

Sutherland Director Line Preamp and Artemis Labs LA-1 Line Preamp and PL-1 Phono Preamp

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This debut column finds our editor enamored of two very different line preamps, a phono preamp, and absolutely gaga over a startling new company.

In the wake of great successes with his Acoustech PH-1 and Sutherland Ph.D. phonostages, designer Ron Sutherland has released the Director, an unusually lovely-sounding solid-stage linestage. Indeed, like Sutherland himself, the Director's character is easygoing, sweet, and rather romantic. As Sutherland shared with me in a recent phone conversation: "I like the notion of pleasure, something seductive, like candlelight; a romantic, beautiful sound, not dark, but one that immerses you in the music."

As he did with the excellent-sounding Ph.D. (see my review in Issue 144), Sutherland had originally conceived the Director as a battery-powered unit. Several prototypes were built, and one of these was displayed at a New York show a few years back. But every time that Sutherland and partner Chad Kassem (head of Acoustic Sounds) compared the prototypes to Kassem's own Sutherland C2000 (an \$8000 model no longer in production), they preferred the earlier design. "It sounded good and did this well and that well," said Sutherland of the final battery prototype, "but it wasn't as musical and neither of us felt like listening to it, so I abandoned the battery approach." Although battery operation, with its spooky low noise and resulting deep black background, can be successful—and I certainly found it to be an advantage with the Ph.D., as well as with the Edge G2 preamp, which can go either AC or DC—it's much trickier to pull off in a preamp than a phonostage, given that a preamp must negotiate much larger voltage swings in order to fully drive a power amp.

But the ultimate challenge, according to both Sutherland and Kassem, was to get the Director to meet or exceed the excellence of the C2000—and have it come in at the desired \$3000 price point. "It's hard to talk about the Director," Sutherland told me, "because the design was guided by sound quality, which is of course what everybody says. There's nothing 'gee whiz' about it: no special caps, no batteries, and no fancy circuits. It's that I've become more skillful over the years at simplifying things—plus we got away from costly things like the



C2000's full aluminum chassis."

Be that as it may, it hardly looks or feels like any corners were cut, except for maybe the "cheapie" power cord that the user's manual playfully describes. The Director's faceplate is a half-inch slab of brushed aluminum, the case is 12-gauge epoxy-coated steel, and the machined volume knob—the only control on the front panel—spins on a large steel ball bearing. This minimalist functionality is possible because the four line inputs automatically switch to any given component as soon as the Director senses a signal. "My mind works toward having machines serve us in an unobtrusive way," notes Sutherland. In practice, this approach is a true delight. Finished playing an LP? Just pop a CD in the transport, press play, and the Director, without slicing off even a fraction of the music's opening phrase, automatically switches inputs (indicated by yellow LEDs in the display window). Adjust the volume via the knob or the tiny remote, and you're off.

Although the Director's sound is indeed warm, romantic, and easy, it is clearly a solid-state design. In a Bach mood, I played the Milstein LP [DG] of the composer's Partita No. 1 in B Minor and was struck by the Director's slightly softened but un-tube-like presentation. The upper registers of the violinist's Strad were sweet and extended, the middle registers warm, and the playing expressive. Also, there was plenty of air around the violin, which held a convincingly life-sized image.

This might lead you to guess that the Director is a great match with vocals, and you'd be right. Ella Fitzgerald's *Sings Songs From Let No Man Write My Epitaph* [Verve/Classic Records] is one of her best yet least-known titles, and a rare chance to hear this magnificent voice solely accompanied by piano. Here, the Director was—to pinch a phrase from Sutherland—highly seductive. The soundstage was wide open, the piano tone gorgeously rich and natural, and Fitzgerald's smoky, creamy, lilting voice about as beautiful as you'll hear it.

Switching to larger-scaled and more dynamic challenges, I cued up excerpts from Tchaikovsky's *The Sleeping Beauty* on Classic Records' super-duper 45rpm *Royal Ballet* box set [review, this issue], and the orchestra all but leapt out of my Kharma 3.2 speakers. The stage presentation was gigantic, with excellent depth, the strings silky and nicely textured, and the brass instruments full-throated.

After a few months of living with the Director, there are a few areas that could be even better. Although it's quite transparent, I detect the thinnest layer of solid-state opaqueness, the aural equivalent, say, of a theater scrim. The Director also tends to slightly pinch low-level dynamic nuance, so that soft yet rapidly bowed passages in the Bach Partitas aren't quite as delicately resolved as they might be. Finally, though its overall presentation is open and airy, individual and massed instruments lack the sense of bloom you'll hear with—oh, hell, I'll just say it—a really fine tube unit.

