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Equipment Report

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Michael Fremer

Hovland HP-100 stereo preamplifier

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There's a whorish aspect to reviewing that some readers and industry critics never tire of mentioning, as if they've stumbled onto some great revelation: that we writers seem to flit from new product to new product, sometimes gushing like cracked fire hydrants over one amplifier one month, only to gush over another amp the following month.

While the goal of most consumers is to find one true love of a component and stick with it for a long time, our job is to wolf-whistle or blow raspberries at the endless passing parade. It's the reviewer's job to try to remain dispassionate. However, no reviewer can listen to *everything* available before writing a review—a reviewer is only as "all-knowing" as the last product he or she has reviewed. I've just evaluated Audio Research's superb-sounding Reference Two line stage ($9995, September 2000). Before that, I reviewed ARC's mouthwatering Reference phono stage ($6495, February 2000). Now along comes Hovland's HP-100, a one-box, all-tube line stage ($4995) with optional built-in MM ($5995) or MC ($6495) phono stage. I'm backing into this review slowly so I don't crack a fire hydrant.

Caps, Cables . . . and a Preamp?

Hovland is best known for its proprietary film and foil polypropylene Musi-Cap® capacitors, which the company began distributing in 1991, and which more than 200 audio companies around the world now use; and for its custom tonearm, interconnect, and speaker cables, which go back to 1979. But company spokesperson Alex Crespi assured me that those products came out of research conducted by Robert Hovland and his associates while they were attempting to design tube and solid-state preamplifiers and amplifiers, projects that date back to the late '70s. At the time, Hovland's business was mainly

Description: Vacuum-tube full-function preamplifier with built-in phono stage and optional MC step-up transformer module. Line-stage tube complement: two 12AX7s, one 12AU7. Phono stage tube complement: two 12AX7s, one 12AT7. **Line-stage:** Voltage gain: 14dB. Frequency response: 10Hz–25kHz, +0/–0.25dB. S/N Ratio: 80dB (wideband) ref. 3V out, (with level control fully clockwise). THD: <1% at rated output. Output impedance: approximately 2500 ohms. Input impedance: 100k ohms. **MC phono stage:** Voltage gain: 66dB at 1kHz. Frequency response: 25Hz–25kHz, ±0.15dB. S/N Ratio: 60dB (wideband) ref. 0.2mV input signal, 75dB ref. 0.2mV input using 400Hz high-pass filter. Input impedance: 450 ohms.
Dimensions: 18¼" W by 5¼" H (including feet) by 17⅜" D (including knobs and rear jacks). Weight: 27 lbs.
Serial number of unit reviewed: 1048.
Prices: $4995 (line stage only). With phono stages: $5995 with MM, $6495 with MC (this version reviewed). Internal 20dB step-up transformer module for MM stage: $695. Warranty: 2 years, parts & labor; tubes, 90 days. Approximate number of dealers: 15.
Manufacturer: Hovland Company, 1545A Pontius Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90025. Tel: (209) 966-4377. Fax: (209) 966-4632. Web: www.hovlandcompany.com.

modifying vintage gear for audiophiles and studio equipment for professionals.

So while the HP-100 is Hovland's first publicly traded audio component, it is not an afterthought, or even a natural extension of the cable and capacitor business, but the fulfillment of what's been Robert Hovland's goal all along: to bring such a product to the market. Or so I was told. It's just taken "…some time to get it all right." Given the company's history of more than 20 years, that sounds like an understatement.

When I expressed my skepticism about the 20-year gap between inspiration and fruition, I was told to visualize Apple's "core team" working in a garage for 20 years and coming up with the G4 as its first product. But no sooner had Crespi and the rest of the tightknit group — Robert Hovland, CEO Jeffrey Tonkin, and design consultant Michael Garges (listening in via speakerphone) — unleashed that analogy on me, than they all chimed in almost simultaneously to assure me that Hovland is *not* a garage-based company, and *not* some hobby run amok!

