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HOVLAND HP200

VACUUM TUBE PRE-AMPLIFIER

REMOTE CONTROL—INTEGRAL PHONO-OPTION

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The Hovland HP200 Vacuum Tube Pre-amplifier

by Roy Gregory

Good things come in fours? Four products, in four years and four front covers: Hovland clearly rewrite the rules of more than just hi-fi aesthetics. For me, their products have been a breath of fresh air at a time when other designers have been becoming more and more cautious, their products less and less individual. But don't make the mistake of thinking that the Hovlands' beauty is only skin deep. The longer you listen the clearer it becomes that whoever is responsible for these designs has a deep and abiding respect for and appreciation of music and where its fascination lies. From the HP100 onwards, each successive model has stood further and further from the path of the musical performance, imposing less and less of itself on the signal being passed. At the same time, this steady evolution in quality has elevated the performance of the power amplifiers above and beyond that of the original pre-amp: Hardly an ideal state of affairs. Clearly it was time to apply some of the lessons learnt in developing the Sapphire and RADIA to a revised pre-amplifier.

Having said that, the HP200 is far more than a simple revision of the earlier model. As well as the lessons learnt in designing the power amps, there's the valuable experience garnered from the 100's four years in the marketplace. One thing that that revealed, loud and very clear, was that the customer wanted remote control. But if you go back and read the review of the HP100, you'll realise that this notion strikes right at the heart of the original design. Hovland rightly consider that the quality of the volume control is

central to the performance of any pre-amp. So much so that they went to the lengths of building their own, precision stepped attenuator for the HP100, a veritable work of audio art. But beautiful though it is, and wonderful though it sounds, it clearly ain't compatible with remote control operation. This alone has shaped the development of the HP200.

Given their obsessive concern regarding the sonic impact of even the most seemingly innocuous components, it's hardly surprising that Hovland quickly concluded that there were no off the shelf options that met their performance requirements. The only answer was to build another design of their own, but this time relay operated. Thus started a long and tortuous search for suitable switching technology, a veritable odyssey that eventually turned up a sealed, glass tube, rhodium plated design that delivered the sonic goods. Arranged in a switching ladder and controlled by a small (but carefully isolated) logic board, these could be combined with the same metal film resistors used in the stepped attenuator to create a remotely operable volume control. The circuit layout proved critical, and it was here that lessons learnt from the RADIA paid off.

However, having got the relays to work, the approach could be extended

to source selection and all the other switching functions. Not only does this extend remote control to mute and source as well as volume, it eliminates these switches from the signal path. What's more, the relays responsible for these functions can be positioned right next to the back panel, shortening the signal path and eliminating considerable internal wiring.

So far so good, and all sonically positive. The downside is that the volume control circuitry takes up a lot of space – space that used to be occupied by the on-board phono section.

Which is definitely a problem given that over half the HP100 owners out there invested in one of the phono options. Hovland were already working on a new, solid-state phono-stage that was destined for a standalone design. Adjustable for

both gain and loading, the problem was that by the time you put the new circuit in its own chassis, along with a power supply, it would end up costing close to the price of the HP200 itself. The answer seemed obvious: put the phono-stage, along with a dedicated dual-mono power supply, inside the HP200. It's an option that will become available shortly. It is retrofittable, but the work required on the chassis in order to mount the board and its power supply mean returning the unit to the factory. We'll be reporting on its performance shortly, but its



► availability at last promises to make the Hovland a genuine full-facilities, one box option.

There are a couple of other changes incorporated within the new circuitry. There's a Bypass switch and input for use with external processors, and an RS232 port for programming purposes. Thankfully, it still retains the tape monitoring and mono switches. The volume control also gains an extra five steps, all at the bottom end of the range, allowing much finer control at lower levels.

less than a joy to use. When I did use the remote (I felt obliged, given the development history and all) I found that it worked positively enough and had a middling angle of acceptance (not as good as the Levinson 383, miles better than the Wadia 861SE). More importantly, the illuminating status indicators were easy to read from across the room.

musical grounds, and if they do things differently, it's more a case of the way they handle the music itself rather than the technology they use. To be honest, I've never really considered the HP100 as a typical valve pre-amp anyway. I couldn't care less if it runs on horse

feathers, as long as it's musically engaging and informative: Which it truly is.



