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# Amplification From The Deep End Of The Gene Pool...

## The Hovland HP100 Pre-amp, Sapphire Power Amp, Generation 3 Interconnects and Nineline Speaker Wires

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by Roy Gregory

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There's a deep, earthy solidity to the drumbeat: an insistent impact and texture: a presence and sense of energy that drives the track. The soaring vocals effortlessly scale their range: guitars skitter and spray staccato runs of notes. There's a chemistry at work that integrates all these elements and combines them into music of meaning. The finger bells and tambourines ringing clear in space, the interlocking guitar breaks: it all makes sense. The track is 'Shotgun Down The Avalanche' from Shawn Colvin's album *Steady On* (CBS 466142-1) and it's a stellar performance from both the musicians and from the system that, in this case, is doing the playing.

Turn to the equipment and it's the Hovland amps that immediately draw the eye. The dark mirror surface of the HP100's front panel reflecting the proud chrome jut of its rotary knobs, the pale blue halo that surrounds them and floats the fascia create a visage that's striking enough to have made the cover of Issue 8. Beside it, the silvery, suspended plateau of the Sapphire amp's plinth carries the clear-coated polished alloy cylindrical output transformer housings, echoing the pre-amp's knobs, even down to

their blue lit bases. But where the eye settles, where it rests, is on the four clear glass chimneys, glowing that same faint blue in the darkened room, that surround the EL34 output tubes. The combined effect is a visual as well as a musical tour de force. It's Hovland finally delivering on the promise first made with their cables and capacitors: promise that extended through and was heightened by the arrival of the pre-amp, and that has now finally blossomed spectacularly into a full system with the appearance of the Sapphire power amp in my front room.

It's easy to get carried away with the beautiful construction and appearance of these products. They possess an almost architectural understanding of visual planes, especially in the way they detach from their surroundings and their willingness to mix media and textures. There's nothing flashy about them. In fact, the grace of their appearance grows out of their almost Bauhaus functional simplicity. It's a refreshing change from the overdressed ostentation that passes for style on so much high-end equipment, an aesthetic as vacuous as the sound that emanates from much of it.

The Hovlands are products where the looks are a bonus rather than an apology for poor sonic performance. The way they look grows out of what they do, and what they do is music: Wonderful music.

The performance they produce is lucid and clear, fast and dynamic, yet sinuous and muscular. The subtlety and power of those drum beats that opened this review is no flash in the plan. Running as a system the Hovland components are much greater than the sum of the already considerable parts. Take the midi-band of *Julian Cannonball Adderley In The Land Of Hi-Fi* (Speaker's Corner/Mercury MG36077): It's a great recording (and mono to boot) but the Hovland set-up imbues it with a sense of presence, substance and power that really makes it swing. The rapidly extending lines of Cannonball's alto sax jousts both playfully and purposefully with the cornet of brother Nat and Ernie Royal's trumpet. The underpinning of tenor, baritone and twin trombones is powerful and provides the perfect groundswell. In fact it sounds like a much bigger band, testament to both the players superb ensemble understanding and the Hovlands' ►

► performance. It's never more clear than on the measured, funky blues of 'T's Tune' where the alto lead stretches out over the brass backing, leaving space for and never swamping the contribution of Junior Mance at the piano. That innate sense of inner balance, so crucial to any successful hi-fi system, allows the Hovlands to move effortlessly through the gears on the sudden shifts in tempo on 'Broadway to Basin Street'.

And so it goes. On any record or disc you select, time and again you notice new aspects and nuances to the playing. It's not so much that the Hovlands tell you more, it's just that they let you hear what you are used to much, much better. It's like having a better seat in the concert hall, a better table in the club: The greatness of great musicians is that much more apparent. Of course, the HP100's mono switch certainly helps on the Adderley, but then there's that broad, almost Protestant streak of practicality raising its head again. Despite the price and appearance of these amplifiers don't get the idea that they are in any way precious or fussy in operation: Quite the opposite in fact. Take those chimneys as an example. They aren't there just to look pretty, although that they certainly do. Vents in the underside of the amp allow air to be drawn through by the convection effect caused by the heat from the valves. Thus the problem of hot glowing bottles is neatly turned on its head, instead providing cooling for not just the valves themselves but the circuit as a whole,

while at the same time eliminating the requirement for an ugly cover or cage to keep small, prying fingers safe. It's just the most obvious example of the completeness of the thinking that has gone into these products. But more on that later.