Out-of-Box Experience

With its three smooth, gleaming, chrome-plated knobs and $^{3}/_{8}$"-thick faceplate of aluminum plated in black nickel (the same plating process used for the sinks on the Sultan of Brunei's jets) and backed by a sheet of translucent plastic that's softly backlit blue, the HP-100 exudes tasteful luxury and authoritative simplicity. More important, the heavy-gauge, polished, anodized top and bottom plates and monocoque chassis help ensure structural integrity. The stiff, heavy box feels as good as it looks, though those of conservative tastes might find it a bit Rodeo-Drive garish. If you don't like the blue glow, you can turn it off via a switch on the rear. Mikey liked it.

Under the lid are three distinct compartments: one each for the optional three-tube phono section, the three-tube line stage, and the solid-state power supply, with cabling neatly routed in between. Mounted on the chassis rear to keep signal paths short is a complex switch, meticulously hand-soldered, for selecting among eight sources. On the faceplate is a stepped attenuator switch, also hand-soldered, that is wondrous to behold. The quality of the workmanship

Measurements

The drop-dead gorgeous Hovland HP-100 preamp offered a maximum line-stage gain of 13.6dB — the silky-feeling switched attenuator operating in accurate 2dB steps down to –58dB, with then a step to a full mute. (There's also a separate Mute button.) The volume control didn't have an exact unity-gain setting; the nearest was the 3 o'clock position, which featured a 0.135dB insertion loss. The 12 o'clock position was equivalent to –14dB referred to the "unity gain" setting.

The Hovland's line stage didn't invert absolute polarity. Its input impedance was a usefully high 100k ohms in the midrange and bass, with just a small reduction to a still-high 86k ohms at 20kHz. Despite the claim that the HP-100 uses a cathode follower output stage, its source impedance was high at 2.4k ohms, rising to 4.3k ohms at 20Hz. The partnering power amplifier would best have an input impedance of at least 47k ohms if the bass is not to sound lean.

Line-stage frequency response (fig.1) was flat within the audioband, rolling off above 10kHz to reach a probably negligible –0.25dB at 20kHz and –3dB at 80kHz. The response did not change at different volume-control settings. The HP-100's channel separation (fig.2) was disappointing: While good at low frequencies (78dB L–R, 73dB R–L), it degraded at 6dB/octave throughout the midrange and treble to a merely adequate 45dB (L–R) and 37dB (R–L) at 20kHz. This is presumably due to capacitive coupling between channels, perhaps due to a twin-triode tube shared between channels at or ahead of the volume control. I suspect the latter as the channel separation did change with the volume-control setting.

Mikey said he felt the Hovland was not the quietest preamp around. Line-stage noise was only okay at –71.5dB, unweighted ref. 1V. The S/N ratio improved to 95.1dB when A-weighted, suggesting that the noise is mainly high- or low-frequency in nature. Fig.3 shows the line stage's THD+noise percentage, plotted against frequency at 750mV output into 100k ohms. The true distortion is buried within the noise below 10kHz; there is a rise in harmonic content above that frequency, but as it reaches just 0.1% above 30kHz, it is probably subjectively inconsequential, particularly as the primary distortion component is the second, at twice the frequency (fig.4).

This graph was taken into the kind 100k ohms load. Reducing the load to

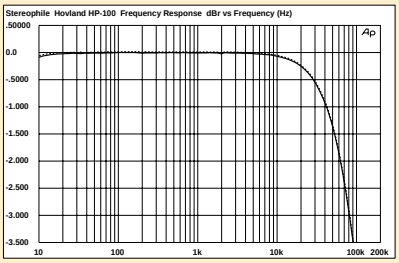

Fig.1 Hovland HP-100, line-stage frequency response at 1V output with volume control at maximum gain into 100k ohms (right channel dashed, 0.5dB/vertical div.).

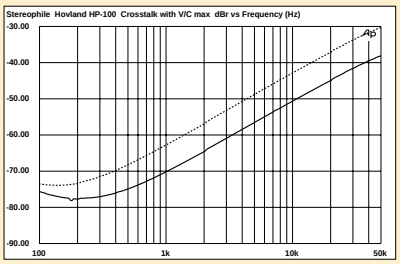

Fig.2 Hovland HP-100, line-stage channel separation with volume control at maximum, R–L dashed, L–R solid (10dB/vertical div.).