The one change that is applicable to the HP100 is that the valve fitted in the V3 position on the HP200 is now a 12AT7, in place of the 12AU7 used in the earlier design. It's a more transparent choice and rather less forgiving. Hovland's decision to use it reflects their confidence in the improving quality of front-end components, especially in the digital field. It's also the one change that can be retrofitted to the HP100. I'll report on the difference it makes in a separate piece.

Unlike CT, I really like the look of the HP200, and think it provides the perfect complement to the resident RADIA. Unlike him, I rarely use remote controls, so I was really impressed by the wonderfully intuitive nature of the front-panel controls. The Hovland was never

The contrasting colour of the mute light and the graduated circle of the volume read-out proved especially effective. Oh, and you can turn the front-panel back-lights off if you want to. It's a well-rounded and carefully considered package. Which just goes to prove, you might be able to make good things arrive in fours, but you still can't please all the people all of the time!

However, the one thing on which CT and I absolutely agree is the sound of the HP200. Having lived with the HP100 as a long-term benchmark, I can claim considerable experience with the Hovland sound. The other unit I've relied on is the Vibe, with its matching Pulse power supply. Now the obvious conclusion is that I keep the Vibe as a solid-state reference, the Hovland as the equivalent when it comes to valves. However, that's not really the case. Both products have earned their berth on

Not surprisingly, the HP200 enjoys much in common with the 100, musically as well as physically. But, whilst the structure and skeleton may be shared, the clothing is distinctly different. Those differences might be of degree, but together they are also different in effect, and fascinating it is too.

If I had to sum up the sonic character of the Hovland pre-amps I'd rely on the terms unforced and unobtrusive. They are devoid of an obvious overall character through which you hear the musical performance. Instead, they manage to stand aside, allowing the music to speak for itself. They provide a direct connection to the structure, the sense and soul of the music. The question of course, is how they do it.

Part of the answer is that they both do it the same way, so we can discuss the similarities in the singular before worrying about the differences. The rest is down to specifics, and they start with the question of instrumental colour ►

► and musical energy. What a Hovland pre-amp does is manage its energy budget and protect the core values. So, the centre of each note is precisely placed and scaled, meaning that the overall structure and grid of the music is reproduced intact. The precision with which notes are weighted and spaced means that each has sufficient energy and time to properly develop

So much for the common ground: Where the 200 diverges from its predecessor is in the detail. The internal changes have resulted in a significant increase in focus and transparency, right across the audible bandwidth. The sound is now quicker and more immediate, more detailed and more intricate.

grip, allow the music to breathe quite so convincingly.

The result is a sound that is at once engaging but commanding. Just listen to Aimee Mann's vocal on the title track of *Lost In Space* (the Mo-Fi pressing, playing on the Kuzma/Triplanar/Titan 'table, amplified via the Groove Plus). The 100 is smoothly seductive, easily insinuating the catchy melody into your sub-conscious. The 200 is leaner, not so much tonally, but physically. The curbing of bass weight opens out the mid, robs it of a hint of rounding and produces a starker, much more focussed and dimensionally accurate soundstage. The added dynamic delicacy allows through the wicked twist that Aimee applies to the lyric, introducing a new sense of pointed intent behind the surface meaning.