First, the Achilles heel. If you've reread the HP100 review back in Issue 8 you'll know that the HP100 is available in three forms: as a line stage only (£4750), with a medium sensitivity,



46dB gain valve phono stage (£5350), or with additional moving coil step-up transformers to provide a total of 63dB of gain (£5750). My original sample only had the active phono stage, and one reason to get the pre-amp back (as well as it being the obvious partner for the Sapphire) is to listen to the higher gain phono stage. This employs a pair of custom wound transformers mounted immediately behind the phono input sockets, a neat arrangement that keeps the signal path as short as possible. Other refinements to the pre-amp as a whole include improved finish on the casework, which is now anodised instead of powder coated, several small

but significant component changes, and a new power transformer that includes a separate winding to supply the bulbs used to illuminate the front panel. This means that you can now leave the HP100 gloriously illuminated without compromising the sound. However, the switch to turn the lights off still remains, just in case they offend your sensibilities.

The previously mentioned weakness is in the sound of the step-up transformers. The active stage is excellent, especially for those who want to use a cartridge with a healthy output: I achieved exceptional results with Len Gregory's Grado derived Music Maker. However, the transformers are simply not in the same class.

At least not yet. The problem is that whilst it's easy to run a CD player through a line stage for days on end, it's not quite as simple with a phono stage. Knowing how long the HP100 takes to run in (months of continuous use!) there's no way that the transformers are going to receive anything like the required running in the time available for a review. Even four or five hours a day every day for a month only adds up to five days of continuous use. So, a huge question mark rests over the validity of these listening results that can only be resolved in the fullness of time. Meanwhile, here's what I heard.

The sound of the transformers, because unlike the pre and power amps they do have a distinctive character, is lean, silvery and flat. They lack colour and dynamic range and that lends the music a fragile, ethereal quality. They also introduce a ►

▶ smoothness and lack of bite and attack to transients as well as a thuddy, immobile quality to the bass. In fact, in many respects they resemble an exaggerated version of the way the HP100 sounds straight out of the box, which in part accounts for my suspicions regarding running-in.

Now let's put that in context. Being blessed with the sadly temporary presence of the Connoisseur Definitions 4.0 phono stage it was just too easy to plug that straight into one of the HP100's line inputs, and it was this sternest of tests that exposed the Hovland's transformers, rather like a rabbit caught in the spotlights. Playing 'Hard Headed Woman' from *Tea For The Tillerman*, the Connoisseur injected, colour, pace, dynamic range, more colour and impact, not to mention a sense of presence and musical purpose. The track simply came to life from the pale shadow of its former self. It's hard to explain (or exaggerate) the magnitude of the difference. Perhaps the easiest thing is to fasten on a single example: the violin backing that enters after the first verse. Via the Hovland's transformers the sound was a simple, smooth tone, replete with a silky surface sheen. The Connoisseur introduced the texture and rasp of bow on string, the sense of drawing the bow itself, the tiny shifts in pressure, level and accent that provide the expressive vocabulary of the instrument. And that's on one

previously inconsequential backing instrument: An instrument whose presence now becomes vital to the structure and sense of the song as a whole. Now think what that means for the bass guitar, the drums, or more importantly, the lead vocal! However it's not all bad.



For starters, the combined cost of the Hovland's active stage and transformers adds up to £1000. Order the HP100 as a line stage and you can buy that, the power amp and all the cabling for this system for less than



the cost of the Connoisseur phono stage on its own! More to the point, the wonderful sound of the Connoisseur was only apparent because of the performance of the Hovland line and power stages, which says a lot about their quality and capabilities. Look at a more sensible alternative like The Groove, which also provides an exceptional match to the

HP100, and you're looking at a system cost that comes in for rather less than the price of the Valhalla cables that I use. The Hovlands may be expensive, but they are also an absolute bargain. Where the high-gain phono stage fits into the equation only time will tell. The medium gain option is a steal for the occasional vinyl user or one with the appropriate pick-up cartridge. In the meantime, you should realise that all the sonic observations contained in this review stem from the Hovlands used with the Connoisseur or The Groove.

