

# hi-fi+

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REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS

## And then there were three...

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*Jadis DA50 Signature*

*AudioValve Eklipse*

### ▶ Loudspeakers

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*Revolver R33*

*Alon Lotus Elite*

*Totem Forest*

### ▶ Affordable Power

*Cyrus Pre-X and Mono-X*

*Rega Cursa 3 and*

*Exon 3*





H O V L A N D

# Hovland RADIA Power-Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

For a company with an extremely long history and which garners almost universal respect from the industry in general, you could hardly describe Hovland as high profile. Indeed, until the appearance of the HP100 pre-amp some three years ago, precious few members of the buying public were even aware of the name, and even to this day their products are one of the industry's best kept secrets. All of which is pretty surprising really, because Hovland don't just build some of the best sounding products available, they are all (in high-end hi-fi terms at least) realistically priced, and they are all amongst the best looking hi-fi that money can buy. That's why a company with only two products has found both of them gracing the cover of Hi-Fi+.

Forget furniture finishes or lumps of curvy wood trying to disguise otherwise plain rectangular boxes. Forget absurdly over-engineered construction, needlessly exotic materials or massive dimensions. The Hovlands are the perfect example of the Bauhaus principle: form follows function, the casework's size, shape and materials defined by the unit's purpose. In the process, Hovland have developed a genuine hi-fi aesthetic,

rather than borrowing one from another industry (such as communications) or pretending to be something it isn't. The results are efficient in the engineering sense, and certainly effective in the sonic one. With careful and intelligent execution, Hovland have turned them into visually stunning units devoid of excessive or unnecessary ornament. They are products that possess an innate sense



of style, quite capable of standing alone alongside the likes of Alessi.

But it would be a huge mistake to dismiss Hovland amplifiers as nothing more than a pretty face. One reason for the company's relative anonymity is that much of their effort over the years has concentrated on internal components and cabling. The electronics finally offered us the opportunity to hear the accumulated

benefits of all that experience and expertise combined in a single chassis. First up to the plate was the HP100 mentioned above, an all valve pre-amp that managed to take a new twist to both the circuitry and aesthetics of this most hacknied of all high-end product categories. Devoid of the cloying warmth and rack handles that had defined its predecessors, the

Hovland was a superb sonic performer with beautifully constructed casework. The large, rotary controls were simplicity itself to operate, while the turquoise blue back-lighting for the front-panel established the company's visual trademark. At a little over £4K for a line-stage that challenged the established state-

of-the-art, the HP100 represented that rarest of animals, a high-end hi-fi bargain. But add in an optional high-gain moving-magnet stage at a price that belies its excellent performance, and even if you have a fancy outboard phono-stage or a CD based system, it's worth including as a stop-gap or against the day when you finally come to your senses (I mean, finally rediscover the joys of analogue).

Next up was the Sapphire, an innovative and even more visually stunning hybrid power-amp, delivering 40 Watts a side from its push-pull ►

► EL34 output stage. It raised Hovland's reputation for musically natural and tonally neutral sound to an even higher level. Long on transparency and finesse, and sounding a lot more powerful than its rating suggests, even bridged it wasn't going to meet the requirements of more power hungry installations, whilst taking up a lot more room than most people want to give.

Which brings us to the RADIA, and Hovland's latest, and to my eyes at least, most attractive amplifier. Despite the fact that it's actually much more of a rectangular box than anything they've done before, it's still unmistakably a Hovland, carrying the same turquoise front-panel lighting and three circular cooling vents in the top plate that instantly identified the pre-amp. The large, circular power switch with its annular surround also echoes the styling of the HP100, and discussions with the company reveal that a similarly configured and remote control equipped version of the pre-amp is in the works.

