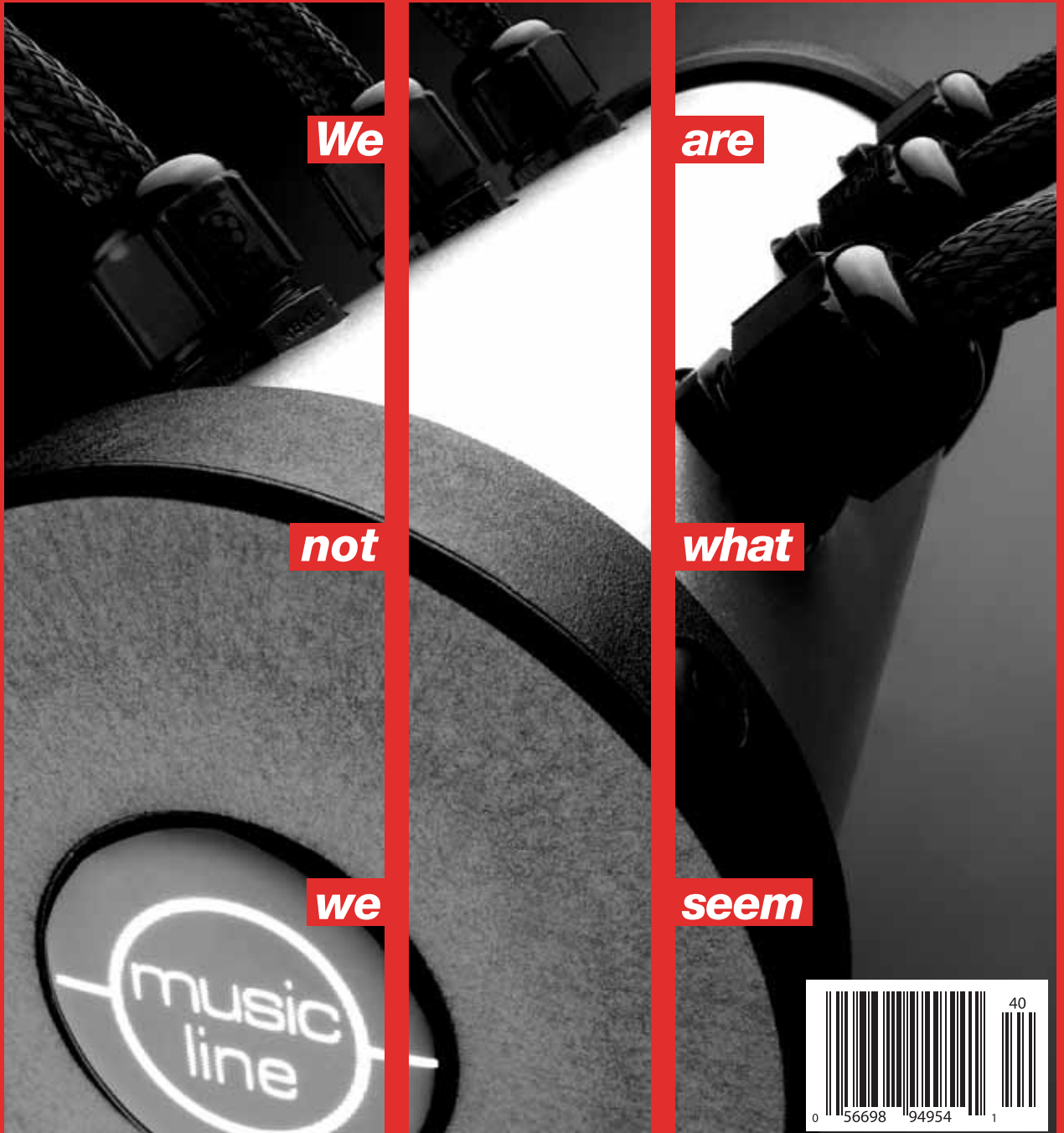


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REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS



We

are

not

what

we

seem



A close-up, angled view of a silver-colored metal keyboard mechanism. The metal has a fine, brushed texture. Two circular holes are visible on the left side. A triangular-shaped opening reveals the internal keyboard mechanism, showing several keys with clear, faceted keycaps and red-colored internal components. The word "SUTHERLAND" is printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font on the metal plate. A white cylindrical component is visible at the bottom right corner.

SUTHERLAND

Sutherland

The Director Line-stage

by Jimmy Hughes

My first encounter with Sutherland electronics came when I reviewed their outstanding Ph.D. battery powered phono pre-amp. It came as part of a group test, where it was pitted against other phono-stages – some costing quite a bit more. Despite this, and despite some impressive qualities displayed by those other phono-stages, the Sutherland was comfortably my favourite. It had a naturalness all its own: a distinct neutrality that revealed subtleties of timbre and tonal colour with no sense of self-imposed colouration.