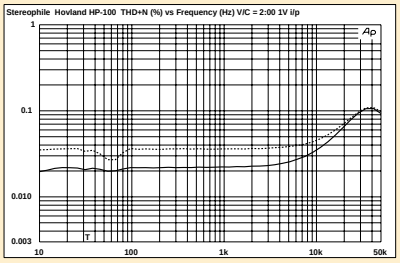

Fig.3 Hovland HP-100, line-stage THD+N (%) *vs* frequency at 750mV into 100k ohms (right channel dashed).

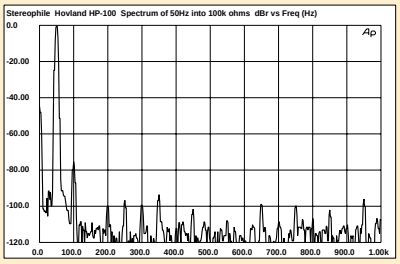

Fig.4 Hovland HP-100, line-stage spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 2V into 100k ohms (linear frequency scale).

on these hand-built parts is gorgeous.

I gazed admiringly at the HP-100's innards. Instead of spending the development years tacking on circuits in an effort to improve the sound, the Hovland design team clearly devoted itself to carving away superfluous clutter, just as an editor removes words to clean up copy. The layout looks so clean and simple. But, of course, looks can be deceiving. What goes on under the HP-100's hood is anything but.

Hovland says they chose a solid-state power supply for greater reliability, contending that tube rectifiers deteriorate sonically in a slow, insidious way. The HP-100's power supply doesn't rely on brute force, using only "modest filtering" via high-quality, specially built capacitors. The custom transformer is non-toroidal but features an oversized core for low heat production and low magnetic radiation. Nonetheless, it's positioned far away from the high-gain stage, as well as being separated from it by two internal metal walls.

The HP-100 uses glass epoxy boards mounted in secure but not rigid grommets of shock-absorbing urethane. Hovland tried spring dampers, but they seemed to detract from the sound. Parts quality is high: MusiCaps (duh!) are used throughout, along with Caddock and Holco resistors. Cabling is Hovland Generation 3 shielded silver interconnect. The hard-gold–plated RCA jacks are chassis-mounted, with collet-type pin sockets.

The 31-position (2dB steps), custom-made, low-mass, coin-silver–contact stereo volume control is configured as a series attenuator instead of the more conventional shunt configuration: the source sees a constant input impedance and the listener is "…not forced to listen through high-value resistors" at certain levels. The silver-contact input selector features "contact break before make," so two devices never "see" each other during the switching process. Unused inputs are not shorted, which means there might be slight bursts of hum and noise when switching between sources. Through listening tests, Hovland determined that the HP-100 sounded better this way.

Hovland is big on using long interconnects from preamp to amp and short speaker cables, so the line-stage output features a cathode-follower

Measurements

10k ohms, a typical input impedance for many solid-state power amplifiers (fig.5), increased the second harmonic almost tenfold, to –60dB (0.1%), and added some third harmonic. Dropping the load to the admittedly punishing 600 ohms raised the second harmonic to –44dB (0.6%, not shown). It is probably inadvisable to use the Hovland with those few power amplifiers that have input impedances below 10k ohms.

This is reinforced by fig.6, which shows how the HP-100's THD+N percentage varies with output level. Into 100k ohms (bottom trace), the distortion at the 2V output level—which will drive most power amplifiers to their clipping points—is at or below 0.05%, and the preamp's output stage doesn't clip (defined as 1% THD+N) until 9.5V RMS, well above any level the preamp will be asked to deliver. But into 600 ohms (top trace), the distortion is almost 10 times higher at 2V, and only 4.2V is available at clipping.

The phono stage featured an input impedance of 500 ohms in the midrange and treble, dropping very slightly to 470 ohms at 20Hz. The voltage gain was a very high 72.8dB, with correspondingly low overload margins: approximately 6.8dB at 1kHz, 6dB at 20kHz, and 10.4dB at 20Hz (all figures referred to a nominal MC cartridge 1kHz output of 500µV, or 0.5mV). The HP-100's phono input has obviously been optimized for cartridges of very low output. With such a model's 150µV output at 1kHz, these margins will improve by 10.5dB. Even so, the resultant 17.3dB overload margin at 20kHz is still on the low side, in my opinion, the subjective result being perhaps some slight emphasis of surface-noise ticks.