Inside the RADIA is a totally dual mono, solid-state circuit, even down to the twin mains transformers. Considerable effort has gone into keeping things thermally stable, the close coupled driver stages and output devices being contained in vertical flues that exit through those circular vents. To ensure decent airflow, the base-plate is raised on substantial cylindrical feet to give its large cooling slots space to breathe. Hovland also use a unique active thermal biasing circuit to provide rapid control of idling bias under widely differing dynamic conditions – a key contributor they believe to the amp's

astonishingly consistent sound irrespective of volume. The output modules use a mixture of matched J-FET inputs along with FET and bi-polar drivers feeding complementary bi-polar output devices, four per channel, arranged in balanced differential pairs. It's a configuration that delivers 125 Watts into 8 Ohms and 200 Watts into four.

The casework itself is a work of engineering art, beautifully machined lightweight aluminium panels bolting to an internal space frame. The front-panel, and more interestingly, the base plate are milled from clear slabs of 20mm Perspex, the thickness of the



material providing the necessary structural rigidity without introducing large amounts of metal into proximity with the circuitry. Front-panel controls are limited to the large, central power switch and three blue status indicators a side. The central ones stay lit while the amp is idle, the flank lamps lighting once it's switched to operate.

Things are similarly spartan round the back, with a small central plate carrying the input socketry (balanced or single-ended to order) and a single pair of 4mm binding posts per channel.

These are the source of my one gripe. Identical to the ones on the Sapphire, they take a 4mm plug in the end, but not through at right angles, which can be a right pain when it comes to bi-wiring. Apart from that there's nothing to report apart from an IEC socket and a small push button that disables all illumination but the status lights, for those occasions when you find the overall effect intrusive.

As regards accommodating the beast: well, it isn't small although at least it runs nice and cool, so space isn't the problem it might be. With a full 464mm width and 423mm depth, you will have problems with some

racks, like the standard sized Townshend Seismic Stands, although the Aavik that I used was fine, originally chosen as it was to house the resident Levinson 383. I ran the RADIA with the HP100 and a variety of speakers including the KEF 207s and Alon Lotus Elites. Cabling came from Hovland (a superb match at the price) and my preferred Nordost Valhalla, which allowed me to investigate the edges of the RADIA's

performance envelope.

Once you've finished this review it should come as no surprise whatsoever that I used the HP100/RADIA combination when it came to listening to the various Peter Gabriel re-masters in all their formats for the last issue. Whilst I'd never describe the RADIA as unforgiving (it is too sweet and harmonically correct for that) it will never disguise inadequacies in the signal, nor the partnering equipment, and whilst the sound is certainly effortless, it is also effortlessly

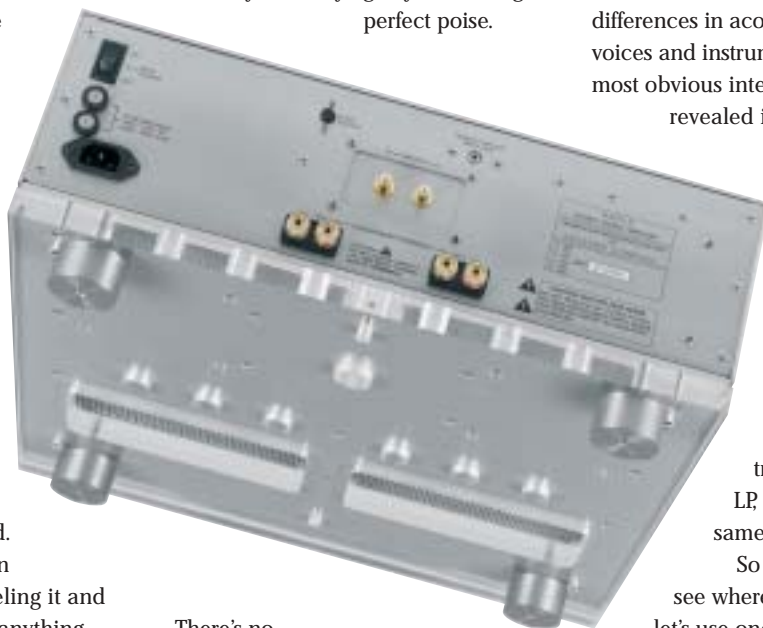
► revealing. Don't expect this to be a plug and play product. To hear what it's capable of you will need a top-notch source, cables and set-up.

