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## New Star in the Audio Sky – Hovland-HP 100 Preamp



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### First Look: The Hovland HP-100 Preamp – New Star in the Audio Sky



I was interested enough in Peter Braverman's review of the Hovland HP-100 (wherever did those initials originate?) to want to hear for myself what Robert Hovland and his design team hath wrought.

And from the moment I turned it on, I heard the very qualities that have so intrigued those already familiar with its magicks. The key to its glory, as Braverman so well notes (page 59), lies in its ability to capture what I've been calling "continuousness," that sense of every aspect of sound being part of an organic whole, like the continuousness of falling water, of a carpet of many colors, of the air that surrounds us.

Its spectral balance strikes me as nearing the ideal. In terms of tonal character, the Hovland reminds me of Audio Research during the latter days of the SP-3 series, minus, to

be sure, the second harmonic excess toward the frequency extremes. Remember, I am talking about overall character here. It is much less "thick" than the ARC gear, save, just maybe, for a small sense of midriff bulge in the exact center of the spectrum of fundamentals, a coloration not in consonant with music.

On one point, I find Braverman's description far from the mark, and that is concerning the HP's (lovely sound, that!) mid-to-bottom-octave performance. One of the torture tests I like to inflict on unsuspecting components is the Naxos recording series from Hong Kong, the *Master of Chinese Percussion* series [8.225942 HDCD & 8.225950]. If you've got a system that can reproduce the huge drum whacks at something like a real-world volume (and Carl Marchisotto's new Exotica Grande system can do just that), then you're gonna feel the earth move, to paraphrase Hemingway. The transient attacks are breathtaking, and they generate both over- and undertones well down into the sub-basement. Now, truth be said, most preamplifiers cannot do on these roaringly dynamic crescendi and decrescendi what the Hovland does without strain, and that is to reproduce the monster percussion slaps in a way that will not only let you know how tightly the drum skin is stretched, but reproduce the dimensions and volume of the drums themselves. (Solid-state preamps reproduce low bass that sounds as if it goes lower when what is actually happening is that the bass is somewhat harmonically bleached and less like the real and right stuff.)

At the opposite end of the range, the Hovland has a top octave that, to these ears, is faintly reminiscent of the best ribbon tweeters (such as that patented by Magnepan or the smaller ribbons used in Marchisotto's Exotica Grande) – that is to say, the highs are sweet (they are in real life, too, on unamplified music) and extended. It's as if your ears could hear upward forever, and this is because, in getting the top octave right, all the overtones below that point fall into their harmonically correct proportions. Interesting enough, there is no thinning-out of that top octave. If you want to have a bit of fun, try the Argento work, "The Ring of Time" (from the album entitled *Valentino Dances* on Reference Recordings

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RR-91CD), with its symphonic deployment of bells, chimes, and whatnot, hit at levels ranging from the very soft (*pp*) to the loudest clangor (*ffff*) you can imagine, a triumph of the recording art. Also a challenge to reproduce, at least as far as keeping the instruments focused in space at every level of loudness. (Normally, with most gear, high-level transients tend to smear or congeal.) Purity of timbre is one of the Hovland's greatest strengths, and this recording shows that to startling effect.

And it is within the purity of timbre that we find some aspects of continuousness. There is some kind of aural interference that is simply not there in certain designs, usually those of tubed descent. And that could lie in the way extraneous noise artifacts are decoded by tubes, a point touched on by Michael Fremer in his long and, to my way of thinking, somewhat addled review of the Hovland, though his enthusiasm the component certainly justifies. Those of you with quite long memories may recall an ancient review of mine, of Nelson Pass' Stasis Model One, a review he has never forgiven me for, by the way, in which I first stumbled across the different ways in which solid-state and tubed designs decoded noise. Until quite recently, solid-state electronics decoded noise in the same plane as that of the music, sort of, you might say, in the spaces between the instruments and the phrases, while tubed units would decode that same noise on a separate plane, rather like smudges on a windshield, not smudges in the scenery or, more apt and worse, on your eyes.

I dislike striking a comparison when I have not done my direct-comparison homework, but I don't need to have the Hovland side by side with the Conrad-Johnson ART Series II to know that the Hovland has a more realistic range of dynamics, much more of what Keith Johnson calls, I believe, "jump." Interestingly enough, the very area in which the Hovland has that dynamic edge over the Connie J lies at the frequency extremes, where the C-J seemingly runs out of dynamic steam.

Also the ART has a more distinctive sonic signature, perhaps thanks to its midbass "jump" (where it clearly overtakes the Hovland), but a jump that emphasizes the "golden glow" section of the orchestra (i.e., the massed brass). I am inclined, at this point, to think that, in totality, the HP-100 exhibits a greater overall continuousness than the Connie J.

Also I have not completely checked out the Hovland's moving-coil phono stage (been busy with a new phono stage from Clearaudio), which is of unusual design, since it employs a step-up transformer. Buying the moving-coil stage will set you back some more money (as will the moving-magnet phono stage, which I can't imagine why you'd want, given the excellences of today's best moving coils, e.g., the Lyra Helikon). Remember that this is a first look, and there remains much work to be done.

But you know, a truly great component sounds that way right out of the box, even when it is not

optimally adjusted. At its price, about one-fourth that of the ART II, it would seem to have dibs on being the top dog in the High End neighborhood. It is also beautiful to look at, internally and externally, and has a rather simple three-tube complement in its line stage. That, Hovland himself says, was a deliberate design decision to keep the tubes from having to carry the design weight. His working approach is to keep it simple and use the ultimate in parts at every juncture in the circuitry, endlessly testing and re-testing with the sound of music as the absolute design source.

Oh yeah, and these guys are restless, never satisfied with the sonic status quo, which is why updates sometimes come along without prior warning, or any change in model number.

The great pleasure of listening to the Hovland comes in hearing what it does to old favorite recordings. It doesn't glamorize anything, so your recordings aren't going to sound suddenly naked and miraculously revealed. In a way, you're going to hear less and more, simultaneously. Less in terms of dark matter between you and the playing of the musicians and more in terms of what those musicians are doing. You hear deeper into the texture and lines of the music, but entirely without any "high-definition" emphasis or that pre-emphasis that comes from miniature deviations within the harmonic spectrum. (Which is not to say there aren't some broader-band ascents or descents.) From recording to recording, with the Hovland, there is a sense of wholeness and completeness in the listening experience that most of you will find, other equipment willing, new, and more than that, refreshing, even renewing. Does it sound real? No. Does it sound more real? Yes. More real than the sound of one hand clapping? Perhaps. But I'm using both.



See Peter Braverman's article for full review on the following pages.

## Hovland HP-100 Full-Feature Preamplifier

Several years ago, I heard a story about Ivor Tiefenbrun, founder of Linn, where he was asked how much of the live music experience he thought the best systems reproduced, and he replied, "About ten percent."

Regular concert-goers would probably agree. Even the best systems lack more than a dollop of verisimilitude compared to the real thing. Even the wonderful big systems I know – in Sea Cliff and the handful that really sound great at shows – never really get *there*. It's not that they don't sound compelling – they do. They just don't sound *real*.

I can't imagine where I'd start to improve them. Dynamics? Certainly, maybe even first, as anyone who's ever heard a trumpet at 20 feet knows. Image and soundstage – the "visual" components? You bet. Scale? That, too. But what I really wonder is how we'll recognize it when components begin to improve in less obvious ways.

The all-tube Hovland HP-100 is the first component from a company long known for premium parts; the Musi-Cap, Hovland's film-and-foil capacitor, is used by dozens of manufacturers and tweekers. The preamp is available as a line-stage only or with moving-magnet or moving-coil phono stage. The line stage uses two garden-variety 12AX7s and a 12AU7; the phono stage adds another brace of 12AX7s and one 12AT7. While you could experiment, I used the stock tubes and found they performed unremarkably – which is as I'm sure Hovland intended. The single operational anomaly was a low-level buzzing that I could never banish. This was inaudible during listening, but others have heard it with different samples. It was the lone issue during the several months I had the HP-100; otherwise, the preamp was quiet.