With the enormous phono-stage gain available, it was not surprising that the unweighted noise was disappointing at –46dB. A-weighting the measurement improved the S/N ratio to a good 62.5dB, but I suggest that only those with the very lowest-output MC cartridges have the internal 20dB step-up transformers fitted. MF noted some hum, and I found it hard to prevent the Hovland's step-up transformers from picking up radiated 60Hz from other components' power transformers.

Finally, fig.7 shows the phono stage's RIAA error. (The input impedance of 470–500 ohms is sufficiently higher than the Audio Precision System One's 25 ohm output impedance that this graph should be free from any interaction effects.) The ±0.2dB swayback in the Hovland's phono response will be subtly audible as extra treble resolution and a very slightly rich bass, or as a very slightly recessed midrange. The response is swiftly rolled-off above 20kHz—a sensible design decision, in my opinion.

Other than the unnecessarily high phono-stage gain which leads to the higher-than-usual noise floor and lower-than-usual overload margins, and the disappointing line-stage channel separation, the Hovland appears to be a well-crafted preamplifier. It certainly sounded fabulous in Mikey's system!

–John Atkinson

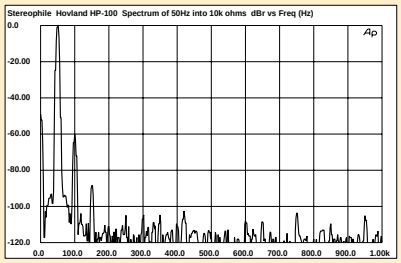

Fig.5 Hovland HP-100, line-stage spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 2V into 10k ohms (linear frequency scale).

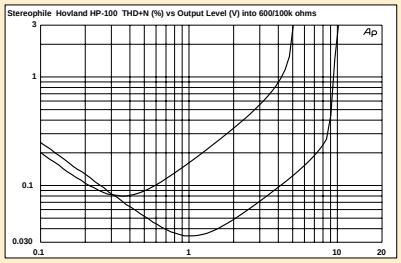

Fig.6 Hovland HP-100, line-stage THD+N (%) *vs* output voltage at 1kHz into 100k ohms (top above 300mV) and 600 ohms (bottom).

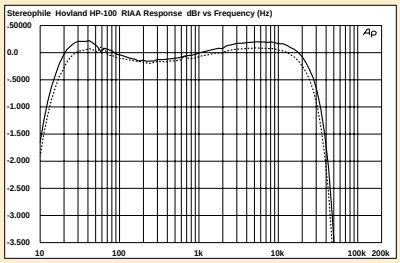

Fig.7 Hovland HP-100, phono-stage RIAA error at 1mV input (1kHz), with volume control at maximum gain into 100k ohms (right channel dashed, 0.5dB/vertical div.).

buffer, which, I was told, reduces impedance to less than 1000 ohms. (The spec sheet claims approximately 2500 ohms.) According to Hovland, the HP-100 is "happy" with different cables, and the sound doesn't change with cable length. Both the phono and line stage are non-inverting, and the preamp is single-ended.

While its design incorporates many custom parts, the heart of the HP-100 — the tubes — are readily available, relatively inexpensive Sovteks. (Hovland requests that you not try to improve on them with vintage tubes or other brands.) The 14dB-gain line section uses a pair of 12AX7s and one 12AU7; the 46dB moving-magnet phono section, a pair of 12AX7s and one 12AT7. Tube life is said to be 2500 hours; matched replacement sets are available from Hovland.

MM/MC phono stage

The optional phono stage — mandatory for this analog lover — is available as a dealer-installed upgrade for $1095 (moving-magnet) and $1695 (moving-coil). MM owners wishing to step up at a later date will have to fork over an additional $695. Hovland says the phono circuit is "unusual, though it looks simple." RIAA equalization is not implemented as a passive filter in series between gain stages, as is done in many phono stages. Instead, it's applied via a "nested" feedback loop. The MM section provides 46dB of gain, which is enough for both MM and some medium- to high-output MC cartridges. Most phono enthusiasts will probably opt for the MC version: it includes a built-in step-up transformer, also available as a dealer-installed upgrade.