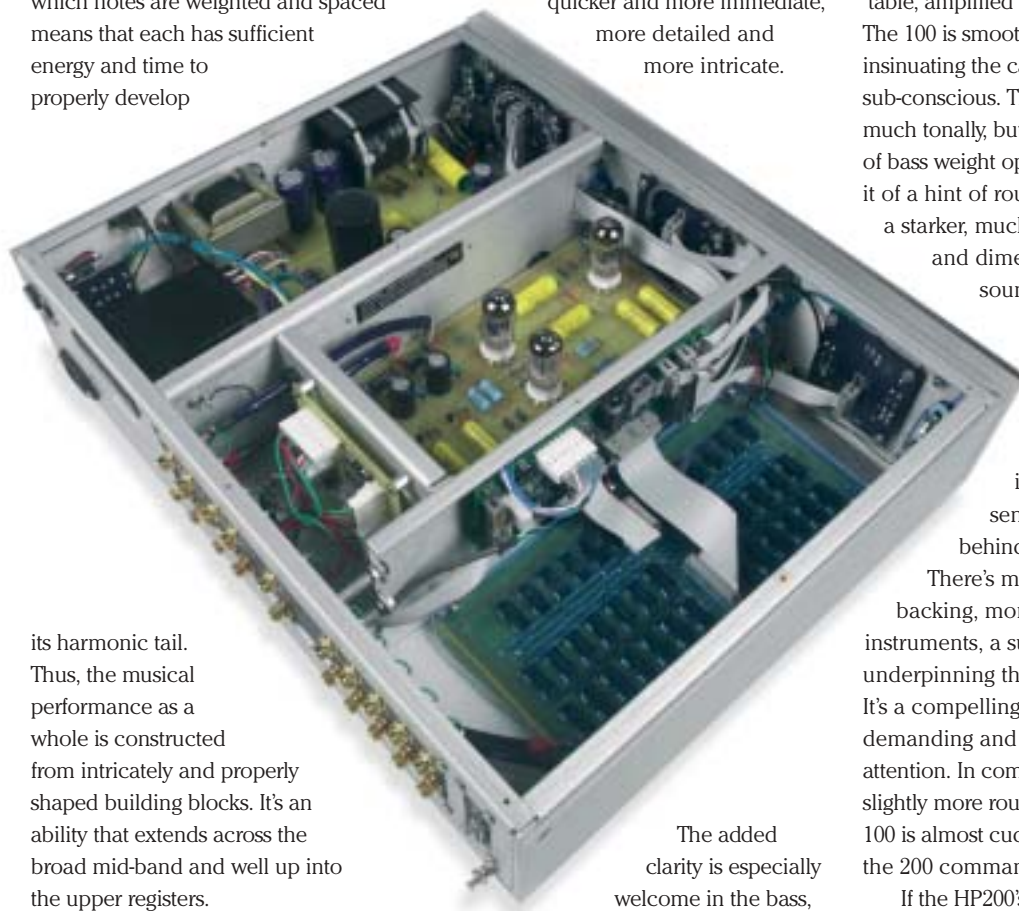
There's more texture in the backing, more space around the instruments, a surer footed bass-line underpinning the track's progress. It's a compelling performance, demanding and holding your attention. In comparison, the warmer, slightly more rounded sound of the 100 is almost cuddly, seductive where the 200 commands.

If the HP200's additional attributes were merely hi-fi cosmetic in nature, they'd be worth the hike in price over the 100. That they translate and contribute so directly, so powerfully, to the pre-amp's musical capabilities raises its performance to compelling new highs. Just as importantly, they do so without in any way diminishing the factors that made the original so appealing in the first place. Which is great, because the HP100 continues, and continues to offer superb musical performance for the money. The HP200 is an entirely different kettle of fish. It stands firmly astride the solid-state/valve divide, defying

its harmonic tail. Thus, the musical performance as a whole is constructed from intricately and properly shaped building blocks. It's an ability that extends across the broad mid-band and well up into the upper registers.

How does this translate in terms of the musical performance? The ability to place and shape notes with such natural ease allows the input of the musician to escape his (or her) instrument without constraint from the system. The way in which the players express themselves through the weight and length of their notes, and just as importantly, the spaces they leave between them is crucial to understanding the performance, transforming it from ink on a page to a living, breathing thing. The result is an incredibly natural ebb and flow to musical proceedings, a progression that draws you into the musical lines.

The added clarity is especially welcome in the bass, which whilst it still doesn't match the reach out and touch solidity of the mid-range, now has greater insight, air and texture. There's a refreshing sense of urgency and purpose where appropriate, the added air and harmonic control allowing a more expressive and atmospheric contribution from the likes of bowed double bass. You don't get the slabs of straight-edged solidity that comes with several hundred Watts of solid-state power driven from a wide bandwidth, solid-state pre. But the timing of notes, the placing of their weight, is impeccable, and few if any of the solid-state alternatives, for all their



► preconceptions. More demanding and less forgiving, it won't cover the tracks of partnering equipment, or disguise shortcomings in a performance. But carefully homed and fed it delivers a real advance in musical insight over the already impressive 100. In combination with the RADIA, it moves Hovland very firmly into the high-end, where they need fear no competition. With a physical and operational beauty to match the sonic splendor, Hovland's latest creation has become my latest object of audio desire. Hear it soon. ➤

