



Sutherland Ph3D Phono Stage

By Marc Phillips

More than any other type of component, phono preamps seem to gravitate around certain price points. For \$300, you can buy a relatively basic MM phono stage that will be an appropriate match for a decent entry level table from Music Hall or Rega. For \$600, you can buy an even better-sounding unit that may allow you to experiment with loading options, or even let you investigate low-output MC cartridges. By the time you hit the \$1000 price point, you're dealing with units that begin to truly distinguish themselves sonically. If you're looking to upgrade to something like a Michell Gyrodec SE, VPI Scoutmaster or Rega P7, you really should be considering a phono preamp at this level at the very least.



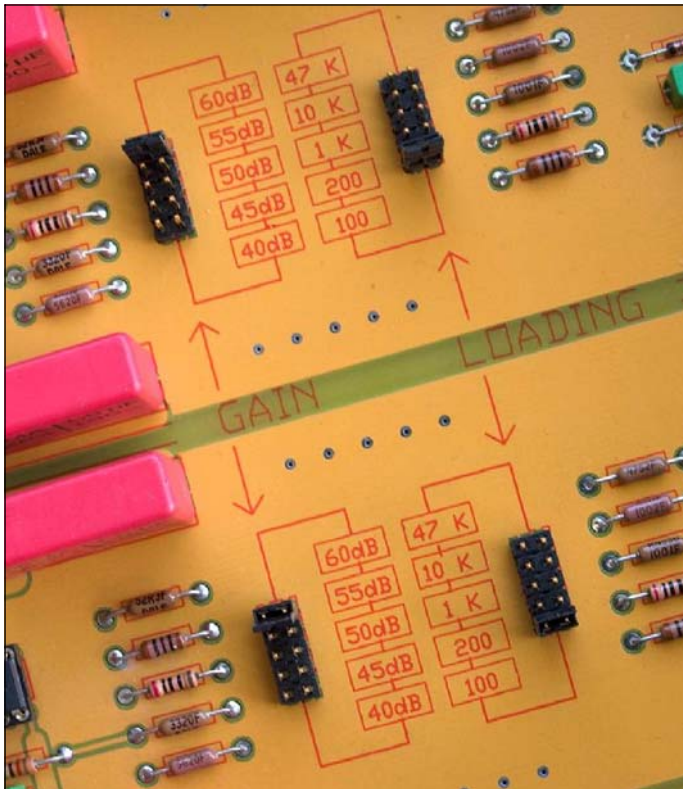
What \$1000 doesn't normally buy you, however, is battery-powered operation. When it comes to analog playback, a low noise threshold is king, and freedom from a potentially noisy wall outlet is a logical and straightforward way to get those legendary black backgrounds that the mega-buck phono stages routinely provide.

Until now!

The Sutherland Ph3D, at \$1000, is one of the more affordable battery-powered phono stages on the market. By popping open the case of the Ph3D, which accomplished easily enough via the knurled-screw knobs on the side of the chassis, you'll notice that the actual circuitry is confined to one isolated half of the chassis and is a rather simple design. Top-quality parts such as Dale/Vishay resistors and Wima polypropylene caps are used, however, so you shouldn't assume that's where corners were cut. As a matter of fact, this design is somewhat similar to the one found in the Ph3D's big brother, the \$3000 PhD. One of the compromises made to bring the Ph3D to its relatively modest price is the simple case, which is made from cold-rolled powder-coated steel.

The other half of the Ph3D is empty. Well, it's empty until you insert the 16 D batteries, which probably triple the entire weight of the unit. That's another reason why you're able to get this unit at such a great price...you're not paying for an out-board power supply chock full of big capacitors and a big power transformer. Before you start thinking about all the D batteries your boom box ate back in the '80s and wondering if the Ph3D is really that much of a bargain, you should know that the unit should run for around 1200 hours before the batteries need to be replaced. The red LED on the front panel even tells you when you're getting close. You may need to re-tip your stylus, in fact, before you have to mosey on down to the local Rite-Aid to pick up a few more packages of Duracells. *(continued)*

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After the simple metal case, I can no longer tell where Ron Sutherland had to compromise. This is a very flexible phono preamp, with five settings for gain (40 to 60 dB) and five settings for input loading (100 ohms to 47K ohms). As I mentioned before, removing the case to make these adjustments is swift and easy. I set the Ph3D at 100 ohms and maximum gain to match my Koetsu Rosewood, and started spinning records.

Quiet, please!

As with most battery-powered analog devices, the first impressions are usually based on very low noise levels. Indeed, the Ph3D was exemplary in this respect. My Michell Orbe SE is a lush, velvety-sounding 'table to start with and the Koetsus are my favorite for relegating surface noise far into the background, so I'm no stranger to quiet analog playback.

With the Ph3D in the chain, this level of pure calm exceeded anything I've experienced. I'm not going to bore you with a lecture about the spaces between the notes being as important as the notes themselves, but you get the picture. The Ph3D was superbly quiet.

Overall, the Ph3D was an energetic and expansive phono stage, giving the music a great sense of momentum and size. On my 45rpm Classic Records pressing of Willie Nelson's *Stardust*, for example, the Red-Headed Stranger sounded focused and appropriately big (no herbal jokes, please), with the backing string section clearly delineated from side to side, and front to back. I've heard this recording sound a bit lethargic and syrupy on other phono stages, but I felt that the Ph3D offered an extraordinary amount of detail and life. *(continued)*



Compared to much more expensive phono stages, the Ph3D may have lacked a certain measure of heft to the presentation. The sound wasn't bass-shy by any means, but it could sound a little too delicate on certain passages compared to some more expensive tube phono stages that I had been using. When I first plugged the Ph3D into my reference system, I was listening to the very impressive LS3/5as from Stirling Broadcast. With the Sutherland in the chain, I found myself less impressed with the Stirlings' ability to sound unusually big for their size. Once I substituted a pair of Harbeth Compact 7-ES3s into the mix, most of the size and weight returned. In other words, you may want to carefully audition the Ph3D in your system if you're a fan of small mini-monitors and desire a warm, full sound.

Not The 1200!

I did have a chance to use the Ph3D with my back-up 'table, the venerable Technics SL1200, which was mated to an Ortofon 2M Blue cartridge. The Ph3D did an excellent job of reducing the inherent darkness of the 1200, making it sound much larger and open than ever before. While it may not make sense to use a \$1000 phono stage with a \$500 turntable, the Ph3D might be the perfect antidote to a compressed, hemmed-in analog source. I can think of a couple of pricey turntables that fit this description as well, but I'll keep it to myself for now.

The Sutherland Ph3D is detailed, dynamic and extraordinarily quiet. The wafle thin footprint makes it particularly flexible, so it will slip into a crowded equipment rack. Thanks to the battery power, you won't have to buy an expensive power cord to get the most it is capable of and I truly feel that this could be the future of analog playback. The Ph3D is at the top of the heap for phono stages in this price range and I give it our highest recommendation. ●

The Sutherland Ph3D
MSRP: \$1000

MANUFACTURER

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PERIPHERALS

Analog Source: J.A. Michell Orbe SE w/SME V/Koetsu Rosewood

Digital Source: Naim CDX2

Preamplifier: Nagra PL-L

Power Amplifier: McIntosh MC275, Nagra PSA, Conrad Johnson ET250

Speakers: DeVore Fidelity Gibbon Super 8s, Zu Druids

Interconnects: Audience Conductor, DH Labs ReRelation, Cardas Golden Reference

Speaker Cable: Zu Libtec, Wireworld Equinox III +

Power Cords: Shunyata Taipan Helix, Diamondback, Copperhead, Venom

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco