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Hovland HP100 Pre-Amp

by Roy Gregory

Have you ever noticed how certain categories of product come and go, top of everybody's wish list one moment, forgotten the next? Time was that a full facilities valve pre-amp was the crowning glory of high-end credibility. In fact, their performance was considered so quintessentially magical that one London dealer recommended (and sold a fair few) systems based around the £2000 Audio Research SP8 and the £750 Meridian M2 active speakers. Why? Because it was the cheapest way to get that all important valve pre-amp into a system. Indeed, in their heyday, customers could choose from the likes of Audio Research's SP8, 10 or 11 (the 9 never really made it), the Conrad-Johnson Premier 3, the CAT SL1, the Matisse and various MFAs or Audible Illusions. All, with the exception of the Matisse, American, and all expensive. And mostly now long gone.

Many of those manufacturers have gone on to produce valve or hybrid line stages, but with the advent of multiple digital sources and multi-channel, not to mention remote control and ease of use, they bear

little or no relation to their forebears in terms of facilities or sonic signature, and it was the latter that used to be all important. Reviewers waxed lyrical about air and warmth and what soon became known as valve sound (rather like we now have triode sound). The CAT is still out there, having gone through five of its nine available incarnations, and the Audible Illusions Modulus 3a



soldiers on, virtually unchanged, but these are very much the last of the old guard.

All of which makes the appearance of a new kid on this particular block all the more amazing. I'd love to tell you that the Hovland HP100 has been 20 years in development and is really just a late starter, but it hasn't and isn't, at least not in the simple sense. What it is, is a bona fide full facilities valve pre-amp replete with volume, balance and no fewer than eight

inputs; mute, mono and tape switching, a medium gain phono input and no remote control. In fact it's so downright old fashioned it's just plain ornery - and I love it. From its three large, chrome rotary controls and bright black nickel fascia to its solid construction; from its discrete logos and lettering to its piece de resistance

blue backlit front panel, here is a product which understands both form following

function and pride of ownership. The

Hovland looks classy and you'd better believe that it sounds classy too, although that's where it parts company

with tradition. You see,

the Hovland doesn't sound like a valve pre-amp at all. Mind you, it certainly doesn't sound solid state either, and once it's warmed up it seems at first, almost devoid of character and the grosser aberrations that marred its spiritual ancestors. Of course it has a signature, and I'll come back to that, but for the moment let's just note that appearances can be deceptive.

If the HP100 hasn't been twenty years in development, then the philosophies and thinking behind it certainly have. The sidebar spells out the background, but for now



The who and why of Hovland



Left to right: Robert Hovland, Chief Engineer,
Jeffrey Tonkin, Director, Industrial Design
Michael Garges, Co-Engineer/Director, Production
Alex Crespi, Director, Sales & Marketing

Hovland is probably a new name to many of you, at least as far as electronics goes, and it's not often that a product this classy springs from virgin ground, so you won't be surprised to hear that the company (and its accumulated expertise) actually stretches back a fair distance. In fact, designer Bob Hovland actually branched out on his own when Saul Marantz, for whom he was working, sold his company to the Japanese. The Hovland Company was founded in 1976, and has been in business ever since.

Twenty-four years on, how come you've only just heard of them? Because much of their initial work

was research into materials and passive components, which put them well ahead of the field.

By the very early '80s they were selling some of the first ever purpose built audio cables, and soon followed those with their 'MusiCap' film and foil capacitors. Audiophile components may be familiar these days, but Hovland were one of the genuine pioneers of what is now accepted wisdom. Along the way they also produced small runs of both solid state and valve electronics, achieving something of a cult following in their native California. The current HP100 is the culmination of all this work, itself soon to be joined by a 50 watt push pull stereo amplifier.

Given its background, it's hardly surprising to find that the pre-amp is the physical realisation of many of the company's theories. It also embodies their belief in balanced design, each aspect of the product receiving equal attention, so that it's built and looks as good as it sounds. At its heart lies an impressive, hand built, precision stepped attenuator. This 31 step device uses coined silver contacts and matched Holco resistors, and is the result of extensive research into all kinds of variable potentiometers. If the volume control is 90% of any line stage, Hovland have gone to enormous lengths to get theirs right.