The HP-100 is one of the most beautifully designed pieces I've seen. The top plate (anodized aluminum, mortised into the sides for structural rigidity) contains three round perforated air vents that echo the three large chrome knobs on the 3/8-inch faceplate. Those knobs control balance and volume and select from the generous eight source inputs plus tape. There are two main outputs; the HP-100 offers only single-ended connections and does not invert polarity. Balance can be adjusted 5 dB in either direction; at its zero point, the fixed-resistor control is out of the circuit. The stepped volume control – dealers should demonstrate this sucker *sans* cover so customers can see the care that goes into construction – allows 31 settings that vary by 2 dB per step. (The volume control had an unusually usable range, no small thing in my system, which tends to too much gain with many preamps.) Below the knobs, sit four chrome push-buttons, for power, mono (hooray!), tape monitor, and mute. In addition, a sexy translucent acrylic plate behind the faceplate



glows blue around the knobs when the preamp is powered up. It can be switched off.

Inside, the chassis is divided into thirds by rigid aluminum "walls," with sections allocated for phono, line stage, and power supply. The literature says nothing about structural rigidity, but one can't overlook its implicit importance to Hovland. In fact, throughout the review, I found that the company did not toot its horn when it could have, that its representatives were a pleasure to deal with, and that even the most ostensibly minor details were addressed, usually without comment.

That's not surprising, as Hovland's upgrade policy testifies. Once during the few months I had the preamp, Hovland's Alex Crespi called to say I did not have the latest version. Back to California, back to me. As Crespi explained, continuous improvement is part of Hovland's philosophy, but with a capacitor here and a short cable there, they don't change the model designation every time. Instead, owners can send units back to Hovland every couple of years for full upgrades, usually at relatively low cost (depending on scope, of course). Those worried that they do not have the latest should relax: The basic sound of the unit has not changed since it was released. Indeed, while the upgraded HP-100 showed definite differences, the preamp was only "more so," certainly not a different species in any way.

The single ergonomic glitch is the lack of remote, though Hovland is not alone in thinking there is no way to engineer one without sonic compromise. Don't fret – the silky controls may make you get up to caress them for even small volume changes. (I think Hovland should produce a remote, even an inert one, just so I could see it.)

Now nothing makes me curious like a component that has garnered a spate of raves; the accolades I've seen for the Hovland made me doubly doubtful, and more than eager to discover its shortcomings. The truth is that most components sound like music only in bits and pieces, and the Hovland, honestly, will not transport you bodily to Avery Fisher

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I have always subscribed to the notion that one need not be familiar with “the competition” to evaluate most products – the notion of the absolute sound is that the “competition” is music itself, and how one component fares against another can be gleaned from their relative successes and shortcomings against the real thing.

or the Fillmore any faster than the Panasonic rack at Best Buy. However, what it does well it does *so* well, and so much better than anything else I’ve heard, that I must admit that my skepticism is in remission, and that describing the advances of this most wonderful piece will be a challenge.

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The Hovland has changed my thinking somewhat, insofar as I have not heard any components that paint the musical image with strokes so consistent. Indeed, it calls into question virtually every component I’ve reviewed with respect to continuousness, so that I wonder if I even understood that term until now.

HP has posited that continuousness “will be obvious to any thoughtful listener when he hears it,” and here, with all due respect, I think he may leave out a critical element of this attribute. To say a component exhibits continuousness begs the question: continuousness of what? In what attributes is the component woven of a single cloth? If you revisit “How To Read TAS,” Issue 129, it will become clear that continuousness is an evaluation of how well a component or system accomplishes other of the aspects of recorded and reproduced sound. To use the terms of that article, the Hovland is remarkably continuous in its sense of immediacy, its portrayal of dynamic gradients, and especially its character and textures.

The Hovland is, by a fair piece, the most seamless, liquid, effortless component I’ve heard in my system. On Simon and Garfunkel’s *Bridge Over Troubled Water* [Columbia KCS 9914], several thoughts occurred to me. First, there is a startling realism even to solo instruments. The guitar that opens “Baby Driver” and the trumpet on Tubby Hayes’ *Tubby the Tenor* [Epic/Classic BA 17023] achieve lift-off by a *realistic* emphasis of instrumental detail. That is not to say that detail was lacking, merely that it was not over-emphasized, as it is with many components, compared to the real thing. (Next time you’re in a club or concert hall – it works best with solo voice or instrument – close your eyes and concentrate on what we’ve come to call “edge definition.” In general, I believe the edges of a live performance are *less* well-defined than they are when you play audiophile favorites on your stereo.) In fact, on “You for Me,” I can hear Tubby swaying slightly side-to-side, something I had never noticed.

