

Tea Party

The Conrad-Johnson TEA1 Series 2

By Jeff Dorgay

Before your journey with the conrad-johnson TEA1s2 phono preamplifier begins, you must decide which version is right for you. Both have two inputs, but the \$12,00 TEA1s2b offers two inputs with 54 dB gain, and the \$15,000 s2, which we are reviewing here, providing 66db of gain on the first input via a pair of high-quality step-up transformers. The s2 has a fixed impedance of 420 ohms, with the lower gain input 2 offering variable loading from 130 ohms to 47k. As my current reference preamplifier, the conrad-johnson GAT2s2 provides 25db of gain; the 54db model might be all that is necessary to get the job done. Again, it will depend on whether you like a directly coupled phonostage or a pair of transformers to achieve higher gain. No one said the quest for analog perfection was going to be simple. But it is fun.





While some of you might freak out at not having a plethora of choices, adjusting your TEA1s2, fear not; used with a broad range of MC cartridges that would normally be loaded at 100 to 500 ohms, we achieved excellent results with all of them. And that second input with 54db, set to 47k is absolute perfection with the new Grado Statement Series 2 moving iron cartridge, having an output of 1mv.

With three other outstanding phono stages at my disposal from Audio Research, Pass Labs and Simaudio, the comparison part of this review seemed more like a day test driving high-performance sedans, with each having its character, yet all four being capable of such incredible performance. It's hard not to be blown away at how many fantastic choices analog lovers have at their disposal in the year 2017. Thirty years ago, when I was listening to a conrad-johnson PV-1, (with onboard phono) if you would have whispered in my ear and

said "in 30 years you'll have \$40,000 worth of C-J preamp and phono-stage on your rack," I would have raised an eyebrow in a Mr. Spock kind of way. But here we are – and it's awesome.