Hooked up to the Clearlight Recovery turntable, Incognito RB300 and Helikon, and driving the Reference 3A or Audioplan Kontrast speakers (I didn't have the extra cable straps for the OBX crossovers) I had a system of astonishing performance for its price. Even the addition of Audio Research's excellent CD3 to spin silver discs, or VPI's JMW 12.5 tonearm doesn't push it into the outer limits price wise. Back to 'Hard Headed Woman' and I'm astonished by

the sheer physical presence of the sound and images. There is a natural presence and authority to the sound that should be the preserve of really big systems, but which they all too often lack. It comes not just from the scale of the presence but from the dynamic range and responsiveness, but above all coherence. The Hovlands are capable of projected energy equally across the entire audible spectrum. It produces a sound free of exaggeration ▶

► or false emphasis, one in which the sound, shape, colour and dispersion of acoustic instruments is uncannily natural. Likewise, the relationship between them, within the band, seems effortlessly right and correct. There's an acceptability in the message which means that you don't question its artifice, you simply accept its content, making the Hovlands a compelling listening experience.

I seem to keep repeating the word effortless, from the first paragraph to the one I've just written. Of course, push-pull EL34s are hardly news when it comes to midrange detail and openness. What I wasn't prepared for was the extension of those capabilities with a healthy dose of sheer power, power that extends well down into the bottom octaves.

The Sapphire quite simply sounds bigger and more powerful, with more authority than it has any right to. Rated at 40 Watts it's an object lesson in the irrelevance of measurement to hi-fi. The glory of the Hovland amplifier is not how much power it's got, but how it delivers what it has. The speed and texture of bass notes is remarkable, mirroring the easy grace, texture and naturalness of the mid-range. Music on the Hovlands breathes.

If the sense of easy power and authority is the first thing that hits you about the HP100 and Sapphire, what dawns more slowly is its lack of overt character. Anybody who buys the Hovlands expecting to wrapped in the warm rosy glow of 'traditional'

valve amps will be sorely disappointed. Neither do they sound solid-state. Instead they are notable for an uncluttered, lucid, dynamic presentation, full of life and colour. There's no rounding or false warmth (indicative of valves), none of the bleaching or micro-dynamic constraint (indicative of solid state). Like the much more expensive Connoisseur and

a single ML2 mono-block. Like I said, the Hovlands aren't exactly entry level products, but their performance makes them impressive value for money.

Time then, to talk about the internal and external constructional details (for these are Hovland products, based on the premise that the physical and electrical must

always be considered together). The HP100 pre-amp that arrived for review this time round is, presence of the moving-coil transformers aside, outwardly little different from the original sample. The main casework is now anodised rather than powder coated, and the ventilation holes in the top-plate now sport nice, perforated, machined discs in place of the mesh they used to have. It all adds up to a neater, more finished appearance that's more in keeping with the glorious deco front panel. Inside, although they might be less obvious, there are changes too, with several key components either being changed for



Lamm ML2s, they offer genuine neutrality, measured not in terms of tonal colour but in the energy propagation that actually generates those colours. There's none of the flatness or constraint that so often typifies so-called 'neutral' products because, rather than paring away additives this is neutrality that grows from within. And it comes in a form where the whole set-up costs less than

different types (notably the discrete resistors on the stepped attenuator) or having their values trimmed. It's difficult without having the two units side by side, but I'd say that the newer one retains the transparency and temporal fluidity of the original whilst reducing its slight tendency to leanness in the mid-band. The current unit has just a little more colour and presence, it breathes just a little easier and