Other aspects of their research are less obvious, but bear an uncanny similarity to many of my own conclusions. They like to stress the benefit of low mass components and socketry, a philosophy for which I have considerable sympathy. Experience shows that this has a seriously underestimated effect on sound quality. The mechanical design of the product is intended to provide maximum physical isolation of the various individual stages and the pre-amp as a whole. Given both its unusual indifference to a whole host of supports, and that I tended to prefer its own unadorned feet to the various alternatives I tried, I think we can conclude that these guys know what they're about. They also use their own (expensive) cabling throughout, and are careful to keep the circuit non-inverting in nature.

These exotic solutions are not chosen simply for effect. Each one is the result of exhaustive research and listening tests, to ensure not just the sonic benefits but also their repeatability and longevity. Hovland are keen to produce a product which offers a long and consistent working life. Given the maturity of the circuit design, most refinements come in the area of materials and components. In fact, you could almost look on the pre-amp as a framework, arranged so that elements can be removed and replaced as improved parts become available. To this end, the various models also have upgradeable phono stages, so that if you own the line only version, an extra £995 will add the medium gain phono stage, whilst MC transformers will set you back another £550 (£1450 if you do the two together). The black powder coat of the review samples' casework has also recently been replaced with polished and anodised panels, perforated metal discs taking the place of the grilles in the top-plate. Even cosmetic changes are retrofittable, and existing owners can purchase a new set of panels at a preferential price. As you can literally see, the HP100 continues to evolve, inside and out.

► what you really need to know is that Bob Hovland started his design career at Marantz when it was still an American company. That gives the HP100 some fairly serious heritage, and probably helps account for the vintage feel and build quality. Indeed, the sumptuous elegance and deco styling of the Hovland left me anticipating a wallow in the luxurious warmth and cosy friendliness of a classic valve pre-amp. Boy, was I ever wrong.

Listen to the Hovland and what you'll hear is music with clarity, poise and vitality; it's seamless from bass to apex, coherent and consistent. It is holistic. It is direct. It has the natural immediacy of the real thing. Assuming of course that the rest of the system is up to it - you can't listen to a pre-amp on its own. It is wonderfully free of hi-fi artifice and devoid of the spectacular. Its open soundstage is natural rather than etched, its bass floats, with none of the earthbound thunder that seems to get 'audiophiles' so excited. It simply puts the music first, without adding any touches or shape of its own, which makes it remarkably faithful to the original performance.

But don't expect that sound straight out of the box. I was lucky enough to have the Hovland around for considerably longer than most review products. In fact, I was so busy enjoying it that it wasn't until the importer needed it back that I realised that I hadn't spent any time 'reviewing' it. That required a second bite at a brand new cherry, and I'm now in a position to tell you that the HP100 takes a good three weeks to burn in, and will go on getting better for several months. It doesn't like being unplugged either, and takes two to three days to really hit its stride after being powered up. Cold, it lacks any sense of drama or authority, and sounds altogether rather mean and pinched. Likewise, ►

► straight from the box it has a hard plastic taint to the upper mid and treble which takes weeks rather than days to disappear.

Because of their extended stay, the two different HP100s got to play with a whole host of other equipment, including Wadia 860x and Rega Jupiter/Jo CD players; turntables from ClearAudio, Clearlight, Amazon and DNM; power amps from Jadis, Copland, Border Patrol, Lavardin and Densen; and speakers too numerous to mention, but including the usual suspects. The Hovland is simplicity itself to use, proving



remarkably immune to siting and perfectly at home on my RDC rack (although it may prove too wide for some!). Experiments with Pulsar Points and other supports tended to change the sound rather than improve it, and I preferred the HP100 au naturelle with most systems. Oh yes, the blue back-lights. Turn them off using the switch on the back panel and you get a worthwhile improvement in transparency and slightly better focus. Everything becomes a bit crisper and clearer, and you can hear further into the recording. So lights

off for listening, on for leisure. Fortunately the switch can be easily reached from the front, but why not slave it to the mute?

One visitor remarked that discussing the Hovland in hi-fi terms doesn't make a great deal of sense. You have to think in musical terms. I couldn't agree more. Listen to the HP100 and you listen to music. It is so un-obstructive, so absent from the sound that the natural shape and chemistry of the recording simply pull you in. Small and

intimate, huge and bombastic, the Hovland brings out the best in whatever you play. Take something complex with superb ensemble playing, like the Frankfurt Philharmonia Ensemble recording of the Dvorak *G Major String Quintet* (Edition Pheonix EPH02), and the character, colour and clarity of each instrumental voice is immediately recognisable and locked in space. Each player's contribution, his placement of notes and the way he shapes his phrases, the way they interlock with the other player's parts, becomes clarity itself. The music makes sense, just like it does when you hear it live.

