



## Compact Performer The Conrad-Johnson CA150 SE

By Jeff Zaret

**C**onrad-Johnson has been around for decades now, and they have received major acclaim for their products. While most of it has been for their vacuum tube amplifiers and preamplifiers, their solid-state components have been equally good. They have always exhibited a consistency in care, design and implementation and it's not unusual to find 30-year-old C-J components that are still running strong. As an owner of several pieces of Conrad-Johnson gear I can personally attest to the quality, ruggedness and simple elegance, which have not varied over the years. Every company does evolve with improvements and enhancements. Whether you dig the champagne-colored front panels or not is a personal matter, but Lew and Bill aren't going to change that part of their heritage.





Taking a slightly different approach, C-J does not build integrated amplifiers in the classic sense, incorporating a standard preamplifier and power amplifier on one chassis, but rather building what they call a “control amplifier.” With the CA150SE, as they have done in past iterations, they combine a power amplifier with a high quality level control and switching circuit, utilizing the same components as their best linestages. They feel that this is a purist approach, eliminating unnecessary circuitry and the resulting noise and distortions. For those interested, this 135-watt per channel am-

plifier uses circuitry nearly identical to C-J’s MF2250 and MF2275 power amplifiers.

That champagne front panel features a simple layout with Power, EPLThtr (Theater Bypass), Source, Volume (up and down), and Mute. The back panel is just as simple with the “normal” connections in the back for almost any peripheral device you might have in your collection. Kudos to C-J for also putting a separate subwoofer output in the back; this comes in handy for those who have one. The manual is standard Conrad-Johnson issue: simple and

to the point with all the pertinent information, just like their products. The remote is the newer style they have been using on other products, a simple plastic remote that serves its purpose. The CA150 has an MSRP of \$5,000 and the SE version reviewed here \$7,000, which features all the major capacitors in the signal path replaced with CJD Teflon units, along with upgraded resistors and a few other goodies.

Immediately on power up, it feels like home – and a welcome one indeed. To steal C-J’s tagline, “it just sounds right.” There are

no accentuated high frequencies, which some solid-state components tend to lean towards. The high end is there, never thrust in your face. The same is true for the low end: solid, tight and tuneful, never bloated. The mid-range, which I feel is where the “C-J sound” is, if there is actually such a thing, is pleasant and true to the instrument or vocal playing. Should you purchase your own CA150SE, a quick few tracks of your favorite acoustic music will convince you. It’s worth mentioning that should you purchase the SE version, with all those coolio Teflon

caps, this will take a few hundred hours of listening time. Like every other premium C-J component we’ve reviewed, the CA150SE sounds slightly flat right out of the box, then “comes out of the fog” right around 200 hours, with a major jump in performance around 300 hours, steadily improving until about the 600-hour mark. I suggest leaving your source of choice on repeat for about two weeks and just letting the CA150SE play all day at modest, non neighbor-annoying volume while you are at work to accelerate the process. You will be rewarded. *(continued)*



ph/aux  
tuner  
cd  
video  
aux2

Initial listening in my second system in a smaller room instantly conveys the resolution this amplifier provides. Our publisher sent me the CA150SE with hours on the clock so I could get right to business. In my reference system, with the notoriously tough to drive MartinLogan CLS speakers, it does not disappoint, especially in light of the C-J Premier 350 that was previously driving these speakers. The CA150SE has an incredible amount of resolution, definition and ability to place individual instruments within a recording. Even at moderately high volume levels, the CA150SE still has plenty of dynamic power in reserves, even for complex music.

The ultimate test proves to be Bill Evans's piano on "Here's That Rainy Day," where the little C-J turns in a breathtaking performance, with all the nuances of this complex instrument reproduced with aplomb. Every bit of his complex chord structures is easily discernible with tonality spot-on. Very few solid-state components can muster this, but again the CA150 sails through. Equally enjoyable results are achieved with many of my favorite acoustic recordings. I'm particularly smitten with Jane Monheit's rendition of "Love Me or Leave Me." Her voice stays front and center, with the gentle cymbal work floating throughout the soundstage, all the while the acoustic bass line is locked in solid. This is an impressive amplifier!

Conrad-Johnson has a winner here. Whether you want to argue about semantics as to it being an integrated or control amplifier, the performance is impossible to argue with. Add in a modest footprint and this is a great anchor for a high performance audio system that doesn't require a ton of space. Well done Lew and Bill.

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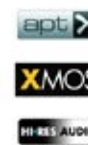


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## Additional Listening — Jeff Dorgay

I have a long history with Conrad-Johnson, going all the way back to their first preamplifier, and I must admit I've never heard a C-J product that I *didn't* like. However, they have changed their house sound a bit over the years. Where vintage C-J gear has a bit of tonal warmth (or you could call it midrange magic) to it, with a slight softening of the uppermost register, their products for about the last 10–12 years have a slightly more modern sound if you will.

They haven't lost that magic midrange, but (thanks to, in part, the development of the CJD Teflon capacitors) now have the extension and resolution that their top competitors possess

as well. And much like two of my other favorite solid-state amplifier manufacturers, Burmester and Pass Labs, they've managed to make solid-state components that have that drop or two of warmth without the sacrifice you'd expect from a world-class tube amplifier without resorting to the glass bottle.

As Mr. Zaret mentions, the SE edition, chock full of Teflon caps, takes a bit of time to come on full song, but the wait is well worth it. While the extra \$2,000 to step up to this model is not a small investment, I urge you to go for the gusto if you can. I've listened to both SE and non-SE versions of quite a few C-J components and

the increased amount of music revealed on all levels is the best two grand you'll ever spend on your hifi system. The standard model is slightly more traditional sounding, if you will, so budget accordingly.

Having played the CA150SE with everything from my trusty (i.e. power hungry) Magnepans to the new MartinLogan Neolith and a number of excellent speakers in between, the only speaker that fell a little short was my Magnepan 3.7s. However, even my C-J Premier 350 couldn't play those speakers as loud as I'd like them to go!

Vinyl via the new C-J Tea 1 that is in for review was absolutely

lovely and, for most people, this will be a destination component. Personally, I like the champagne faceplate, so that's not an issue here. Regardless of program material, whether Metallica or Mahler, the CA150SE has a certain ease about it that I've come to expect in only the world's finest hifi components. While not everyone needs 300 plus watts per channel, it's lovely to see an amplifier at this level presenting such high tonal purity without breaking the bank.

Build quality is also identical to C-J's top of the line components in terms of electrical parts, mechanical assembly and even the volume indicator on the front

panel, which looks identical to the one on the face of the GAT 2 preamplifier. This is definitely a component you can be proud to own and pass on to one of your kids.

Fortunately, even though the CA150SE has a passive linestage, because this is an integrated, there are none of the usual issues that plague a passive setup. The amplifier section is perfectly impedance matched to the attenuator and there is no chance of screwing the match up with an interconnect that is too capacitive, causing that lack of body that you get when you do it wrong.

If you want fantastic sound with a compact footprint, the CA150SE is your baby. ●



The Conrad-Johnson CA150SE  
MSRP: \$7,000  
(\$5,000 as non-SE model)

**MANUFACTURER**  
conrad-johnson design, inc.

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www.conradjohnson.com

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**Phono Stage** Nagra VPS

**Speakers** Snell Type Q,  
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**Cables**  
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