The net result was that voices and instruments retained more of their individuality – their unique tonal distinctiveness. Listening to the Ph.D. made one realise that (by comparison) most other audio components imposed a coloration signature on the sound. Now, this might be described as 'rich' or 'warm' or 'bright' or 'lean'; it might even be attractive and very pleasant to listen to. But, it was a quality or characteristic superimposed by the equipment. By comparison, the Sutherland Ph.D. sounded free of such coloration. It was like an open window on the music.

The explanation for this almost certainly stems from Sutherland's use of a battery power supply. Having used battery-powered equipment before (in the '80s I had a DNM preamp) I recognised a special sort of openness and neutrality. With the DNM, it was possible to switch between battery or mains supply. And doing so left no doubts about the advantages of battery power. Not that a battery supply is

perfect; it brings its own problems and limitations. But it does free you from the mains with all its noise and rf problems, and this is a major benefit.

I mention all this because the Ph.D. created definite expectations for Sutherland's Director line-stage. Having a sense of where Sutherland were coming from in terms of sound quality, I already had an idea of what their Line pre-amp might sound like. As things turned out, I wasn't disappointed – it proved to be very much a chip off the old Ph.D. block. But surprisingly The Director is not battery powered like the phono-stage. Apparently, Sutherland thoroughly explored that avenue, but results were not entirely satisfactory. In the end, it was found that a battery supply did not meet the required standard.

So for reasons covered later – among them, the need to have high-power consuming circuitry to retain dynamic attack that would have 'eaten' cells at an alarming rate – the battery option was eventually discarded and replaced with a mains supply. Nevertheless, considerable care was taken over design of the supply in order to make it perform electronically and sonically like a battery. While, from a purely practical viewpoint, this is a good thing – a pre-amp that needed fresh batteries every few days or so would have been a right pain in the arse – the question remains; have Sutherland really been able to come up with a mains power supply that

mimics the sonic results produced by batteries?

The Director is one of the simplest and most 'stripped' minimalist designs ever. There's just one control – for volume level – and that's it. There's not even a mains on/off switch – though further options (mute plus volume increase/decrease) can be accessed via the remote handset. What – I hear you cry – No input selector?



Calm down dear... Cleverly, The Director automatically selects an input as soon as it senses signal voltage at a particular set of sockets. This means there's no need to select CD when you want to play a compact disc; just press Play on your CD machine and The Director will switch over without prompting. However, in order to avoid confusing the pre-amp, you need to have just one source producing sound at a given moment.

Those who favour ultra-fine control of volume levels will find The Director close to ideal. In all, 128 level settings are offered, giving a total range of 78dB. There are 31 steps of 1dB between –27.3dB to –57.3dB, and 96 steps of 0.5dB between –27.3dB and +20.7dB. Whereas most conventional volume controls are fairly sensitive ▶

▶ – producing noticeable changes in level when turned just a notch or two – the control fitted to The Director is broader and needs turning 180 degrees (or more) before having any sort of noticeable effect. Although this provides incredibly fine adjustment, it also means the user is given little ‘feel’ for change.

As a result, you seem to be able to turn the knob quite a way without hearing much (if any) change in subjective volume level. True, there’s a visual display. But, with only 16 leds covering a dynamic range of 78dB, this is coarse and only shows fairly broad changes in level. A volume control linked to a numerical display calibrated in decibels

would have provided a more precise indication of the exact volume setting – useful for those times when it’s important to set volume levels to a specific repeatable value; for example, when A/B comparing equipment.