You're precluded from using an MM cartridge once the step-up is installed: Hovland believes a selector switch would degrade the sound. If you use both kinds of cartridges, the solution is to add an outboard MM phono section of your choice into an Aux input. Incidentally, instead of a 47k ohm input impedance, the MM stage is "loaded" at 1 megohm — almost no load at all — but Hovland feels the sound is better this way. After all, 47k ohm is an arbitrary standard. [*I believe the standard 47k load impedance was chosen to work best with the relatively high inductance and source impedance of typical MM cartridges, though the various Shure V15s, if I remember correctly, needed 68k ohms. — Ed.*]

The step-up transformer is built for Hovland to their specifications. It features copper wire, using, according to Hovland, "unique winding technologies" whose creation required many worker-hours of investigation into transformer design. The final approach yields a high degree of consistency in sound from unit to unit, according to the company. The step-up adds 20dB of gain, or 10 times voltage, for a total of 66dB of gain (including the MM section's 46dB), which should be enough for any MC cartridge. If your MC cartridge's output is up near 900µV, you won't need or want the step-up transformer option.

> I have never heard such a fireworks-like display of high-frequency resolution and transient detail, accomplished without any grain, brightness, or edginess.

The load the cartridge sees with the MC step-up is around 450 ohms (similar to AR's Reference Phono stage MC input), which Hovland finds works well with most MC cartridges. Should you wish to load down further, there are provisions for adding resistors, but Hovland feels that most modern MCs don't need them.

Let's Play!

Its design is "minimalist" and it lacks remote control, but otherwise the HP-100 is a full-featured preamp. There are a generous eight inputs, plus a tape loop and two sets of main outputs. The preamp includes a Mono button (a must-have for any lover of monophonic LPs), Mute, and a ±5dB switched silver-contact attenuator balance control (it's out of the circuit in its centered position). The balance control is there just to touch up the soundstage in an acoustically unbalanced room.

While there are two inputs labeled "CD," Hovland suggests using the tape loop for the purest sound, as it bypasses the selector switch. I tried it both ways, and the selector switch is very close to transparent; if you need a tape loop, you won't be giving up much, if anything, by going into a CD input.

I think everyone will love the feel of the knobs as they click the volume up and down, select a source, or go to Mute or Mono. The Hovland feels good!

And It Sounds Even Better!

Tube sound? Not here — unless by "tube" you mean luxurious liquidity, sensuous liquidity, wrap-around-your-eardrums liquidity, all accomplished seemingly without politeness, sluggishness, or high-frequency rolloff. When I first played a favorite recording through the HP-100, the first thing I heard was that liquidity — but accompanied by seemingly limitless high-frequency extension, supple and airy delicacy, and previously unheard-of transient resolution.

Unheard of by *me* — I can't speak for you. It was as if the ether had increased in pixel density. I almost wrote "ether had softened," but "soft" is not the word for the top end of this groundbreaking design. It was surprisingly fast, and could come up with the grit when grit was in the signal.

I have never heard such a fireworks-like display of high-frequency resolution and transient detail, accomplished without any grain, brightness, or edginess — yet the highs had a melt-in-my ears delicacy, transparency, and harmonic completeness. This thing killed me right out of the box — and then warmed up and got even better. I didn't have to mull over my conclusions, and you probably won't either — whether or not it meets your needs, you'll know you're in the presence of a major sonic accomplishment.

The HP-100 served the ebb and flow of music with greater grace than any tube or solid-state preamp I've heard. It breathed music with a rare effortlessness, perfectly balancing tube warmth and solid-state clarity while moving dynamically up and down the scale in both large and small steps with exceptional continuity and cohesiveness. Its incredible top-end performance gave me more confidence than ever about comparing various pressings, so I pulled out (among other things) an original six-eye Columbia LP of Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*, along with the vinyl reissues by Classic Records and Absolute Analogue.