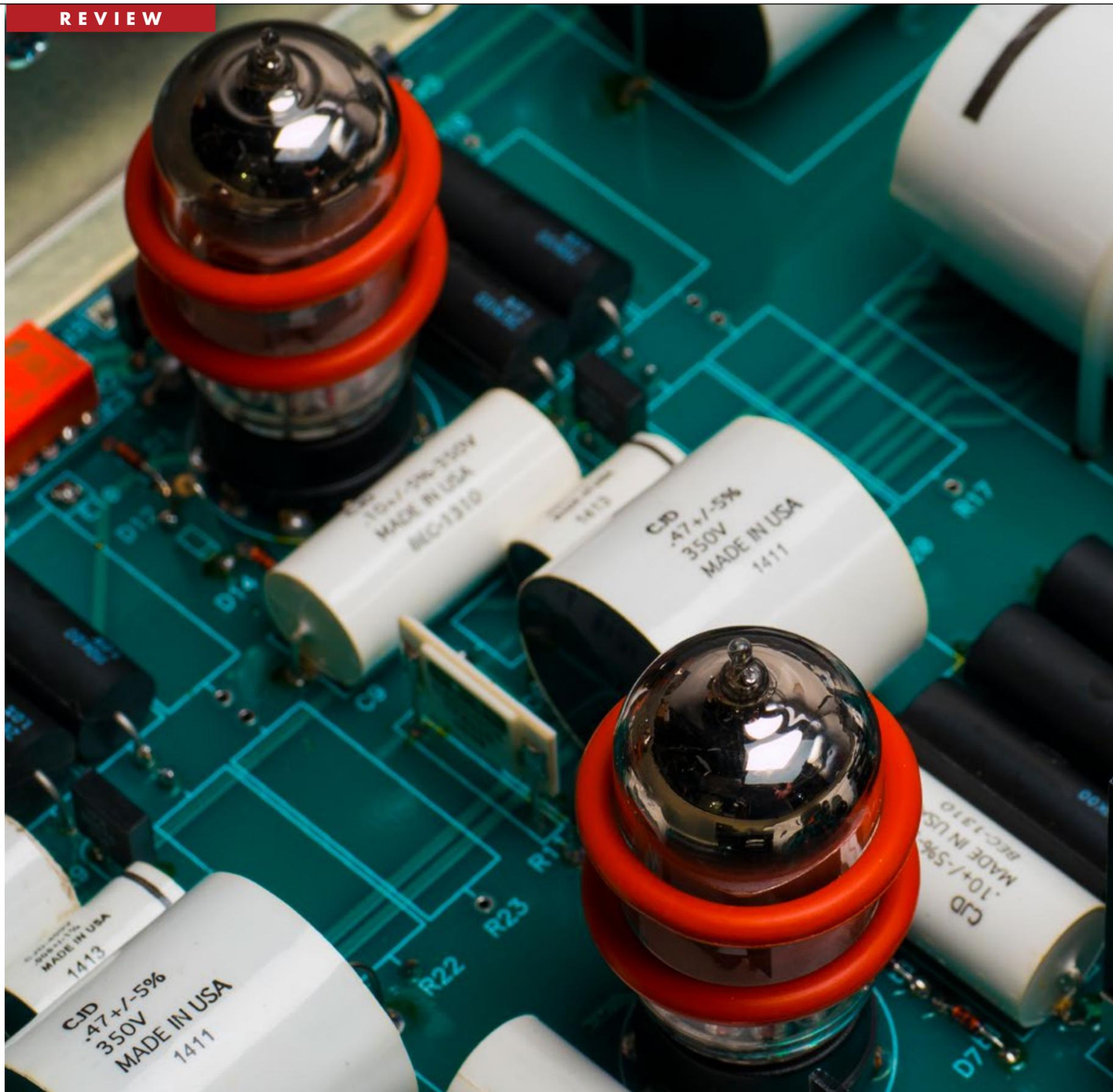
Choices, choices, choices

Most of the extensive listening sessions were done with the conrad-johnson GAT2s2, which is one of my three reference preamplifiers and the conrad-johnson ACT2s2 preamplifier. (which has just returned to my possession after duty at one of our staffers and has worked flawlessly for just over ten years now) These were the first choice as they employ the same single-ended circuit topology and the obvious synergy exists. While we can argue the single ended versus balanced question until the next presidential election, C-J favors the simplicity of a single ended circuit and it works brilliantly here.

(continued)

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Though in the context of a mixed system, the TEA1s2 performs just as exemplary with the Pass XSPre, the Audio Research REF 6 and the slightly more exotic Robert Koda K-10 pre-amplifiers, though with the Koda only offering 6db of gain, I would suggest pairing the higher gain of the s2. And should you have the Koda K-10, it's champagne gold faceplate matches the C-J so well, you would swear they were made in the same factory. Much respect to both parties on this one.

Few things have the potential of generating anxiety like the thought of a product comparison in the world of high-end audio, and the term "shoot-out" even more so. I'd rather go to the dentist than sit around with nerdy audiophiles for an afternoon of comparing one product to another, to determine a winner or a loser, proudly declaring that the victor destroys, annihilates or otherwise does harm to the other. However, there is a fundamentally different sonic signature to vacuum tube preamplifiers and those that are solid-state, and within the realm of the glowing bottle, a few more subsets.

The fundamental difference with the TEA1s2 is that it is built around three 12AX7 tubes, which I happen to be very fond of, but that's personal. The owner's manual states that the tubes in the TEA1s2 have been hand picked for duty here and that no better sound can be achieved by swapping tubes. This is an argument for your favorite audio forum, and I feel the same way about tube comparisons. My experience with the TEA1s2 and my Nagra VPS, also based on the 12AX7, is that after trying many different variations, at the end of the day, I prefer the sound of the stock tubes best.

Other tubes might change the tonal balance, but the stock tubes reveal more music.

You're a human being with free will, and if you just have to roll tubes, and want to buy a set or two of unobtainium, vintage NOS 12AX7s for your TEA1s2, call my pal Kevin Deal at Upscale Audio, he'll set you up. But don't say I didn't warn you. You don't stay in business for 40 years by rolling your gear out the door with lousy tubes. What I would suggest, should you buy a TEA1s2 of your very own is to call the folks at conrad-johnson and order an extra set of tubes right now. While it sounds like a lot of time, 5,000 – 10,000 hours of listening goes faster than you think if you're a real vinyl enthusiast. Somehow when tubes fail (at least for me), they always tend to do it on Sunday morning, about 11 a.m., when I'm about to settle in for a relaxing day of listening. So be prepared, and remember, tube prices keep going up, so it's nice to lock in a set at today's price.

Many think that the 6H30 tube that has been in vogue for over a decade now is more dynamic than the 12AX7. In some preamplifiers, this tube does tend to have a slightly more punchy sound, which I attribute to a bit higher level of tonal contrast offered by the 6H30. However, the TEA1s2 gives no quarter to the other designs in this respect, and much if not all of this is attributed to the massive power supply in the TEA1s2. I've seen power amplifiers not built as robustly. With a bevy of C-J's proprietary CJD Teflon and Polypropylene film capacitors in the power supply and gain circuitry, there isn't an electrolytic to be found. *(continued)*



This provides a dual benefit. First, film capacitors tend to have a longer life than electrolytics, and the Teflons offer a combination of smoothness, weight and high resolution to the presentation that the electrolytics have a tough time matching.