How revealing? Perhaps more importantly, what kind of revealing? Playing *Verve Remixed* (Verve 589 606-1) the mix of original material and the grafted on bass beats is immediately apparent – what was there to start with, what's been added on. No great feat you might think, but the impressive thing about the RADIA is that it does it by revealing the nature and character of the sounds, separating the acoustic from the synthetic rather than just the new from the old. It shows you what's been done rather than unraveling it and destroying the effect. If anything, it's more impressive as a result.

Comparisons between different versions of *Steamin'* (XRCD on the Wadia and Mo-Fi SACD on the Classe Omega) are similarly stark, the superiority of the new Mo-Fi pressing emphatic. Better weight, substance and energy add up to far greater musical presence, a performance that leaves the XRCD sounding weak and, well, old. It's still Miles, it's still great Miles, but Miles is better on Mo-Fi and the RADIA leaves you in no doubt of that fact.

What makes an amp so revealing? It's a combination of things, and not always the same things. In the case of the RADIA there are three key elements to its performance: speed, transparency and headroom (or should that be control). I was astonished just how fast the Hovland amp sounds. One of the things that makes Janis Ian's album *Breaking Silence* (Analogue Productions APP 027) so impressive

is its unfettered dynamics. Boy is that obvious on the RADIA. Snare beats arrive with real snap and impact, yet remain beautifully scaled rather than larger than life, overblown or overweight. For a genuinely powerful amp it's remarkably light on its feet, rhythmically agile yet retaining perfect poise.



There's no clipping of notes or curtailing of harmonic structure in an effort to add the impression of speed. Musical energy is allowed considerable dynamic freedom and jump, yet never gets out of control or intrudes on other instruments. Indeed, instrumental lines are kept astonishingly separate, irrespective of pace or level, or the pace of what's going on around them. It may lack the body and enthusiastic presence of the Sapphire (an amp which, paradoxically sounds more obviously powerful) and it certainly lacks the sheer addictive vibrance of the JA30s. Instead it sounds wonderfully lively yet in control, not pinching notes or instruments, but rarely reaching the edge of its grip. Indeed, you have to push pretty hard before you detect the first hints of strain creeping into the equation.

The RADIA is also refreshingly free of grain, allowing you to hear way

back into the beautifully focused soundstage. How big a stage? That's down to the recording and the source component. Again, you can't expect the RADIA to lie, wrapping everything in a wonderful golden glow and acres of space. But if it's there on the disc then the amp delivers it. The differences in acoustic space around voices and instruments was one of the most obvious inter-format differences revealed in the Gabriel

comparisons. How much space around the singers at the start of 'Biko'? Depends on which version you play, but it expanded on the SACD before going truly open air on the LP and that's from the same tape!

So we're beginning to see where this is leading, but let's use one more example to clarify (no pun intended) things further. Playing the Diverse Records pressing of Alison Krauss, *Forget About It* (Div 002LP) two things strike you. Firstly the way the lead vocal remains a constant presence, the same size, the same acoustic power, whether it's singing solo or there's a full studio arrangement behind it. Secondly, the way individual instruments can take off on rapid runs, delivering sprays of notes without disturbing the pace or poise of the whole. It's this innate balance and inner control that makes the RADIA so impressive. The fact that it is at once delicate and authoritative. It is also somewhat stark, but like *The Soul* (the amp it sonically most resembles) that makes it no less engaging. There's nothing dry, clinical or over-damped about the sound of the Hovland. Instead it entices and seduces with the clarity of its view – what you can see, not what you can't. This is ►

▶ no Dance of the Seven Veils, they've all been ripped away, leaving you to gaze in on the performance. Listen to 'Maybe' on the Sapphire and the RADIA. It's an instructive exercise. There's an attractively seductive quality to the smaller amp. It has a gentle, measured pace that brings pathos and pushes the vocals forward in the mix. The RADIA is more even top to bottom, showing you a bigger, slightly more distant but clearer and more immediate picture. Yes, I know that sounds like a contradiction, but read it carefully and you'll see that something can be at once further away and clearer as well as arriving quicker. More importantly, the balance of voice and instruments, the acoustic scale of the individual elements is far more natural. But the kicker is the pace. Faster, more insistent and introducing a dramatic edge to the song, all without any compromise in space, detail or intelligibility: Faster here is definitely better. There's more going on and it's better arranged. Just listen to the placement of the bass note that provides the fullstop to the first chorus, the bridge to the second verse.