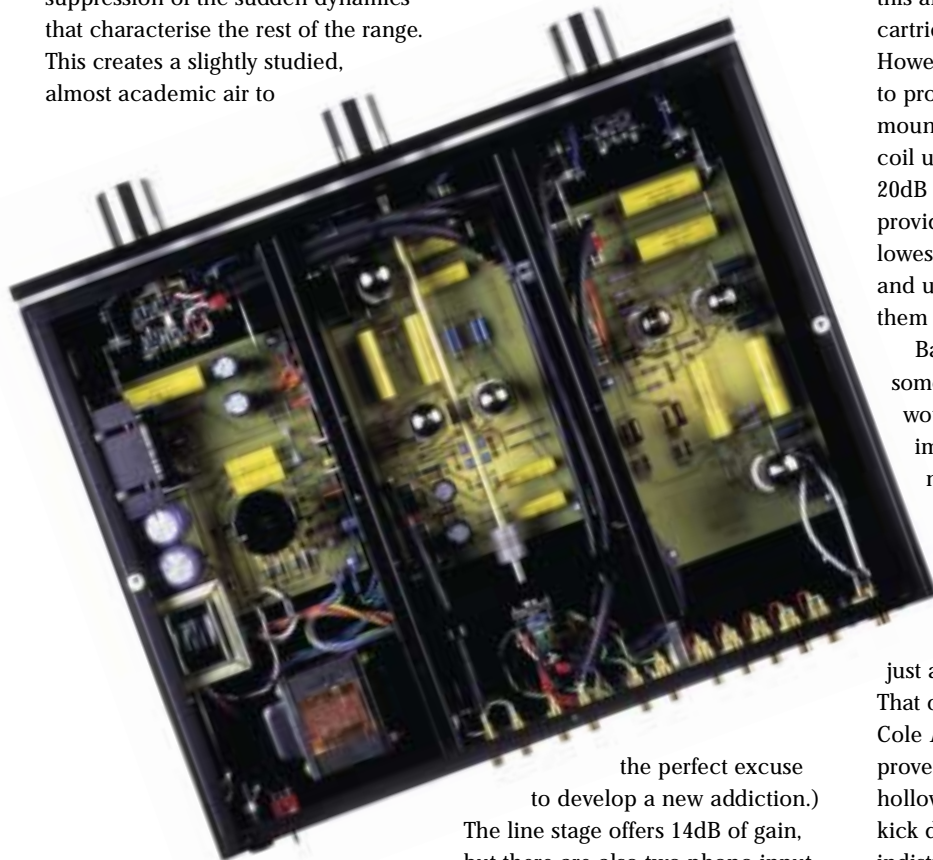
The Analogue Audio Association recording is, of course, outstanding. The playing is full of purpose and sophistication, the sound has outstanding life and presence, but it's incredible how easy it is to mess it up. The Hovland passes the signal intact and on time. Notes happen when and where they should, in a single coherent space, and with impressive life and vitality, which is most of what I want from a pre-amp. The correctness of its portrayal, tonal, temporal and physical, make the musical message so much easier to understand and enjoy, the system so much easier to forget.

Comparing performances becomes exactly that. Listen to the Heifetz Mendelssohn (RCA LSC-2314) and then try the Ferras on EMI (ASD 278). What you'll hear is the contrast between the sweeping grace and power of the American recording and the poise and understated control of the British. The yawning chasm between the two approaches is just as wide as it should be, undiminished by

electrical intrusion. Likewise, differences in partnering equipment seem more obvious. The upper mid/lower treble dip in the Nordost SPM cables was more than normally apparent, possibly mirroring a similar tendency in the pre-amp itself, and I tended to prefer the Clearlight cables instead, with their greater sense of presence and purpose. Indeed it's here that the HP100s character starts to show, a character which has little to do with colouration or deviation from the real, but more to do with the unit's particular perspective. This is slightly set back, introducing a sense of distance between the listener and the performers. Distance as in feet ►

▶ rather than detachment. The players are right there, but not reach out and touch close.