Though I've heard it hundreds of times, the original pressing was a real shocker. The HP-100's microdynamic delivery of Paul Chambers' soft opening bass line on "So What" revealed it with a clarity, focus, and natural dexterity I'd not experienced before. The preamp gripped the bass with authority, but never so tightly that the delicate first touches of fingers on strings hardened or got "one-notey." And when Chambers really got going, the HP-100 responded with equal control. Tight

bass from a tube preamp? Yes. Perhaps not quite as taut and punchy as my reference Ayre K-1x, but, overall, more realistic and complex—especially at ultra-low levels, where bass clarity and focus surpassed those of every other preamp I've auditioned.

I got another shock when Davis himself entered. I've never heard such a complex portrayal of his horn—tonally, spatially, and physically. The muted bite of his sound on that track tore through the air in ways that other preamps simply gloss over. The HP-100 seemed to be able to dig out and reveal tiny vibrational peaks and valleys where other preamps deliver flat lines. And it did so three-dimensionally, without etch, grain, or spotlighting. As the track played through and I continued to hear so much that was different and better, I kept saying to myself, over and over, "*This* is what high-end audio is all about! This isn't a new flavor, it's a whole new *dish*!"

The Classic reissue was quieter, perhaps more dynamic, and did a very good job of conveying the original's message, but there was more of the outline and less of the fill. It's a fact of life: 40-year-old tapes lose highs. Still, if you can't find an original pressing, the Classic does the music and the recording justice. The Absolute Analogue version just glared, and the secondhand source (they used the original UK production master) was painfully apparent.

And the Hovland could rock. Its speed, transparency, bass control, and treble extension delivered electric music with satisfying realism: plenty of bite to cymbal splashes, lots of punch to electric bass. It wasn't at all polite, plummy, overripe, or soft, though the liquidity sometimes gave the sound a bit too much "finesse." Still, I never felt my fingers wandering toward the acoustic, jazz, or classical shelves because that's what sounded better through the HP-100.

This preamp gave me a greater sensation of "you are there" from vinyl than any other preamp I've auditioned.

What the Hovland did well—almost everything—served every kind of music equally. I pulled out stuff like Neil Young's *After the Gold Rush* (ultra-rare orange-and-yellow Reprise-7Arts label) and Eno's *Another Green Word* (British Polydor) and just shook my head: The HP-100 delivered the best of what my Reference Ayre K-1x does in terms of clarity and extension, and what Audio Research's Reference Two (with Reference Phono preamp) imparts tonally—but without the added plushness and richness on the bottom and the slight, subtractive politeness on top. The Hovland's tonal and spatial presentations were far more wide-open and revealing.

On a whim, I pulled out Herbert von Karajan's 1962 set of the Beethoven symphonies on DG and played Symphony 7. Oh! The strings!—an airy, panoramic view with a convincingly natural, three-dimensional physical bite and the kind of complex tonal textures you hear live. And the images, while focused and three-dimensional, were never hard or "glazy."

Even a rock-loving cretin like me knows that Debussy was a champ at orchestral color, and to my ears, the RCA team of producer Richard Mohr and engineer Lewis Layton team hit the sonic nail on the head with *Images for Orchestra* (Charles Munch/BSO, RCA Living Stereo LSC-2282). The HP-100 delivered this set with full-flowered color and incredible delicacy and airiness. What an amazing balancing act the HP-100 pulled off! Bring on those Jascha Heifetz Living Stereos and get ready to melt.

To hear how the Hovland handled piano, I auditioned Byron Janis's recording of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto 1 (Herbert Menges/LSO, Mercury Living Presence); and Earl Wild doing George Gershwin's Concerto in F, *Cuban Overture*, and the *"I Got Rhythm" Variations* (Arthur Fiedler/Boston Pops, RCA Living Stereo; get a clean original, or Classic's 45rpm version). No surprises: In almost every way, the Hovland beat anything I've ever played those recordings through, particularly in the natural attack and decay of the piano. (Yes, I know—I've written that before about the Gershwin recording.) This preamp gave me a greater sensation of "you are there" from vinyl than any other preamp I've auditioned.

