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Reprint

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Headphone amplifier Lehmannaudio Linear SE:

Quality of experience



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The southern end of Manhattan has been flooded. Where cars were rolling just a minute ago, a ship is now clearing its way through New York's urban canyons. While the temperature keeps falling in Roland Emmerich's movie »The Day After Tomorrow«, it goes up and up in the audience. Fear is spreading. Of course, there are different ways to experience this scenario. The scope of possibilities ranges from the full-fledged home cinema to a notebook computer with built-in loudspeakers. It's logical that the degree of emotional turmoil depends on the equipment in use. Over the 1" broadband speaker of a computer the cracking of an ice block sounds like a breaking matchstick. Or otherwise put: simply ridiculous. Using a headphone can be a remedy, that much is clear – provided it is driven by a suitable amplifier which has been custom-designed for this purpose. Such a device is made in Bergisch-Gladbach.

Good for your ears

Besides their excellent phono preamps Lehmannaudio has also established a reputation during the past years with special amps for headphones: with the entry level Rhineland (ca. 370 EUR) to the Linear (ca. 770 EUR) to the luxury version, the Linear SE, which is ready to change ownership for a price starting at 1,450 EUR. Who prefers to acquire this

I beg your pardon, the headline was actually supposed to be 'quality of result'. After all Lehmannaudio stands for the typically German art of engineering: intelligent, efficient and very durable. But the Linear SE headphone amplifier can also put its beautiful aesthetic in the balance.

machine with an exclusive real wood veneer, must shell out another 350 EUR. Sounds like a lot of money, but one look at the perfect housing puts the additional charge into perspective. At least none of the editorial staff wants to have their Linear SE »naked« any longer.

In addition to the company logo, a blue On LED and a smoothly rotating volume control there are two parallel 6,3" jack output sockets on the 5" wide front. By the way, customers are invited to create their personal Linear SE, for Lehmannaudio offers three colours each for the front panel and the knob: aluminium, black aluminium and chrome. The bright LED is even available in six colours. However, the matching procedure takes the biscuit with no less than eight (!) different housing versions. In view of the stylistic command re-

garding the choice of options one can hardly believe that firm owner Norbert Lehmann is an engineer. Because these people are often said to be resistant to advice when it comes to aesthetic. Approached upon the subject, Lehmann explains that he's still responsible for the high-class technology, but has also developed an understanding for the fact that in the high-end sector the eye also plays its part in the purchasing judgement. So he engaged designer Guido Gutenstein to style the Linear SE. A big compliment for this decision, the more so as other competitors in the market are either reluctant or unable to take this step which is so important for the product. Unfortunately there are of course also those producers who hide outdated or insufficient technology behind a posh front.

Behind a beautiful façade ...

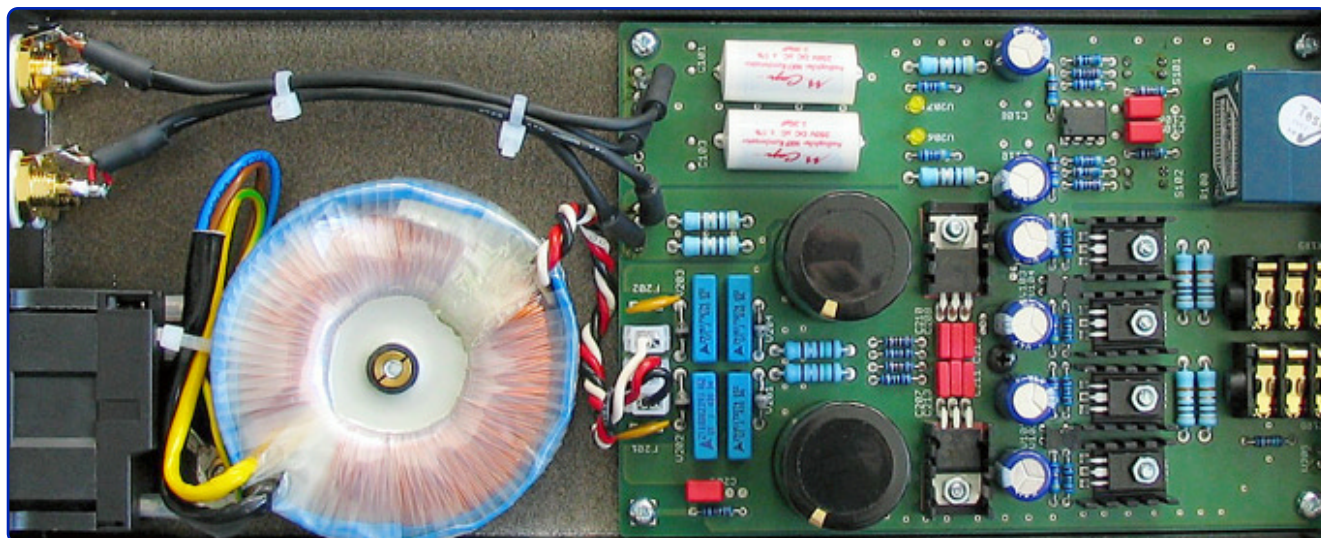
...the Linear SE reveals a reasonable technical recipe by contrast which apparently only the best ingredients were selected for. The volume level for the headphone and the equally present preamp output (!) is controlled via an Alps pot. From the PC board to the RCA input or output respectively we are spotting 5" cables. Instead of cheap bellwire Norbert Lehmann uses the Mogami VW-1 with its excellent conductivity and, above all, sound properties. The fact that in quite some pretentious headphone amps with high ambitions and an adequate price their makers are very stingy with the material they use in this place, is commented by the designer from Bergisch-Gladbach: »This is a colossal cheek. First because it doesn't comply with the pursuit of truly the best



sound quality, and to my mind it's also an inconceivable disregard for the customer.«