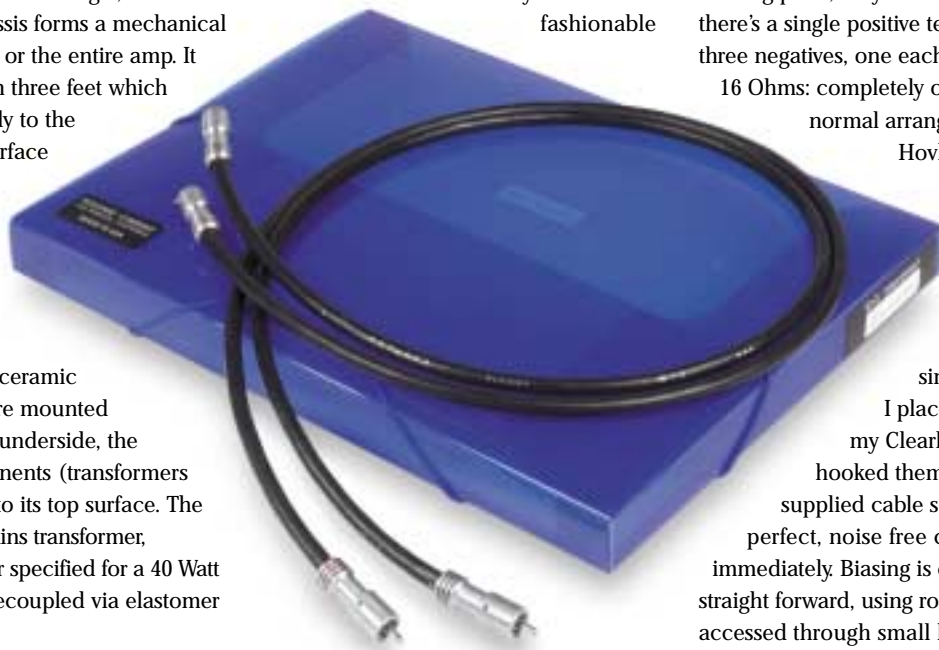


► sounds a shade more musically generous. But we're talking small, evolutionary steps here, which is very much the Hovland way: No change for change's sake with these products. Of course, the Sapphire, being entirely new, is a different kettle of fish. And believe me, there's a lot more going on here than meets the eye. You can't really miss the brushed aluminium chassis that supports the hardware. What is less obvious is the fact that that support is both visual and physical. Constructed from a single, inch thick slab, that chassis forms a mechanical ground plane or the entire amp. It sits on its own three feet which couple directly to the supporting surface (and which are threaded for cones if you so wish). The circuitry and ceramic valve bases are mounted directly to its underside, the major components (transformers and chokes) to its top surface. The enormous mains transformer, massively over specified for a 40 Watt amplifier is decoupled via elastomer mountings.

By now, anybody who can count will have worked out that this isn't just another jazzed up Williamson or Mullard application circuit. Not enough of the little tubes you see.

In fact, the Sapphire is a hybrid amplifier, with a bi-polar input stage and J-fet phase splitters used to feed a hybrid J-fet/12AU7 cascode driver for each channel. The push-pull EL34s run in Class AB and the entire circuit is dual mono down to separate windings on the mains transformer. The power supplies are substantial and, importantly, the amp uses custom wound choke filters for its HTsupplies. Internal construction is a mixture of hard wiring and PCBs, the two

approaches applied as appropriate to those situations where they produce superior results. Yet again, rather than simply following the herd and opting for one or the other, Hovland have listened and evaluated the benefits of each over the years, and now apply that experience to honing and refining the Sapphire's sonic qualities. In the same way, the circuit eschews global feedback, but retains carefully implemented nested feedback around each stage. Why EL34s when there are so many much more fashionable



alternatives out there. Hovland are not only confident in the sonic superiority of their chosen device (a confidence spectacularly born out in practice) but point out that reliable replacements are readily available from a wide variety of sources. yet another example of just how grounded in reality this company really is. In an industry where output tubes can cost well over £300 each and the five-figure phono cartridge is only just over the horizon, it's a reassuring situation.

The Sapphire's back panel is also unusual. Tucked under the lip of the top-plate it's not that easy to access, but get it to something like eye-level

and you'll find the necessary socketry, and a bridging switch. Yes, for those of you who crave more power, the Hovland can be bridged to produce an 80 Watt mono-block: a swings and roundabouts option that delivers the extra grunt at the expense of some transparency, but one that I'll be sampling just as soon as I can prize a second sample out of the importer. About now you'll do a double take. Alongside the single-ended phono inputs are the requisite rows of speaker binding posts, only for each channel there's a single positive terminal and three negatives, one each for 4, 8 and 16 Ohms: completely opposite to the normal arrangement.

Hovland feel it sounds better this way. Setting up the Hovlands is simplicity itself.

I placed them on my Clearlight rack and hooked them up using the supplied cable sets. I achieved perfect, noise free connection immediately. Biasing is equally straight forward, using rotary trim pots accessed through small holes drilled in the top plate and placed, along with a bulls eye meter, between the two gasometers. Select the appropriate valve and rotate the pot until the needle centres – elegant, effective, Hovland!

