

PREAMPLIFIER AND POWER AMPLIFIER

Hovland's latest valve-loaded preamp makes a fine match for the solid-state RADIA power amp

Hovland HP-200 and RADIA

H O V L A N D
C O M P A N Y



Hovland was one of our most pleasing yet serendipitous discoveries of the last 12 months. The brand, which is based in Los Angeles, started out repairing and modifying hi-fi, and then sourcing and making its own cables and capacitors under the MusiCap brand. Slowly, Hovland has been developing its own pre and power amplifier components, the latest of which is the HP-200. Reviewed here with the RADIA power amp, this new preamp is remote controllable, unlike the existing HP-100 (which continues to run concurrently with the new model). Both preamps are a natural match for the RADIA, not least because their gain is marginal with some third party power amplifiers, but this is not an issue with Hovland's own. If you have a particular preference for valves over solid state or vice versa, you should probably find some new reading material at this point. Like the older HP-100, the new preamp is driven by thermionic valves, albeit with a solid state power supply stage ("for stability"), while the RADIA power amp at the muscle end of the system is solid state. We tested the HP-100/RADIA combination in *HFC* 250, and found it sounded different from most to the extent that it refuses to conform to the stereotypes of either technology, but there is no doubt that these components belong in each other's company in a way that goes above and beyond simple electrical compatibility. There is real synergy here, and the same applies to the HP-200/RADIA. The preamp's remote control logic extends to source selection (there are five line inputs plus tape; the

HP-100 has eight plus tape). A switchable processor-bypass input is included, and an RS232 interface allows integration with systems using external controllers. The HP-200 is the same size as the older model, and although it looks rather different, the essentials of its construction are similar – a mutually self-damping combination of acrylic panels and a polished aluminium frame, with a curious, but very winning aesthetic that marries cutting-edge contemporary and retro. If it was a city, it would be Barcelona. The remote is a work of art in its own right. A slim, heavy item of extruded aluminium and acrylic, it feels good in the hand and the buttons are light and positive, but it needs a clear view of its host to work reliably. The original 31-step 2dB precision resolution attenuator that sits at the heart of the older preamp has been reworked, and now has 35 steps, giving a total operating range of 70dB. It still uses what are described as ultra linear metal-film resistors alongside dual, hermetically sealed-in-glass, rhodium-contact reed relays, the latter introduced to facilitate remote control using a small custom logic board. You can read more about the RADIA in our original review, but as an *aide mémoire*, it is a 125-watts-per-channel bipolar stereo power amp. The HP-200 was conceived as an 'HP-100-plus', the 'plus' being remote control, but somewhere along the line, someone had a bright idea, and the new preamp has gone beyond its original remit. So rather than adding features and shedding a little sonic competitiveness, it's gone the other way, and the new preamp if anything works better. One difference is that the combination seems a little quieter. The first review pair (with the HP-100) had some minor noise problems which may have been specific to the system set-up, but if so, the new one is essentially silent from the listening hot seat. As before, coloration levels are lower than expected for a preamp that uses valves. It sounds more solid and tighter than expected, and even more so than the HP-100 allowed, in part perhaps because microphony, often a problem with valves, has been reduced below even the very low levels scored by the older preamp.

SOUND QUALITY

It takes a while to get to grips with this combination. In many ways it is the least obvious, the least demonstrative pre/power amp combination we have encountered in a long time. Auditioned alongside some alternative high-end combinations, it doesn't have the blinding speed and articulation of the Krell KAV-280p/KAV-2250, for example. Neither does it have the astonishing refinement, detail and lively midband of the (much more costly) Hovland dm10/dm38. What the Hovland does best is musical expressiveness – its stalking ground is the middle registers, and the middle part of the dynamic envelope. If it is stretched really hard with current-hungry monster loudspeakers like the B&W Nautilus 800, it begins to show the strain, and either of the two alternatives mentioned work more seamlessly through and beyond the pain barrier – the Hovland just shows the pain. To be fair, it goes into battle with a substantial power deficit, and the fact that the power output of the RADIA less than doubles when the load impedance is halved suggests that it may struggle with more complex (electrically reactive) loads. But most speakers are not like the Nautilus 800, and the Hovland duo fitted like a glove with other speakers available during the test period, not least the Lumley Lampros 300 and Anthony Gallo Reference III. It also worked brilliantly with Quad 989 electrostatics. In each case, the Hovland brought a steady hand to the proceedings. Each note sounded carefully articulated and properly expressed, so that complex musical arguments in a recording of Beethoven string quartets in one memorable example made sense because the contribution of each musician was easy to read. With the Hovland pair, it was easy to follow the subtle dynamic shadings in piano arpeggios, and fine singing (Janet Baker's *Mahler Lieder Eines Fahrenden Gesellen*, for example) was beautifully expressive, and genuinely moving. You sense that whoever designed these two amp components really understood something about the often vexed relationship between musical expression and the hardware used to reproduce it. Compared to the still very impressive HP-100 – it should be said that there was a gap of some months between auditioning the two preamplifiers, though with the same power amp – the HP-200 is a little harder hitting. Transients seem a little sharper, a little better focused, and the decay of individual notes is more progressive. Tonal colours are particularly well expressed by the HP-200, and the whole demeanour of the preamp is like an HP-100 that has had a little cotton wool taken out, so that it is more focused on the job at hand, with blacker spaces between notes adding contrast to the internal structure of the music. The qualities referred to here are mostly quite subtle, and don't make for an immediately impressive ride. They grow on you, but only if the rest of the system is sympathetic to the attributes that the Hovland brings. The HP-200 and RADIA pre and power amps are great products in their own right, but in some not easily deciphered way the combination is still more than the sum of the parts. HFC
Alvin Gold

“The combination refuses to conform to the stereotypes of either valve or solid state.”

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