

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

conrad-johnson HVA-1 headphone amplifier

by Alan Sircom



The name 'conrad-johnson' is no stranger to traditional audiophiles, but the HVA-1 is the brand's first venture into the personal audio world. It's clearly a product derived from the high-end audio line, with styling cues and circuit design alike hailing from the brand's decades of high-performance audio.

The HVA-1 is a bare-bones design, simply putting its money where it matters; in the design, execution, and build of a very good circuit. It's a valve design, with 6922 double-triodes for each channel, coupled to a high-current FET buffer stage/source follower that delivers a healthy 3W of pure single-ended Class A power per channel into a 20Ω load. This circuit layout is derived from the company's top GAT preamplifier. Components on that circuit are top-notch,

with the company's own Teflon capacitors nestling alongside Vishay metal film resistors. Vishays are also used in place of a conventional volume control potentiometer, in a custom-made stepped attenuator behind the volume dial. Both channels of the HVA-1 are also fully and independently DC regulated. The amplifier has two RCA line inputs (a button with two yellow LEDs on the front panel switches between the two), and a single pro-grade 6.35mm headphone jack socket. The circuit is profoundly single-ended from stem-to-stern.

Someone reading the aforementioned specifications thoroughly might point out that a pair of 6922 valves in Class A means the HVA-1 will run hot, that a stepped attenuator has more noticeable jumps in volume than a conventional potentiometer, and that the single-ended nature of the amplifier precludes any kind of balanced headphone. All of

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that is fair comment. Someone well used to c-j electronics will also note that the company's own Teflon caps are notorious for taking weeks to bed in, and that is a fair comment too.

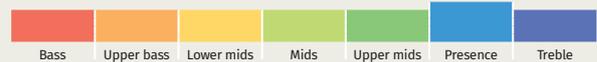
On paper, these are deal-breakers. However, we don't tend to listen to paper, and if you listen to this amplifier honestly and seriously, any such objections just melt away. The deceptive thing about the HVA-1 is just how powerful it sounds – not just in a 'make more noise' sense, but in the way it grips hold of the headphones and lets them do their best work. This shouldn't be understated; while headphones tend not to 'flop around' like a loudspeaker/amplifier damping factor mismatch, some of the more demanding headphone loads do benefit from an amplifier with some 'grip'. What makes this fascinating (from an intellectual, if perhaps not strictly practical sense) is just how much this also influences the sound of more humble and easy loads; my workmanlike Sennheiser HD-25s are designed to monitor from the least competent amplifier (their ENG use implies they will be used running from the output of a camera), and yet took on about half an octave of depth and control that was a delight to hear. The deep bass tones of Nils Frahm's *All Melody* [Erased Tapes] shone through with greater precision and definition, even on such low-impact headphones.

It's a very ordered and beautiful sound, which might not bond it to those who equate bright and thin with 'better'; this is a full, rich, and satisfying presentation and to many, it will be like trying good chocolate after years of cheap candy bars. That sense of naturalness comes across as an expansive, dynamic, and detailed sound that makes you listen deeper. Oddly, I found myself less bothered by itchy ear cups, as I sat in front of entire movements or whole opera acts. No, it doesn't come with built-in anti-histamines; instead the HVA-1's performance is so musically honest, it takes you longer to reach your listening limits.

But perhaps the biggest part to the c-j sound is that it just keeps on going. Your headphones sound as if this was where they always wanted to be, music seems to be an effortless element that you hear without any form of electronicky hash or harshness, and all's right in the sonic world. The traditional audio world has its share of very expensive products that go for ultimate sound quality above the traditional roll-out of

Summary

Voicing: Fundamentally neutral with very mild hint of upper midrange warmth



(All ratings relative to comparably priced headphones.)

Resolution/Focus:



Sound staging/Imaging:



Dynamics/Expression:



Value:



Pros

- Extremely natural sound.
- Very neutral performance
- Excellent dynamics and soundstage
- Effortless detail

Cons

- Runs warm
- Stepped attenuator has big steps
- Single-ended only

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Valve, single-ended headphone amplifier

Inputs: 2x RCA line level

Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz +0dB/-0.3dB

Power: 3 watts per channel RMS into 20 Ohms

Gain: 14dB

Sensitivity: 1.4Vrms to rated power

Hum and Noise: <200 UV below 100mw

Input Impedance: 12k Ohms

Output Impedance: 20–47 Ohms

Dimensions (W×H×D): 26 × 10.6 × 45cm

Weight: 8.6kg

Price: £7,490 incl VAT

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

conrad-johnson design, Inc.

URL: conradjohnson.com

DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

Audiofreaks.

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specifications, and now that happens in the personal audio world, too. Some will be infuriated by the sheer existence of this product, others will just hear it and buy it! +