The picking of nits aside, Sutherland's Director is another first-rate effort from one of our most original-thinking designers. If tubes aren't your bag, and you want an elegant-sounding and operating line preamp that doesn't cost the moon, I would be hard-pressed to name a comparably priced solid-state model with a siren song as seductively inviting as this one's.

While high-end audio offers many fine-sounding and beautifully made products, what remain relative rarities are those that come from out of the blue to knock your socks clean off. For me, the tube-driven LA-1 and PL-1 from Artemis Labs have done exactly that.

I'll do my best to convey why I find this stuff so thrilling, but first a bit of background.

Like me, you'd probably never heard of this two-year-old start-up from Pasadena. Like Sutherland, Artemis is the kind of company the high end was built from—small, focused on the music, and with a maverick point-of-view. I first became aware of this gear while visiting (distributor) Aydn's room at the last Consumer Electronics Show. It was displayed with KR Audio amplification and Triangle speakers, and the sound was among the best I heard in Vegas—extremely open, dynamic, layered, and musically inviting.

Designed by John Atwood, the former technical editor of *Vacuum Tube Valley* (a journal and resource for tube enthusiasts), the Artemis line consists of the two models under review here as well as a second phono preamp, the PH-1, which was designed for higher-output cartridges. The company expects to have a 300B-based single-ended power amp ready for September's Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, and currently has six American dealers.



Although plans are in the works for steady growth, and Artemis certainly will grow as word gets around, don't expect to find this gear all over the place—ever—because it takes as long as four to five days to produce each one of these hand-made pieces. They're built entirely in the U.S.—nothing is outsourced—using the kind of artisan techniques rarely found anymore. For instance, no printed circuit boards are used in Artemis designs. Instead, the innards reveal silver-plated military-sourced trace boards, point-to-point wiring, hand-selected-and-matched RIAA equalization capacitors, and choke-loaded output stages. While Artemis isn't the only company using this nearly antiquated approach, it's less common



than it used to be. As Aydn's Sean Ta told me, "The idea was to take the best ideas from classic tube gear, but apply modern technologies to the design and execution. And rather than follow the latest trends, we were looking for a sound that was true to life."

Interestingly, Sean's phrase "true to life," or something like it, is repeated in the lengthy listening notes I'd taken before we spoke, and describes one of those intangibles about sound reproduction that, if it ever comes, usually does so either right away or never at all—no matter how much "burn-in" time any given component may be said to need.

My listening sessions began with the \$2850 LA-1 linestage. For phono preamplification, I used the Manley Steelhead and Sutherland Ph.D., only later adding Artemis' PL-1 (\$3350). Once both Artemis pieces were in the system, it became startlingly evident that their sonic characteristics are essentially identical. There's obviously no "design by committee" work here, but rather a

strong vision of what reproduced sound can and should be. I can't say for sure because I didn't speak directly with designer Atwood, but it seems to me that he must be a man with deep knowledge of the sound of live music. And I would bet that rather than compare his stuff to other components, he was constantly referencing the sound of the real thing. Whatever the case, his efforts sound less like reproduced and more like live music than anything I've heard in some time. As I describe my listening experiences, keep in mind that these musical examples apply equally to the sound of both Artemis units.

With the Milstein Bach recording, where the Sutherland Director is sweet, warm, and easy, and the Manley Steelhead's line section more sinewy, detailed, and dynamically nuanced, Artemis takes the best of these traits and

Cool-Swap

Although there are many interesting technical touches to these designs, and for details I'll refer you to Aydn's Web site, Artemis' trademarked Cool-Swap technology deserves special mention. Since certain dual triodes, such as the 5687s used here, contain split heaters (this lets them operate at 6.3V or 12.6V), it is possible to heat only one of two triodes at a time. With Cool-Swap, Artemis heats only one half of each tube—the opposite half for each channel—effectively rendering the unused half of each tube as a spare. This lets each tube run cooler, extending life, but also allows you to swap channels as tubes age, essentially doubling the life of the tubes, as well as saving the owner money due to less-frequent tube replacement. **WG**

rolls them into something altogether its own. One thing you'll immediately notice is that there's an unusually high level of air and ambience to the recorded space as well as *around* the various dimensions of Milstein's violin. This brings a remarkable degree of physical

presence to the fiddle, as does the rosiny-sweet textural detail you'll hear as the horsehair bow pulls, pushes, and bites against the violin's strings. And as Milstein dips down into quieter moments, the Artemis pair responds beautifully, holding on to tonal and

dynamic subtleties in a way that makes the performance seem chillingly alive.