The second thought is that the Hovland’s exemplary continuousness de-emphasizes tape hiss. This should not be surprising, since the hiss is not really a part of the music, and

the music is continuous while the hiss is other, *outré*. Not so odd, except that I had not heard it before, either.

Third lesson: Continuousness allows one to hear more deeply into the music *at low levels*. Again, this should be an old lesson, but it turns out to be rather rare. Discontinuousness is naturally emphasized with any change in volume, so a discontinuity in the musical tapestry will be exaggerated at higher volumes, when the discontinuities are magnified, or at lower volumes, when some dominant elements of the frequency range (or dynamic shadings or textures) are emphasized over the low levels of others.

Most of these drawbacks in other components are not nearly so vivid until the Hovland exposes them. Listening to the Brahms *Violin Concerto* [Heifetz/Reiner/Chicago, RCA/Classic LSC-1903], I marveled at the entry of the bottom of the orchestra after the first measures. Coincidentally, I looked out a window with four panes of glass in it. Each of the four panes is a slightly different color – one a little more blue, one more red, one more gray, the last more brown – and it occurred to me that this is the way components behave: The character of the treble is whiter, the midrange is caramel, the bass is empurpled, and so forth. You have already guessed the point, that the Hovland casts the most consistent color over the divisions we impose artificially on music so we can describe it more usefully. With the Hovland, many of these divisions are obviated. Moreover, the type of music isn’t relevant; the bluegrass classic, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?* [United Artists UAS 9801], is yet another example of this superior consistency.

Okay, isn’t there any fault? Of course there is, and it’s in the bass. From the midbass up, the Hovland is almost entirely of a piece, but in the last octave or so, there is a very slight constriction. This is true in the Naxos CD of Vaughan Williams’ *Antartica* [Naxos 8550737], and even in the acoustic basses on *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?* But it’s very nearly the exception that proves the rule, in that the kind and level of discontinuousness I’m talking about here is such a commonplace that we take it completely for granted in other components. It takes a component of the Hovland’s overall distinction to call this to our attention at all.

This is reinforced by a quality the phono stage shares with other great phono components: de-emphasis of extraneous noise. I have a slightly crackly copy of Szeryng’s lovely Mendelssohn *Violin Concerto* with Dorati and the London Symphony [Mercury SR90406]. With the Hovland, it’s more than listenable, and this led me to reconsider the concept of microdynamics. Regardless of the range of dynamics – macro or micro – tracking a waveform is tricky business. Even a single violin or trumpet or lute produces a wave of infinite complexity. Whether an orchestral tutti or a plucked guitar, the complexity is the same; the more complex stuff is just a case



of magnifying the infinite, after all. The Hovland was able to track the waveform, especially microdynamically, as well as anything I've heard. Picture a luge team barreling down a track: a bump here, a veer off-center there, a ride almost up on the wall as the foursome heads into the final turn. The Hovland is unflappable, always on-center, whether at 10 miles an hour or 100, tracking every bump and bend and bouncing haplessly over none.

This ability to track musical lines is not merely allegory. Take Patricia Barber's disc, *Companion* [Premonition LP 90749]. Barber's quartet rides their trademark stark horse, and I am amazed at how easy it is to hear deep into the soundstage, how great my ability is to sort complex musical lines, when all of the tapestry seems woven of the same cloth. As with an actual tapestry, it is easier to "see" the picture itself, woven so carefully, when eyes are not distracted by vagaries of color or texture. With sound, different colorations and textures in, say, different frequency ranges (the treble, the midbass, etc.) occupy unnaturally our unconscious analysis and enjoyment of the music. But with a component of remarkable continuousness, it's as if a variable, or several, have been removed from the experience of listening to recorded music, ones we have assumed were always there and which our brains have worked overtime to hear through.

Even individual instruments with fairly wide tonal ranges – piano, obviously – shine in a sort of "individual unison." Bill Evans' *Live at Shelly's Manne Hole*, in its excellent XRCD incarnation [JVCXR0036] sounds so utterly natural that it's hard to believe it's a CD. Evans' piano is so *whole*, in a way I had never heard it. This is to say nothing of the disarming presence of each instrument, the almost tangible air around the drums, and the lifelike width and depth of not only the stage, but the instruments as well.