Okay. I've officially backed over the fire hydrant.

Easily Identifiable Negatives?

Sometimes I thought the Hovland's overwhelming liquidity was too much of a good thing—that there was more romance than was desirable. But those fleeting thoughts were always swept away by some other amazingly natural sonic stunt the HP-100 pulled off. Sometimes I felt as if the preamp's macrodynamic presentation was not quite as authoritative as the Ayre K-1x's or the Reference Two's, and that there was a slight compression in the middle of the dynamic spread—more a slight lack of punch there than anything else.

The Hovland may not have been quite as tightfistedly organized as the Ayre or the Audio Research, and it certainly didn't sound as lush and rich as the AR, but it delivered more of the natural expression of live music than either—at least with my system. I wouldn't be surprised if detractors find the highs a bit ragged. Not me.

Associated Equipment

Analog sources: Simon Yorke turntable, Graham 2.0 and Immedia RPM2 tonearms, Lyra Helikon, Parnassus D.C.t, Kondo IO-J/silver, and van den Hul Colibri cartridges.
Digital sources: Musical Fidelity X-Ray CD player, Marantz DR17 HDCD recorder, EAD DSP-9000 Mk.3 D/A processor.
Preamplification: Audio Research Reference phono stage; Lyra Arion, Audio Note AN-S6CZ step-up transformers; Ayre K-1x preamplifier.
Power amplifier: Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300.
Loudspeakers: Sonus Faber Amati Homage, ProAc Future 1.
Cables: Hovland Music Groove DIN/RCA tonearm cable. Interconnects: Yamamura Millennium 6000, Hovland G3, Wireworld Gold Eclipse. Speaker and AC: Yamamura Millennium 6000 and Quantum, Electra-Glide, JPS Labs.
Accessories: PS Audio Power Plant P300 AC conditioner, Sounds of Silence Vibraplane active isolation platform, Seismic Sink 1-3D, Finite Elemente Pagode, and Zoethecus equipment stands, Symposium Rollerblocks, Vibrapods, A.R.T. Q dampers, Walker Valid Points, Shakti Stones, Shakti On-Lines, ASC Tube Traps, RPG BAD and Abffusor panels, and Walker Audio Precision Motor Controller. **– Michael Fremer**

Finally, I sometimes thought the sound was a bit lean in the midbass, and perhaps even a bit bright on top—both unusual for a tube preamp. But I'm grasping for negatives—even in the section of the review where I'm supposed to find fault, I come back to the HP-100's dazzlingly natural and incredibly supple musical presentation overall, and find myself reliving the dozens of hours of pure pleasure, not the few fleeting flashes of doubt. When John Atkinson came by to take the Hovland away for measurements, I played him the title cut from Davey Spillane's *Atlantic Bridge*. I don't think his enthusiastic reaction was good manners, nor do I think he would have responded quite so intensely had I had another preamp in the system. [*This was the first time I had done some serious listening to Michael's system. With the Sonus Faber Amatis driven by a Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300 power amplifier, there was a holographic intensity to the sound from LP, with what sounded like unlimited dynamic range. Even though I needed to drive back to the city, it was hard to drag myself away from the music. One interesting characteristic: what little groove noise there was via the Hovland seemed localized in a completely different plane to the music, allowing it to be perceptually discarded.—Ed.*]

Noise might be an issue for some potential phono-stage purchasers. The MC stage had an underlying hum I couldn't get rid of, and while it was inaudible under normal listening circumstances, I was bothered that it was there at all. The HP-100 is not the quietest preamp you can buy, nor did it deliver the blackest backgrounds, but it was quiet enough, and the space below the music had an unusually supple, natural quality. (I've also been using the non-Multiwave version of PS Audio's P300 Power Plant AC conditioner. While it made a definite improvement to the Ayre K-1x, for some reason it added an unwanted brightness to the Hovland.)

My biggest reservation: Over time, will the HP-100's liquidity become cloying? Will I end up craving a bit more transient edge? Or will the preamp's mellifluous splash of sound continue to create the eerie, effortless, ethereal sensation of live music—the HP-100's strongest suit?