These combined qualities bring a kind of “like hearing it for the first time” experience to all kinds of music. From Wilco’s *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* [Nonesuch], to John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* [Impulse], to Ella Fitzgerald’s *Let No Man Write My Epitaph*, to—uh, you name it—the level of musical experience and involvement was, simply put, more magical than any I’ve known in ages.

Now, as lovely, expressive, and

involving as the Artemis sound is with a single instrument or small group, be prepared to hold onto your seat when it’s time to pull out the big stuff. At the start of the first excerpt from *The Sleeping Beauty*—“Introduction: The Lilac Fairy”—the orchestra springs to life with the agility and strength of a galloping colt. Before you have the chance to catch your breath, the crescendos build and build and build, and the Artemis rides each fortissimo crest with a seemingly limitless dynamic headroom, until delivering


what can only be described as a thrilling climax. Along the way, though, notice how very holographic the soundstage is, with an equally impressive size, and cascades of fully integrated instrumental layers, both wide and deep. The frenetic cymbal crashes punctuate with a natural sound that’s neither bright nor splashy, and the similarly convincing bass and kettledrums bring an equal sense of weight to both ends of the frequency spectrum. I hesitate to use the word “fast,” because the term often conjures a cold, sterile quality. And fast isn’t really the point here, but rather that the Artemis stuff unleashes transients not only with speed, but seemingly effortless power and heft. And with the plucked harp and following flourishes that transition from this section to the “Rose Adagio—Pas D’Action,” I sat with a dopey grin at the harp’s stunning sense of

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Red Point Model B turntable; Tri-Planar VII tonearm; Shelter 90X cartridge; Manley Steelhead phono preamp; Sutherland Ph.D. phonostage; Balanced Audio Technology VK-D5 and Shanling CD-T300 CD players; Musical Fidelity Tri-Vista 21 DAC; BAT VK-55 amplifier; Kharma Ceramique 3.2 speakers; Nordost Valkyrja interconnect and speaker cables and Brahma AC cords; Finite Elemente “Spider” equipment racks; ASC Tube Traps; Running Springs Audio Danielle power conditioner

presence, and also at the waves of air that so clearly defined it within a space that seemed at once part of the record as well as of my room.

Now, just as Sutherland's Director sounds sweet and warm while not being a tube unit, the Artemis gear absolutely announces itself as tube stuff. Because while it does not sound caramel-coated or otherwise even that romantic (though beautiful it most certainly is), the life-like qualities I am so shamelessly gushing about—in my experience—remain the domain of vacuum tubes.

So there you have it: A spine-tin-gling debut from a fresh company that, should it succeed with its power amplifiers and whatever else follows to the same degree it has with its line and phono preamps, will add an exciting new chapter to the ongoing story of the high end. 

DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

ARTEMIS LABS LA-1 AND PL-1

Aydn
679 East Easy Street, Unit E
Simi Valley, California 93065
(818) 216-7882
aydn.com
info@aydn.com
Prices: LA-1: \$2850; PL-1: \$3350

SUTHERLAND DIRECTOR

Acoustic Sounds
PO. Box 1905
Salina, Kansas 67402
(785) 825-8609
acousticsounds.com
Price: \$3000

SPECIFICATIONS

Artemis Labs LA-1

Inputs: Five pairs (RCA)
Outputs: Two pairs (RCA)
Features: Goldpoint stepped attenuator volume control; dual conductive plastic balance control; one 5687 tube per-channel in "Cool-Swap" configuration
Dimensions: 8.5" x 6.5" x 14.75"
Weight: 22 lbs.

Artemis Labs PL-1

Gain: 52dB
Inputs: One pair (RCA)
Outputs: Two pairs (RCA)
Input impedance: 47.5Kohms (lower with optional shunt resistors)
Dimensions: 8.5" x 6.5" x 14.75"
Weight: 24 lbs.

Sutherland Director

Inputs: Four pairs (RCA)
Outputs: One pair (RCA)
Features: Automatic input selection, remote control for volume and mute
Dimensions: 17" x 4.25" x 15"
Weight: 24 lbs.