In character, the Hovland is well-balanced, but favors slightly the contemplative, the yin, and does so throughout its frequency range. Further, it is not only articulate, but gentle as well. Don't misunderstand and assume that it favors "gentle" music. On *Hotel Child*, the agile swing disc by Ingrid Lucia and the Flying Neutrinos [Artists Only AOR33], the first track opens with a raucous drum beat and a trombone voluntary that zigs and zags and bites hard. The Hovland does not soften the bite. Rather, the preamp is gentle in its approach, gentle to the music, gentle to the listener. Perhaps the better term is "sympathetic."

So powerful, beguiling, and unexpected are the things the Hovland does right that I have tried to be especially aware of its shortcomings, to remain dispassionate. I wondered particularly whether in its remarkable continuousness it homogenizes music, and whether there is some coloration or character that contributes to the euphony emanating from the eye-catching box.

In fact, it is not quite as dynamic – we're talking macro here – as the BAT VK30SE or the Pass X-1, but it is not reticent, either. It is not the most revealing component I've ever heard, but I argue again that that award goes to components that sound, usually, less like live music. Even the slightest area of discontinuity I thought I might have heard, from the midbass to the lower midrange, was more or less quashed by the upgrade in the middle of the review process.

Quantifying the unquantifiable is self-abusive, but if I was ten percent of the way to reality before, I'd say the Hovland gets it closer to 15 percent – it doesn't sound like a lot, but there is a quantum leap toward the texture and the unbroken gestalt of the real thing, no matter how much we're chasing windmills.

While some preamps do some things better, the Hovland's remarkable continuousness sets it clearly above the other line stages I've heard in the \$4,000–\$5,000 range. At this price, I can't in all good conscience call it a "bargain," but when you add the phono stage at \$1,000 (\$1,500 for MC), it begins to look reasonable, considering that the price of admission for a competing phono stage alone is \$2,500 or (much) more, and that puts a full-function preamp at the Hovland's asking price or more likely above it. As I mused with a colleague recently, the best bargain in phono stages is the Hovland – the catch is that you have to buy the line stage to go with it!zzz

The Hovland has led me to rethink some long-held ideas about reproduced music. In its price range and perhaps much above, it does some things I have never heard before, and never expected to hear. As they say, you don't know it until you know it. Whether your monkey bone will be tickled by those things at which the HP-100 excels awaits your audition. Regardless of whether you're in the market for a preamp, regardless of whether this is your price range, I encourage you to hear it.



PETER BRAVERMAN

*See HP's Workshop for his comments on this product.*

#### MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

##### Hovland Company

1545A Pontius Avenue, Los Angeles, California 90025

Phone: (209) 966-4377; fax: (209) 966-4632

www.hovlandcompany.com

Warranty: 3 years parts & labor (tubes, 90 days)

Prices: \$4,995 line stage only; \$5,995 with MM phono stage; \$6,495 with MC phono stage

#### SPECS

##### Line stage

Gain: 14 dB

S/N ratio: 80 dB below 3V output

Input impedance: 100 k/ohms

Output impedance: approx. 2500 ohms

##### MM Phono stage

Input impedance: 1M/ohm, other values optional

Gain: 46 dB; minimum input voltage approx. .7mV

Frequency response:  $\pm 0.15$  dB, 25 Hz – 25 kHz

S/N ratio: 60 dB below 2mV input signal wideband;; 75 dB below 2mV input with 400 Hz high-pass filter

##### MC Phono stage

Input impedance: approx. 530 ohms (provision for reduced impedance loading)

Gain: 63 dB

Maximum input voltage: approx. 1.0mV

#### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

VPI Aries turntable/JMW pick-up arm with Synchronous Drive System, Miyabi /47 Labs MC phono cartridge, Meridian 508.24 CD player, VAC Renaissance 30/30 Mk III amplifier, Von Schweikert VR-4 Gen II loudspeakers. Hovland G3, Synergistic Kaleidoscope and Looking Glass interconnects, Wireworld Eclipse Gold and Silver speaker cables, Custom Cable Company Model 11 power cords, Bright Star bases under turntable and amp, Vibrapods liberally applied