Picayune Comparisons

Compared as a line section to the EAD DSP-9000 Mk.3 digital processor fed directly into my power amp, the Hovland HP-100 proved somewhat more transparent than the Audio Research Reference Two, retaining the direct feed's top-end clarity and extension and most of its low-bass tautness and control (though bass dynamics are not the EAD's strong suit), while slightly enriching the overall liquidity (no surprise), harmonic presentation, and spatial differentiation in ways that, to my ears, made CDs sound more pleasing. There was a slight sensation of added noise as well, though; the Ref 2 is definitely quieter. Overall, given a choice between the EAD direct out or through the Hovland, I'd opt for the Hovland, even though it's not strictly "accurate."

I also compared the Audio Research Reference Phono section to the Hovland's in two ways. I had access to four outboard step-up transformers: the Audio Note AN-S6CZ (see this month's "Analog Corner"), the Lyra Arion, the one built into the Reference Phono, and an outboard version of the Hovland. I auditioned four cartridges in various combinations: the Kondo IO-J (see this month's "Analog Corner"), the Lyra Helikon and Parnassus D.C.t, and the van den Hul Colibri. I was busy.

The $5000 Audio Note was the best of the bunch. I ran it and the others through the Reference Phono's MM section, and the AN's top and bottom extension, midband smoothness, and overall vividness trounced everything else. But it costs five grand. Next best, and very close, was the outboard Hovland, which maintained the Audio Note's midband magic but cooled the vividness (at least through the Reference), and was not quite as rich yet limpid in the bass. The Lyra was somewhat more polite and not as dynamic. Comparing the Reference's built-in transformer to the Audio Note or the Hovland produced a very surprising result: the Ref's transformer was noticeably polite in somewhat rolling the highs, which softened transients and greatly reduced air, shimmer, and detail.

Last and most important was a shootout between the Audio Note AN-S6CZ transformer into the ARC Reference MM stage ($11,000+ in total), and the Hovland's built-in MC stage (a $1500 addition to the line-stage version, $1695 as a later add-on). The AN/ARC combo was somewhat better, but the Hovland's built-in phono section sounded similar in overall balance. It just shaved off a bit of everything. Surprisingly, I preferred the Hovland's built-in phono section to the Reference's MC input, though I *was* running the Ref into "alien territory" and can't account for system interactions.

The bottom line was that the Hovland's built-in phono section was superb—hardly surprising, from the comments I've already made. And it's relatively inexpensive.

> The Hovland HP-100 proved to be a sonic heavyweight at a relatively lightweight price.

Conclusions

This review is a love fest filled with shameless superlatives, and love is blind and can disappear in a heartbeat. But the Hovland HP-100 proved to be a sonic heavyweight at a relatively lightweight price. As a $5k line stage or as a $6500 full-featured preamp, its overall performance provided me with the greatest musical pleasure I've gotten from a preamp. My system sang as it never has. This came as a total surprise—I was wary of what a group of "tweakers" might come up with, sonically and otherwise.

The HP-100 is solidly built, elegantly simple, a pleasure to use, behaved flawlessly, and put on a sonic show that made me want it back in my system as soon as possible. The sound was on the romantic side, but not warm and tubey in the classic sense, and the slightly extravagant liquidity I've repeatedly called your attention to was more than offset by the unit's incredible clarity, focus, textural detail, harmonic fullness, and spatial expansiveness.

In the sonic continuum of preamps I've reviewed lately—all great products, by the way—I put the Ayre K-1x to one side and the Audio Research Reference Two on the other. Midway, but closer to the Audio Research, I put the Herron VTSP-1. The Hovland goes on the other side, closer to the Ayre. Does that help?

I've been kicked in the groin on the test bench before, and I hope it doesn't happen this time—if the Hovland measures like it sounds (a reviewer's reference shouldn't be heavily colored or measure poorly), it's coming home to stay, maybe for good. While I wait, I'm spending as much time as I can with my reference Ayre K-1x so I can make a quick, informed choice when the Hovland returns. Meanwhile, find a dealer within walking, driving, or, if need be, flying distance, and give the Hovland a listen. It's special.

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