



Headphones carve out a relatively unnoted existence at the edge of the hifi scene. In this area loudspeakers are still being regarded as the standard on which high end fans spend considerable sums of money. Yet the fact is often overlooked that by using headphones, one can get much farther on the audiophile road for much less money. Because of their niche place many headphones need to settle for the corresponding output of an integrated amplifier or a CD player and thus can't nearly tap their full potential, for with headphones even the slightest imperfection will go straight to the ear.

Five years ago Norbert Lehmann presented the Black Cube Linear, a headphone amplifier that instantly made it into the league of the best in its class. True, 700 Euro are no chicken feed and so Norbert Lehmann, who already made quite a splash with the reasonably-priced Black Cube phono preamp, remembered his roots and designed an entry-level headphone amplifier. The »Rhinelander« (350 Euro, Lehmann Audio, 02202/2806240) comes in a much smaller case as it is fed by an external power supply

and does not draw its current from a massive toroidal mains transformer like the Linear. However, this is no economy pack, since it also features a discrete Class A output stage; plus it routes the entrusted signal through MKP capacitors where necessary, its PCBs are double-sided (and hence more expensive to produce) for short signal paths and its headphone socket is another solid product made by Neutrik.

Next to the mentioned front socket is a small toggle switch that lets you select between two unbalanced inputs located on the rear side of the unit. Things get really exciting when you take off the cover and exploit the possibilities of the little DIP switches and the jumper on the PCB. The first serve to select the gain factor in two steps, whereas the jumper turns the second input into a true output, making the Rhinelander a puristic single-source preamplifier.

Soundwise it's nothing short of fascinating what this little box does with various headphones. In terms of punch, resolution and spaciousness it clearly distances itself from onboard solutions, underscoring hands down its *raison d'être*. However, what it can't do – and in this respect it mirrors exactly its big brother Linear – is a constructive post-creation or enhancement of a music sig-

nal. Neither does it conjure up a groove nor unfold shimmering colours or infinite spaces, but it always dogs the trail of the canned music it is fed with. No wonder that the Linear, which is now available in an updated version, can handle all this still a tad better and this is perfectly alright in view of its price (718 Euro). Yet the genes of a sound editor can't be overheard.

The Rhinelander is extremely good at the accurate structuring of rooms where the positions of the musicians are easily

Top-down Complement

»Rhinelander« – the affordable
headphone amplifier from
Lehmann Audio

recognised. And it's powerful, too: it could even drive a 600 ohms headphone without sounding stressed. Used as a preamp – this shall be added here – it also does a pretty good job and sounds really nice, provided that the cable runs to the power amplifier won't get too long. I have never run across such a package for such a bargain, and so I can only send my best congratulations to Bergisch Gladbach. *Stefan Gawlick* ■