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Vacuum tube line-stage with phono input option
 Tube Complement: 2x 12AX7, 1x 12AT7
 Inputs: 5x line-level 1x tape monitor
 Input Impedance: 100 kOhms
 Linestage Gain: 14dB
 Outputs: 2x main outputs 1x tape output
 Output Impedance: 2.5 kOhms
 Dimensions (WxHxD): 18.25 x 4.88 x 15.52
 Weight: 12.2kg

Optional Internal Solid-State Phono Stage Specifications:

Input Impedance: 5 switch selectable settings, 100k?, 47k?, 390?, 100? and 24?
 (removable for custom value setting)
 Phono Gain: 57dB min to 69dB max, switch selectable in 3dB steps

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Hovland HP 200

by Chris Thomas

As a confirmed fan of their RADIA power amplifier I was delighted to be able to squeeze in a few weeks with Hovland's new HP 200 line-stage before RG took it for the full review. At the time I was still running the Eben X-Centrics with the Radia being partnered with Tom Evans Vibe/Groove line stage. This was being sourced by the Naim CDS 3 and the whole system was wired from mains to speaker cables with Nordost Valhalla. This is a pretty fine, well-balanced audio system I must say, so when the HP 200 arrived I was intrigued as to whether it would soar to new musical heights or fall, rather embarrassingly, off its perch.

I don't like the look of the HP200 very much at all and am at a loss to understand why Hovland chose to fit a chromed front plate to the unit as the frosted acrylic of the RADIA already looks so good, especially at night when the amplifier glows with that icy blue light. They surely should have continued the theme and only chromed the control centres. And while I'm mentioning the negatives I should also

say that the remote control, good as the handset itself is, does not operate with anything like the smoothness that it should on a unit of this price and quality. I found it difficult to achieve precise adjustments, as the window of acceptance is just far too narrow. In fact I generally don't like the operation of this pre-amplifier but when it is working within the system these things do tend to fade into insignificance as sheer musical fascination takes over. Make no mistake, this is a very, very good piece of hi-fi equipment and in the RADIA it has the perfect partner, though it needs to be used in the right system and is not universally successful as was shown when I replaced the Ebens with the JM Labs Micro Utopia, but more of that later.

When you mix solid-state and valves as Hovland have done with this pre/power combination you are hoping that the best aspects of both design approaches compliment each other in harmony and balance – and that is exactly what they have achieved. The sheer grip, tautness and compact nature of the RADIA is expanded by the

inclusion of the HP 200 which brings new shades of colour to the tonality and a completely different sense of rhythmic expression and movement. Where the Vibe/Pulse majors on presence, precision, ultra fine resolution and dynamic contrasts the HP 200 is somewhat looser and cannot quite match the Vibe's sense of dynamic freedom and tight control. But it is the master of fine tonal shadings and it is absolutely impossible to resist the sheer emotional content of the music as it imposes itself on your ear in such a profound way. This is one of those designs that should dispense with a volume control altogether in favour of a tap, as the music flows like a river from the speakers and its movement through any piece of music is what really captured my attention throughout my all too brief time with it. It just seems so much more naturally musical than so many other very good pre-amplifiers.

Let me try to explain this rather sweeping statement. When I was being taught guitar many years ago my ►

► tutor would have me repeatedly run through scales and modes and lean over and whisper “Legato, legato”. This description of the smooth changeover from note to note so the flow would be even and not jerky or forced is exactly what the HP 200 reminds me of and be it vocally or instrumentally, you cannot ignore it. So when a quality singer is doing their stuff, the natural flow, breathing and intonation of the words is about as close to real life as any hi-fi I have heard. Likewise, the beauty of a musician’s physical technique, choice of notes and the sense of their decay, release and most importantly the transition between them as they

never have the raw pace and sheer impact of the Tom Evans design.

Space, depth and instrumental separation are really superb. The Hovland HP 200 does not produce walk-in soundstages as a matter of course but it has that rare ability to maintain the characteristics of each instrument including its tonal colour and the way it is being used. On Miles Davis stunning album *Nefertiti*, the track ‘Fall’ shows the Hovland’s worth. Many people would say that

subliminal time signature that has been previously stated and somehow continues in the silence through the piece. As an example of musical minimalism it is magical and is dripping in atmosphere.