The only things you need to remember is not to place any kind of supports under the base plate of the amplifier (it must stand on its feet). That and to remove the safety plugs from the binding posts so that you can use 4mm plugs. You could use spades, but the access to the terminals is so cramped (an increasingly common failing on valve amps just at present) that you'll need very flexible cables, and double connecting bi-wires



► would be no fun at all. Fortunately, Hovland's Generation 3 interconnects and Ninline speaker cables are a model of flexible convenience when it comes to hooking them up. They might appear nondescript but these are the latest incarnation of one of the first ever audiophile cable systems (evolution, remember!). Their performance within and between the Hovlandelectronics is one of the most powerful arguments I can suggest for the coherent application of cable technology to a system as a whole. This is

bottom of the amazing performance possible from these amps will be to substitute the Nordost cabling into the equation. But this is a review of the Hovland system, and a system it is.

from the basic raw energy building blocks, you listen to the music from the inside out. It might sound like a strange observation, but all too often when you listen to a hi-fi system (and especially a serious high-end system) you start on the outside. After all, that's where you start at a concert hall

– except that in a concert the orchestra talks so much more directly. Once it starts to play if you're aware of the environment as containing the music (rather than the music in the environment) then you're at the wrong concert, in the wrong seats or the

band want shooting. We spend so much time worrying about sound stage height, width and boundaries that some systems offer exactly that at the expense of presenting the orchestra as a single congealed blob within its holo-graphically recreated acoustic surroundings. Marvel at that dimensionality, reach out and touch Orchestra Hall – what is it that the orchestra's playing?

The Hovlands are neither forward nor enveloping. In the same way that The Groove manages to place you in the same sound space as the players, they manage to extend that impression. It's a simple case of direct access. Because your attention is firmly fixed within the performance the boundaries that enclose the acoustic event become secondary (just as they are in life). Listen for them and they're there, just as the individual instruments and players are clearly and precisely defined in space. But they form a continuity of, a coherent whole along with, the



Which means that the whole is considerably greater than the sum of the parts. Oh yes indeed! I've already discussed this system's astonishingly inviting sound and the level of musical access it provides, and in doing so I've touched on the inter-relationships it reveals between

one of the most musically satisfying set-ups I've ever used at home. The total cost of the cabling involved adds up to £2100 (including a set of 5m bi-wires) – or rather less than a single pair of the Valhalla interconnects I normally use! I'm not saying that the Hovland cables are better than the Valhallas, and the next stage in getting to the

instruments and players in a band. For me these are key aspects of what makes this such a musically convincing and satisfying set-up, but it also alters the way you listen. The Hovland puts the music on a plate for you; you don't have to go looking for it. In the same way that it grows the accuracy and placement of its colours and notes



► orchestra. They aren't as obviously separate or distant as they are on some systems. Rather than existing in their own right as something to marvel at and measure, they are a natural extension of and limit to the musical event. In fact, I was so convinced by the Hovland's presentation that it wasn't until another listener pointed out an apparent lack of depth that it even occurred to me. Such considerations form an essential part of the reviewing process, so as you can see, I gave the matter some considerable thought. I'd normally consider myself a spatially aware listener, and lack of stereo or acoustic information definitely worries me. The Hovland's lack neither, they simply present it in a different, and I'm beginning to believe that it might be a more realistic fashion. Whatever the rights and wrongs of this (and I can hear the "You don't hear stereo at live concerts anyway" brigade sharpening their knives) all I can say is that I'm enjoying my music. There are products that exaggerate dimensionality and inject it even into recordings that are spatially challenged (the Audiophisic Virgo springs to mind). If that's what you want, then you know where to look. Me, I'm happy with the natural spatial perspective of the Hovlands, being more interested in what comes from the instruments in the first place. The width, depth and height are all actually present (and I believe correct), they just don't smack you in the face.

Listen to Heifetz playing the Bruch

Scottish Fantasy (RCA LSC-2603) and his fiddle is a vital, vibrant, multi-coloured presence in front of



a beautifully spread and separated orchestra. The great man is a little larger than life, and a little more forward than real life, but that's how he was recorded. With the Hovland system you can hear the bite of rosin on strings, the smallest expressive variation in pressure and the shape of the note. The musical event has a believable presence and palpable reality to it. It draws you in; shut your eyes and with the barest effort you are there. Change the record and you can have Kirsty McColl or Elvis (Costello please) singing just for you. That'll do for me. If products like the Lamm ML2s and Connoisseur Definitions 4.0, Nordost's Valhalla

cables and the Clearaudio Master Reference record player have redefined what I believe is possible from a hi-fi system, then the Hovlands bring that level of achievement within the reach of mere mortals for the first time. Lavardin and Living Voice have redefined the real world market, but this is something entirely different. The HP100/Sapphire combination, in concert with their matching cables offer a foothold in the high-end. As such they offer the heart of a serious assault on the state of the art for less than the cost of any of the individual products I named above. Robert Hovland and his cohorts have created a bridge to the hi-fi stratosphere: Don't all rush at once. ►+

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