"Maybe I can stand alone,  
maybe I'm strong as stone"

So sings Alison and your heart melts for the fragility and vulnerability of the voice that delivers that defiant hope. This is what reproducing recorded music is all about. The Hovland communicates simply because it delivers all the elements of the music just where they should be, and thus the sense of the original performance. Which is of course a double-edged sword. If your turntable's got a fat bottom-end then the RADIA will reveal it in all its wobbly wonder, cellulite ripples and all. If your CD player chops the music into discrete bands and then delivers them all at slightly different times, I'm afraid that you're going to know all about the

horribly disjointed truth. But most importantly, if there's anything upstream of this amp that interferes with the timing integrity, the rhythmic organisation of the music, then the resulting shambles will not impress at all. The RADIA should never sound flat, disjointed or congested. If it does you can safely point the finger elsewhere.

It's not exactly surprising, but the easiest way to release the musical performance of the RADIA is to use it with the HP100, a combination which definitely delivers more than the sum of its parts. Whereas the Sapphire thrives on the ultra transparency and timing integrity of the Vibe, there's a magical element that creeps into proceedings when you use the valve pre-amp with the solid-state power-amp. Maybe it supplies just a hint of roundness to the RADIA's uncompromising honesty. Not much mind you, as the HP100 is a long way from traditional valve sound. What I think is more important is the pre-amp's way with a musical line, shape and spacing of notes that the RADIA seizes on with musical enthusiasm. Whatever the reason there's something going on here that raises the combination way above the ordinary.

Not so long ago I was comparing the new Tom Evans amplifier to the best of the logical contenders. Hey it's only 15 Watts after all. At that time the Sapphire couldn't compete with the clarity and musical communication of the S15 or the Lamm ML2s. Now, the RADIA hasn't just closed that gap, it's sitting right on their wheels. And it's brought a hundred or so extra Watts along for the ride!

I started this piece by giving you something of the Hovland history because it is important to understand the heritage and context that help define this product. As each of Hovland's products has appeared it has redefined performance and value benchmarks, and done it with style. The HP100 is a bargain in

anybody's book. The Sapphire too is a superb product, but in some respects it is in danger of being eclipsed by the RADIA. There will still be those who are drawn to its colours and easy intimacy, not to mention its stunning appearance. Which is only right because it is a great product. But as of now, the RADIA isn't just the best looking product Hovland have produced, it's simply the best in every respect. Used with the HP100 it provides magical insight into the musical performance, informing your mind, enticing your senses and holding your attention all at once. This one stays for as long as I can keep hold of it.



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

|                     |                                                                              |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Type:               | Solid-state power amp                                                        |
| Inputs:             | Either balanced or single-ended (user specified)                             |
| Input Impedance:    | 50K Ohm (unbalanced);<br>100K Ohm (balanced)                                 |
| Input Sensitivity:  | 1.6 Volts for<br>125 watts/8 Ohms                                            |
| Rated Output:       | 125 watts per channel<br>into 8 Ohms<br>200 watts per channel<br>into 4 Ohms |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 464mmx183mmx423mm                                                            |
| Weight:             | 33.6 kg                                                                      |
| Price:              | £7,995                                                                       |

UK Distributor:  
Metropolis Music Ltd.  
Tel. (44)(0)1892-539245  
Net. [www.metropolis-music.co.uk](http://www.metropolis-music.co.uk)

Manufacturer:  
Hovland Company  
Net. [www.hovlandcompany.com](http://www.hovlandcompany.com)