The components, too, are once more of the highest grade. For instance we can find some of the wickedly expensive MKP caps from Mundorf. »Not because it's costly, but because it simply sounds better«, so the designer's statement. And he continues to explain the next step: on the bottom side of the housing there are not the usual little rubber or plastic adhesive feet, but vibration-damping products from SSC. Who has ever determined the influence of microfuses on the sound quality, will not be surprised at the AHP type inside the Linear SE. Could it be that finally someone has thought the subject through to the end?

Yes, for Norbert Lehmann knows what really matters in headphone amplifiers. Most of the solutions built into pre- or integrated amplifiers are either totally unable or not adequately competent to meet the technical requirements set by the



AMPLIFIER

The whole equals more than the sum of its parts – and these are already on the finest quality in the Lehmannaudio Linear SE.

different headphone models. That's the reason why there are indeed separate headphone amps.

In order to run the headphones with the right level on the Linear SE, the level can be boosted in two steps of 10 dB each via DIP switches located on the bottom side of the housing – needless to say, individually adjustable per channel.

Logical consequence

Of course, such an extravagance is fueling our expectations for the listening test. Do you remember the scenario of New York being flooded that was depicted at the beginning? With the Linear SE receiving its signal from Musical Fidelity's V-DAC D/A converter and passing it on to the Beyerdynamic TP 70, the soundscape is unfurled in an impressive, i.e. authentic way. An intriguing quality of the headphone experience is the increase both in wanted as well as unwanted details. Because those who watch the film in the dubbed version will be surprised at the funny noises every now and then.

But the Lehmannaudio Linear SE is made primarily for music. Therefore we are now loading the Pure-Music software and the iTunes data base which contains Apple-Lossless encoded tracks exclusively. Then Herman van Veen gets started with his »De Fluter«, first piano and pipes live, then it vanishes into the playback. Van Veen is complimenting a musician and we are just sitting among the audience, nothing unusual. The emphasis on the whole and not e.g. on tonal sections predestinates this headphone amp for long-time listening.

Over the headphone output of an Apple iMac »Alfie« by Patricia Barber sounds unacceptable; hooking up the Chan-



nel-D »Pure Music« software doesn't change a bit about the acoustical catastrophe. Dull, hollow and lifeless is the sound of this sublime recording, so one cannot even bear listening through one whole track to the end. Only the return to Musical Fidelity's V-DAC and the Linear SE restores the tonal harmony and, owing to the outstanding sound quality, produces a very unique form of enjoyment. Never before did we listen to such a headphone amplifier!

Right at the source

Finally the Linear SE must demonstrate how it gets along with SACDs readout by the Marantz SA-KI Pearl. Los Angeles Guitar Quartet, the name of this ensemble may well be remembered by everyone. Not only with the track »Café-zinho« the Lehmannaudio can fully act out its qualities. With a feeling for time and rhythm as well as flawless resolution it manoeuvres through the piece, leaving both the integrated headphone output of the Marantz and its counterpart in the Audionet SAM G2 appreciably behind. By the way, this reveals a fundamentally different approach. A lot of manu-

facturers regard the headphone socket as some malady which is probably not to be avoided, and the quality will be correspondingly low then. This attitude dates back to an era when headphones were only used in rental flats during the night hours after 10 p.m. Norbert Lehmann has approached the subject in a different manner and solved the task with »summa cum laude«. Over the Linear SE headphone listening develops a substantial pleasure factor that involves anything but the word »compromise« – a warm welcome for the new reference!



Test result

The Lehmannaudio Linear SE is a superb sounding and reasonably equipped headphone amplifier which can even double as a single source preamp if need be. Without neglecting even the smallest of details, this amp's nonchalant style of play can instantly win you over. For those who have been critical or even disapproving of the headphone issue for sonic reasons, the Linear SE can provide a safe access to complete enjoyment. And those who already use headphones regularly will be wondering after several pieces of music if they can still trust their own ears. Because sound-wise the new i-fidelity.net reference plays in the ultimate league!

Olaf Sturm *ifn*



Facts

Features

Inputs: 1 x RCA, 1 x mains
 Outputs: 1 x RCA; 2 x 6.3 mm
 Neutrik jack sockets
 Output impedance headphone
 output: 5 ohms
 Output impedance line output:
 60 ohms

Special features

- Three switchable gain factors
- SSC feet
- Mogami interior wiring
- Mundorf components
- Various real wood veneers

Dimensions (W x H x D):

12 x 6 x 29.5 cm

Weight: 2 kg

Price: from 1,450 EUR
 (Review model: 1,800 EUR)

Warranty: 2 years

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Reference

Sound quality

Superb

Features

Superb

Workmanship

Very good

Overall score

Outstanding

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Lehmannaudio Linear SE
Test verdict: superb