing the four plastic knobs on the sides of the cabinet, and lifting the lid off).

Once inside, the power sockets are located at the front of the circuit board. This rather unusual approach ensures that there are no power leads running inside the shielding casework, to minimise any risk of interference with the signal carrying circuitry (or as the manual puts it, "on your car the gas (petrol) cap is very near the gas tank. It is not located at the opposite end of the car"). This is the fourth phono stage that Sutherland have made, and it is claimed to build on the knowledge gained in making the battery powered PHD, PH3D and Hubble units. The idea being to provide an AC powered unit that behaves like a battery powered machine, for those who don't want the hassle of batteries.

The power then goes through ten cascaded stages of passive RC filtering using Wilma Polypropylene capacitors, before meeting the IC gain stage itself. This is well specified with Dale/Vishay 1% metal film resistors and custom wound 1% polystyrene capacitors in the equalisation circuit. All of this is mounted on heavily plated fibreglass circuit boards. At the back left of the boards are a set of jumpers. these control the gain (five options from 40dB to 64dB are available) and the cartridge loading, 47.5 kOhm to 100 Ohm, again in five steps). Once power is supplied it takes about ten seconds for the unit to become live, at which point it automatically un-mutes itself and listening can begin.

SOUND QUALITY

The unit arrived configured for 100 ohms and 64dB of gain so I

started listening using the Ortofon Kontrapunkt a on the Clearaudio Master Solution playing Amy Winehouse's LP 'Back To Black'. By side two I was thoroughly immersed in the sound, enjoying the detailing of the backing instrumentation. It wasn't pushed forward in the mix, but had its own place alongside the singer, making subtle little details more obvious than they sometimes are. Here I felt that the vocals were placed within the mix, rather than standing slightly proud as is often the case, making for a very balanced rendition. Indeed the midband smoothness and detail proved more akin to that of the NAT Signature battery powered valve phono stage than I would normally expect from a solid state device. The size of the image was smaller than that of the NAT, but equally well furnished and spread convincingly into the room, with a feeling of air and effortlessness that helped with the illusion that I was listening to a performance not a recording.

Having aired Amy's slightly melancholic view of the world, I moved to the rather more romantic strains of Renaissance's 1978 LP 'A Song For All Seasons'. I'm not a great fan of 'long-haired guitar twangling', but have always loved the track 'Northern Lights' since I first heard it on *Top of the Pops* when first released as a single. I remember being hooked by the vocals and the groove of the bassline which has continuing prominence throughout the tune. Because of this, I find the record quite sensitive to the speed and accuracy of the bass. It can very easily sound rather draggy. Here, I am pleased to say, it had a sprightly skip to its step, and was so absorbing that I just had to play it again!

Finding myself in a vaguely folky mood I dug out the soundtrack of the 1986 John Hughes film 'Some Kind of Wonderful'. Most of the tracks are a bit rocky for my taste, but I love the version of 'Can't help Falling In Love' by a group who rejoiced in the name of 'Lick the Tins'. This starts with an Irish folk influenced solo drum, which then is joined by guitar, flute and penny whistle, before the vocals start (as you realise, this bears little resemblance to the Presley original). The performance was captivating, being tightly timed and thoroughly explored, but in a very effortless and unassuming way. I found I was just enjoying the music, rather than focusing on my job of analysing the sound.

Several hours later and I had musically wandered back to the nineteen forties, via an eighties compilation of 'The Andrews Sisters Live'. These tracks were recorded for broadcast on Bob Crosby's 'Club 15' radio show between 1949 and 54, so benefitted from the recent introduction of tape into the studios, resulting in a true high fidelity recording, albeit in mono. I rapidly forgot about the equipment that I was listening to and got lost in the vivacious approach that Patty, Laverne and Maxine had in front of an audience. They weren't quite present in the room, but pretty close to it, with the orchestral interplay with the vocals beautifully displayed.

At this point I moved the 20/20 to the upstairs system to see how it responded to the MusicMaker III, moving iron cartridge on the Sondek. After a quick lift of the lid, and resetting the jumpers to the 40dB and 47.5 kOhm positions and I settled down to Rachmaninov playing his Second Piano Concerto, accompanied by Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra. The original performance was cut to wax on April 10th and 13th 1929, and transferred to this LP in the late 1950s by HMV. Even for the period the recording quality wasn't great, but here full credit must go to the Sutherland. It avoided the twin pitfalls of either sounding very thin and flimsy, or going too far in the opposite direction and trying to beef it up, resulting in a rather cloudy rendition. Instead I was left aware of the fact that this as an old recording, but then my mind's focus moved back to the important bit, the music itself.

Anyone used to a modern performance would find this one quite strange. The composer's pacing of the piece is a lot faster than seems currently favoured (or maybe he was just a little more dexterous in his fingering of the notes - Rubenstein famously described the concerto as unplayable when it was first published in 1901!) and I felt that I was able to look far enough into the recording to follow the different strands of the orchestra and be aware of Rachmaninov technique and mastery of the keyboard. In short, it was totally absorbing.

CONCLUSION

Looking back through this article I see that I have used words like 'immersed' and 'absorbing' quite a lot, because the Sutherland 20/20 is a very persuasive piece of equipment. I could be hyper critical and comment that the edges of the higher frequencies didn't have that gilding smoothness that only comes from valves, or that I have heard bigger and possibly more open soundstages from other phono stages, but I come back to the point that the 20/20 persuades the listener in a very subtle, almost subliminal way, of the 'rightness' of the sound emanating from the speakers. I felt it was well balanced, with a tight and seemingly accurate description of the sounds relayed through it, and an almost hedonistic delight in that hard-to-define essence of music. I enjoyed listening to the Sutherland 20/20, and I would certainly put this high on the auditions list if you're looking for a flexible and musical phono stage. Although not cheap, it's surely well worth the money invested in it.

VERDICT
Well engineered, smooth sounding phono stage with a charm of its own.

SUTHERLAND 20/20 £1,999
Musical Design Company
✆ +44(0) 1992 573030
www.mdc-hifi.co.uk

FOR
- natural flow to rhythm
- engaging midband
- MM and MC

AGAINST
- lacks tube smoothness
- low gain for low output MCs

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The RIAA equalisation accuracy of this phono stage was very good, so it will sound well balanced tonally. There is no warp filter and gain extends right down to d.c. it appears, so whilst bass will sound strong, aided by warp info, cone flap will be an issue with warped records when using reflex (ported) loudspeakers.

The gain values quoted were met exactly, lowest gain for MM cartridges being a useful x100 (40dB) and highest gain for MCs a modest x1585 (64dB). Very low output MCs could usefully do with more than this to avoid volume being turned right up at the amplifier so the Sutherland will not always suit. Overload was set by the usual silicon chip limit of 9V rms, making input overload 9V (use 9000mV) divided by the gain, so with x100 gain for MM it is 90mV and with max MC gain it is 5.7mV, satisfactory values.

Noise was reasonably low, low enough for MMs and high output MCs like Ortofon Cadenzas. However, an equivalent input noise value (IEC A weighted) of 0.095uV is around 4dB noisier than many top MC stages so it is not ideal in this role.

The Sutherland is very accurately engineered, which is how it should be with modern CAD programs. It is good, if possibly not ideal for top quality MCs. NK

Frequency response (MM & MC)	1Hz-31.5kHz
Separation	>100dB
Noise (e.i.n. A wtd)	0.06 / 0.6uV
Distortion	0.0018%
Gain (MM/MC)	x100 /40dB, x1585/64dB
Overload	9V out

FREQUENCY RESPONSE