It's difficult to be too emphatic about this (and arguably it is actually a more realistic rendition of the concert experience) but it seems to be related to the degree of energy in that all important mid/treble transition. There is no variation in texture or the degree of detail, rather a subtle suppression of the sudden dynamics that characterise the rest of the range. This creates a slightly studied, almost academic air to



the pre-amp's performance, not at all at odds with enjoying the music, and a natural extension of the overall stability it brings to proceedings. And if this is in stark contrast to the fiery and emphatic CAT or the ultra precise DNM, then it's a diffidence which lets the music speak for itself, which is what makes it so difficult to pin down. Given the alacrity with which it exposes the shortcomings in ancillaries, I'd love to hear the HP100 with Hovland's own cables. It has

already displayed a marked preference for the company's own arm cable, the only piece I had available.

Which brings us to the thorny question of phono stages, and what if anything you actually need. Like most pre-amps, the HP100 is available as a line only unit for those who've kicked the vinyl habit. (If you never acquired it in the first place then a pre-amp like this is

the perfect excuse to develop a new addiction.) The line stage offers 14dB of gain, but there are also two phono input options available. The review units both had a medium sensitivity, 46dB gain, valve phono stage. This needs a minimum of 1mV from a cartridge in order to achieve decent noise levels, which makes it ideal with a whole host of moving-magnets or high output moving-coils. I used the variable reluctance Cartridge Man Music Maker for much of my listening, and that was fine, but the second unit suffered slightly higher noise than the first, so valve quality may be an issue.

It wasn't a problem with the Franken-Grado, but I reckon it might have been with around half the output.

For running the ClearAudio moving-coils I used either 'The Groove' or the Pass Aleph-Ono, the line stage providing ample gain for either. Incidentally, I had a moving-magnet version of 'The Groove' for a short while, and the HP100's mm input was musically superior to both this and the Pass with higher output cartridges - impressive indeed. However, Hovland have now started to produce their own internally mounted transformers for moving-coil users. These offer an additional 20dB of amplification and should provide sufficient gain for even the lowest output cartridges (0.1mV and up!). Hopefully I'll get to try them soon.

Back to the music and a little something energetic. After all I wouldn't want you getting the impression that a hint of reticence makes the HP100 slow in coming forward. Quite the opposite. The pre-amp's overall coherence, and dynamic and rhythmic integrity mean that it can kick up its heels just as soon as the music demands. That old favourite 'Forest Fire' (Lloyd Cole *Rattlesnakes* Polydor LCLP1) proves the point. That's a real live, hollow kick drum, with real live kick drum texture, rather than an indistinct thud. And when the drum reinforces the point at the end of the first verse, the Hovland effortlessly encompasses the double snare crash without so much as a ruffle. It cruises just as effortlessly through the hitch kick that picks up the beat after the first chorus, and the bass guitar is a thing of beauty. Each note is precisely pitched and paced, the fingering absolutely clear. The sound is right where it should be, level with the mix rather than stumbling along below it, and the tactile, ▶



no problem with music with attitude. In fact, musical attitude is what this pre-amp is all about.

As I write this there's a faint blue glow washing over my waiting system. Fuss free and fabulous, and with style to burn, this is a product to enjoy; enjoy its feel and looks, but most of all enjoy its music. Any pre-amp has a choke hold on its system, and the Hovland is no exception, it's just that here we're talking silk scarves and velvet gloves. In a world of compromises (and believe me when I say that pre-amps are compromised) the HP100 is one of the best balancing acts I've heard. It's heart is definitely in the right place, and so is its head. I'm not saying it's the best pre-amp out there. I'm not saying it's the one you should buy. But I am saying it's the one I prefer to listen through. ➤+

and the lower key verses, without any loss of presence or shift in the soundstage. It waltzes through the stutter drum break at the end of the second chorus and then ramps things back up for the final fling. Altogether something of a tour de force when it comes to dynamic coherence and rhythmic agility. But that's not the point. I put this track on to illustrate the argument, but as soon as I finished the review notes I was straight back downstairs to listen to the whole album. That's what I love about the Hovland. There is power and there is subtlety, but most of all there is music. Nothing I've used communicates quite like it, or has its total lack of fluster. I hesitate to use the term control because that implies 'grip' or constraint. The HP100 is more like an open sluice which is so wide that it can accommodate the fiercest torrent without things getting messy or confused. The music simply flows, the pre-amp never intrudes, even when the going gets tough. So

mobile notes drive the song along rather than holding it back. Even in the climax the separation holds, the HP100 delineating and scaling each stage as the band ramp up the volume and the density. And that nice, real kick drum's still there...

'The Real Life' from the John Cougar Mellancamp album *Lonesome Jubilee* (MFSL 1-222, and one case where the Mo-Fi is definitely worth the extra) fair gallops along, but once again the Hovland shifts effortlessly between the high density choruses

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