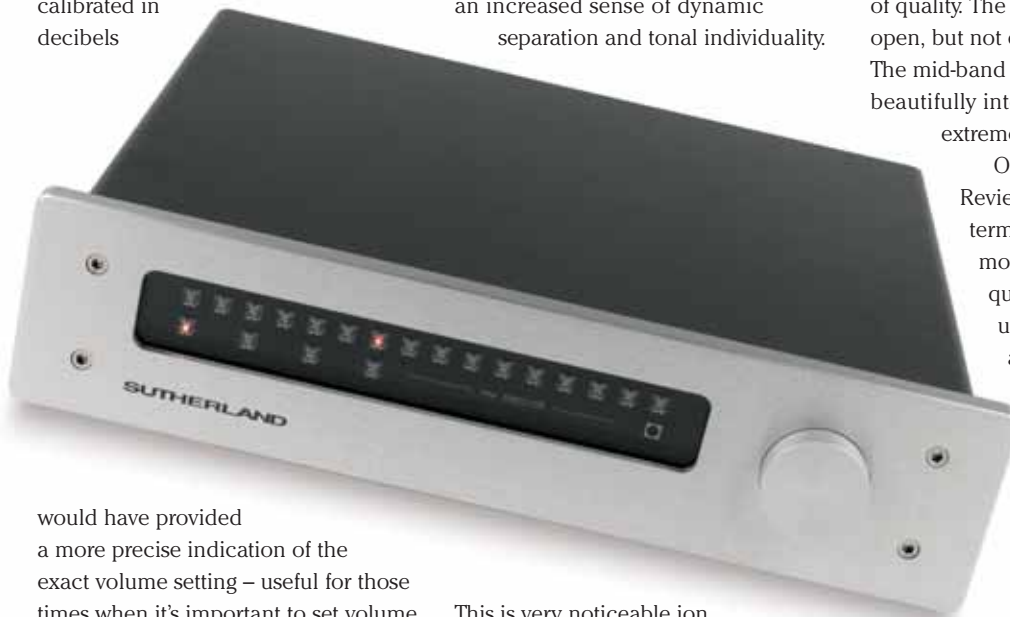
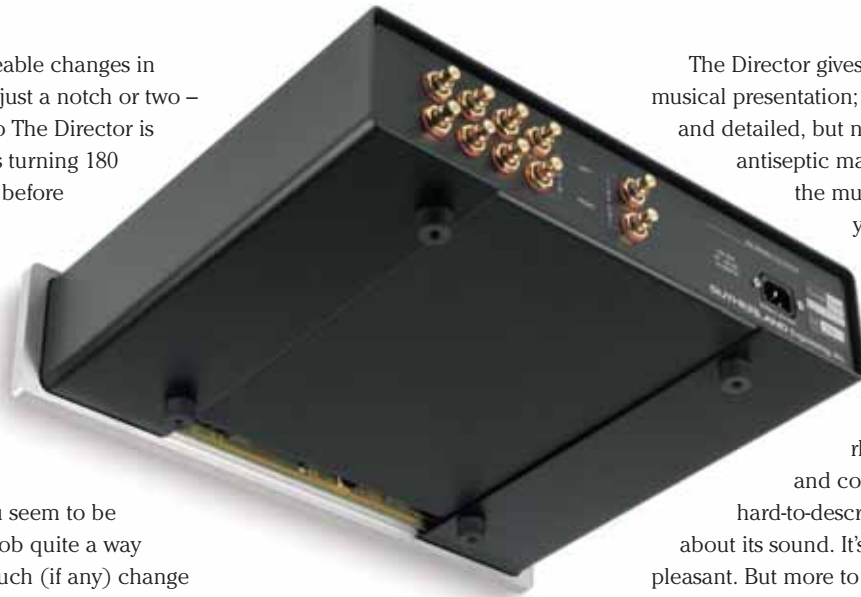
Having hugely enjoyed the results produced by Sutherland’s Ph.D. phono pre-amp, I was hoping and expecting The Director to offer more of the same. I wasn’t disappointed. There’s a similar kind of openness, the same sort of easy

natural clarity. I used my review sample with Chord’s Mezzo power amp, and immediately noticed a difference in the way subtle timbres were portrayed. The Director produces an increased sense of dynamic separation and tonal individuality.

This is very noticeable in simple naturally-miked acoustic recordings – for example, when you get four or five voices singing a Cappella. To a far greater degree is usual, you feel you can hear the distinct timbre of each voice more clearly. Individual tone colours and subtle dynamic inflections come through with greater precision and accuracy.

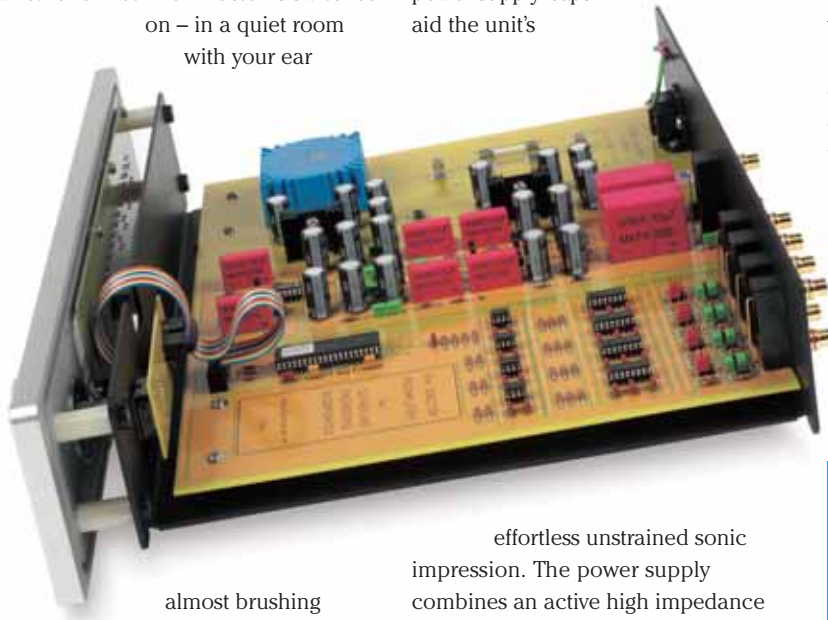
The Director gives a very clean musical presentation; it sounds lucid and detailed, but not in a clinical antiseptic manner. It presents the music in a relaxed yet focussed fashion, with impressive clarity and crisp attack. There’s convincing rhythmic drive and coherence, plus a hard-to-describe ‘rightness’ about its sound. It’s likeable and pleasant. But more to the point, the total presentation has a truthful and utterly believable quality. There’s no excess or exaggeration. Bass is very powerful and weighty – deep and strongly nuanced, but clean and controlled, with a nice full solid sort of quality. The treble is crisp and very open, but not overly bright or sharp. The mid-band is smooth and liquid; beautifully integrated with the extremes of high and low.