A whole lotta listening

Regardless of phono cartridge used, the TEA1s2 offers a combination of dynamics, tonal clarity and tonal saturation that you just don't get out of phonostages beneath this level. A quick comparison to a handful of phonostages on hand, all squarely in the \$3,000 - \$8,000 range proves the C-J to be light years ahead of lesser designs in every way, and worth every penny asked. The C-J motto has always been "It just sounds right," and truer words were never spoken concerning the TEA1s2 phonostage.

Despite the urge to exhaust my adjective gland on the TEA1s2, the word "everything" keeps popping up. This phonostage has such a wonderful combination of dynamic drive, tonality, and an exquisite rendering of fine musical details and spatial cues, I can't imagine ever wanting more. Where it's all too easy to get caught up on bells, whistles, and adjustment, the TEA1s2 purely and simply delivers the sonic goods in a way that few phonostages do at any price.

The toughest part of reviewing the world's finest components is that they do such a fantastic job at disappearing and not calling any attention to themselves, it's easy to just ease back into the listening chair, only to realize hours have gone by and you haven't written

a damn thing. The TEA1s2 falls distinctly into this category. To this end, this review has taken longer than it should have and I apologize.

Tracking through the entire Crowded House catalog for this issue's "Audiophile Pressings" column underlines everything about the TEA1s2. After listening to these pop classics for decades, the comparisons between the original pressings and the newly remastered versions is a breeze through the C-J, and it reveals so much more subtlety, it's flabbergasting. The soundstage rendered by the TEA1s2 is room filling, yet seamless, and not overblown. Some phonostages fool you with a larger than life presentation, which com-

pels with a brief test drive, but when a wide range of material is played, you realize that everything doesn't sound that big. The TEA1s2 not only offers a refined sense of musical pace, instruments and vocalists sound realistic from a physical size standpoint as well. This is perhaps one of the toughest things for a high fidelity component to reproduce. Flutes sound small, and trumpets sound large, as they should.

Earlier listening sessions with jazz chanteuse Ella Fitzgerald is equally beguiling. Ms. Fitzgerald's creamy voice tends to sound fat and non-dimensional on a lesser phonostage, yet here, via the Grand Prix Audio Monaco 2.0

turntable, TriPlanar arm, and the delectable Lyra Etna cartridge, an audible picture is painted that must be experienced. All of the subtle overtones and phrasing that Fitzgerald is famous for engulfs the listening area.

While a few of the big bucks phonostages have a somewhat accentuated sonic palette, that grabs you for a few cuts; the TEA1s2 keeps you in the chair for hours. Much like the Grand Prix table now in for review, the balance of resolution, subtlety, and smoothness is spot on. Listening to acoustic images, regardless of your choice convinces thoroughly. Pianos, violins and acoustic guitars sound real. *(continued)*



There is a tonal purity that the TEA1s2 achieves that even my \$60,000 Pass can't quite touch, though the Pass has the last bit of quietness and sheer slam that the C-J is incapable of. It's a hair-splitting game with mega phonostages.

Decades ago, conrad-johnson got a reputation for building highly musical components and for about fifteen years too long were accused of achieving that goal because of an overly warm tonal balance. Ever since they removed the electrolytic capacitors from the power supply and began implementing their CJD Design Teflon caps throughout, it's been a different ball game. All the midrange delicacy that they built a company on is still there, yet today's C-J components have the punch, clarity, and extension of the world's finest. It's no coincidence that many of their components are in a disproportionately high amount of "world's best," "editor's choice" and "product of the year" lists.

On a personal note, I credit conrad-johnson components for not only providing me with decades of listening enjoyment but for making up the core of the reference system that I built TONEAudio upon. I give the TEA1s2 my highest personal recommendation – I feel it is one of the best available. ●

**The conrad-johnson
TEA1 Series 2 Phonostage
MSRP: \$15,000**

MANUFACTURER

conrad-johnson design, inc.

CONTACT

www.conradjohnson.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog sources

Grand Prix Monaco 2.0 turntable/
Triplanar arm/Lyra Etna Brinkmann
Bardo turntable/Brinkmann 10.1
arm/Koetsu Onyx Platinum, Grado
Statement 2, Ortofon Cadenza Black

Preamplifiers

conrad-johnson GAT2 s2, Pass XSPre,
Audio Research REF 6

Power amplifier

Pass XS300 monoblocks

Speakers GamuT RS5i, Focal Sopra
no.3, MartinLogan Neolith

Cable Cardas Clear, Tellurium Q,
Black Diamond

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