There was one surprise in store though and that was the disappointment I felt when I hooked the JM Labs Micro Utopias into the system. When I was using the Eben X-Centric I had a clear preference for the HP 200 over the

Vibe/Pulse but this was reversed with the JM Lab’s. Here the softness that I mentioned before



leave the instrument sounds closer to reality than it does on most high quality audio systems. This is such a fundamental observation but it is at the root of much of what the HP 200 does so well and though the music never feels as rhythmically taut or emphatic as the best solid-state designs, the actual smooth flow of the tempo is quite remarkable. The bass lacks a really incisive edge and the Hovland never manages quite the same shape and focus here. There is also an overall softness to the sound right across the whole of the bandwidth, so you never quite get that finely etched sense of micro detail that the Vibe/Pulse excels at, or the explosive sense of leading edge dynamics. But the musical pictures that the Hovland paints are still beautifully coherent, open and rhythmically fascinating though it will

this sparsely produced track, played at well below walking pace, should be food and drink to any half respectable audio system but I would disagree. Listen to Miles’ trumpet and then to Wayne Shorter’s tenor sax. It’s the blend that kills most systems and it can end up being more than a little sour. But not here as both players let the notes spill from the instrument in unison and the Hovland allows both full rein and space expressively and tonally. And when Herbie Hancock drops small pearls of piano into the tune you realise that the silences between the notes are just as important. The beautifully slow tempo almost meanders to a stop at times but on a system as good as this even Ron Carter’s bass solo is played on top of the

worked against the music and I much preferred the extra articulation and greater leading edge definition. Perhaps it is partly that very special tweeter and its endless potential. But right through the mid and down into the bass Tom’s design explores and controls the speakers capabilities in a much more sharp, convincing and focussed way. I think we are talking about system synergy here mixed with a fair degree of personal taste so I could easily understand it if you disagreed.

I am slowly being seduced by the inclusion of valves in audio systems. The Hovland HP 200 has increased my fascination because it has given me a different view of the music that I listen to. Given my interest in the minutiae of musicianship and the raw sound of instruments, it was almost bound to appeal. Well, it certainly does. ➤



Hovland HP200 Vacuum Tube Pre-amplifier

by Roy Gregory

What they started with the RADIA, Hovland now finish with the HP200 – and I'm not talking just about the cool, good looks of the aluminium and acrylic casework. As attractive and stylish as the Hovland products are, it's their sonic performance that's really impressive, a virtue that grows out of the impeccable attention to detail lavished on every aspect of the design. What might appear to be no more than an HP100 with remote control and revised aesthetics is in fact a far more refined beast altogether. The development of an all-new volume control circuit along with shorter and simpler signal paths, as well as the adoption of a new valve complement has created a significant improvement in performance whilst retaining all the considerable musical strengths of the original.

Hovland products have always succeeded in standing aside from the sense and structure of the music, rather than placing themselves in its path. The emphasis is on getting the right amount of energy in the right place and at the right time, placing notes and the spaces between them. It gives music an incredibly natural sense of flow and progression, a gestalt that denies the old assumptions regarding valve (or solid-state) sound. The sound of Hovland is indeed the sound of music.

What the HP200 brings to the mix is greater focus and transparency, immediacy, intimacy and detail, elevating the performance of the pre-amp back into line with that of the

RADIA power amp. The end result is both greater air and space and greater musical authority. Where the HP100 has a seductive quality, the 200 grants music a far more purposeful and commanding presence.

The 200 might be less forgiving as a result, but the inner aspects of a performance, the technique and expressive input of the players, are far more apparent and effective. Combine that performance with a full quota of control functions (including a mono

switch) as well as the provision of an

onboard phono option, all of which can be driven from the front-panel, and you have that rarest of creatures, the full-facilities pre-amp. Fit and finish are superb, while form definitely follows function. It gives the HP200 the same visual integrity that it delivers in sonic terms. With improved versatility and remote control as well as superior sound, it is a worthy partner to both the HP100 (which continues) and the Hovland power amps. Music rarely looks so good.



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