Of course all that’s Reviewer Speak; in musical terms what strikes the ear most is the seamless natural quality of the sound – its unexaggerated rightness and believability. While you might find yourself deeply impressed on first acquaintance, once you’ve lived with it for a while you’ll almost certainly take The Director’s special qualities for granted – as though all line pre-amps sounded this good! Speaking personally, I found this very much the case with the Ph.D. – it was only when going back to other phono-stages that I realised (again) just how different and special it was. The Director is very similar – it ▶



► does its job so easily and comfortably, you mistakenly think that what it does is easy...

It's a very quiet pre-amp – electrically and mechanically. The innards are very well shielded by a heavy 12 gauge (1/8th in thick!) steel case. Although the lid section rings quite noticeably when tapped, it is not set into resonance by the mains transformer. Even with your ear close to the casework, it's difficult to tell whether or not The Director is switched on – in a quiet room with your ear



almost brushing the top of the unit, you can just (JUST!) detect a faint almost inaudible buzz. Maximum gain is given as 20.7dB, with a maximum output voltage of 8 volts RMS. This should enable even inefficient speakers to be driven hard.

It's a large heavy pre-amp, weighing in at about 24lbs (11kg). Most of the weight is in that thick steel case – a fact borne out when the remarkably and surprisingly heavy lid is removed. The front panel is made from aircraft grade solid aluminium half an inch (13mm) thick. There are four line inputs (each with selectable hi/lo sensitivity) and one set of outputs. All inputs and outputs are unbalanced, incidentally. For what it's worth, distortion levels are vanishingly low; less than 0.01% thd A

weighted (including noise) for an output level of 2.5v at 1kHz.

Interestingly, Sutherland avoided op-amps for the important gain stages. Instead, they used all discrete components including hermetically sealed dual J-fets for the input stage followed by a bi-polar gain and Class A bi-polar output stage. All bias currents are kept high to maintain dynamic reserve, while extensive use of high-capacity low-impedance power supply caps aid the unit's

effortless unstrained sonic impression. The power supply combines an active high impedance current source with passive pi RC filtering followed by a low impedance shunt voltage regulator to create something close to a 'perfect' battery type supply.

The manufacturer claims that great care was taken to ensure that noise from the various displays did not contaminate the audio circuitry or power supplies. Moreover, the auto-switching sensor for input selection is disabled as soon as an input is chosen. The volume control knob has a ball bearing mount to give a smoother more effortless feel, and the control itself turns continuously through 360 degrees – there's no physical start and stop point. Usefully, the pre-amp 'remembers' previous volume settings.

Those who've already experienced

Sutherland's Ph.D. phono-stage will have a good idea of The Director's sonic qualities – it definitely offers more of the same. If you want a line pre-amp that's superbly tactile and dynamic, yet at the same time smooth, well-balanced, and above all, neutral and truthful, Sutherland's The Director is definitely one you have to hear. It transcends all the usual transistor/tube prejudices, producing a wholly natural sound that's clean, unexaggerated, and well balanced, without being boring and nondescript. It should suit a wide range of power amps (both transistor and tube), and produces results that do justice to any type of music. Representing a near perfect balance between hi-fi performance and musical sensibilities, its delicacy and finesse is in stark contrast to its massive, heavy appearance. It might look like a traditional US high-end product, but its performance definitely sets it apart. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-state line-stage
Inputs:	4x line-level (single-ended RCA/phono)
Input Impedance -	
Low Gain:	29kOhms
High Gain:	42kOhms
Gain:	3.8dB (low gain) 20.7dB (high gain)
Outputs:	1x pre-out (single-ended RCA/phono)
Input Impedance:	2700hms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 108 x 380mm
Weight:	11kg
Price:	\$3000 (+shipping, duty and VAT if imported into the UK)

Supplier:

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