

Home Audio Equipment Review



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Conrad-Johnson MV60 Stereo Amplifier

*"Most likely to one day achieve
'classic' status."*



by John Potis

It was 1991, and I had finally arrived as an audiophile. Well, in *my* mind, anyway. Earlier I had bought a pair of MartinLogan Sequel IIs and finally owned a pair of speakers that looked as cool as they sounded. Problem was that they sounded as cool as they looked. The venerable Adcom GFA-555 amplifier that I was using had taken the high end by storm, and it was a remarkable amp for the price even if it could sound a little bright and hard on top. That's why on that day in 1991, I took the plunge and bought my first tube amplifier: a Conrad-Johnson MV100. An 80-pound behemoth sporting four pairs of EL34s to produce 90Wpc, it was a superb addition to my system, as it was just what I needed.

I still own the MV100. While it is surpassed by today's better amplifiers, I haven't been able to part with it. So when Conrad-Johnson announced the new MV60, I couldn't wait to get one for review. Utilizing only two pairs of EL34s, the MV60 is less powerful than my old amp at 55Wpc. The list prices of both amps are almost the same -- \$2795 USD for the MV60 versus \$2995 for the MV100 back in 1991 -- so after adjustment for inflation, the MV60 is considerably less expensive, which begged the question: What effects would 11 years of development and a lower price have?

The MV60s is a *solidly* built amp following in the footsteps of every C-J piece I've ever used. A relatively compact unit, the MV60 is only 13 1/4"D x 17 1/2"W x 7"H, but it weighs in at 48 pounds. On the rear is a single pair of gold-plated five-way binding posts, a single pair of RCA inputs, and an IEC power-cord receptacle. Styling shows influence of the Conrad-Johnson ART preamplifier and is both different and versatile. If you like the looks of exposed tubes, the protective cage can be removed, while a vertical fin leaves one pair of EL34s somewhat obscured, which is different. But the same fin that obscures the tubes makes the caged look much more appealing and gives the entire piece a more highly finished appearance that I quite like and consider a good compromise.



Review Summary

Sound "Very clean and transparent, and "does detail...very well by any standard"; "the treble was always as detailed as the midrange and just as smooth and graceful"; lacks "iron-fisted grip" in the bass, "but nicely fleshed out and with an excellent sense of rhythm."

Features Individually biased EL34 output tubes and "a few *very* cost-effective tricks" that help yield performance normally reserved for C-J Premier electronics; interesting and attractive cosmetic design.

Use "Your take on its bass quality will be highly dependent on the speakers chosen," as John had much better results down low with Silverline Sonata IIs than Magnepan MG1.6/QRs.

Value "By every measure -- on its own or as compared to amplifiers costing much more -- the MV60 is a *superb* amplifier."

Setup simplicity is only bettered by amps with automatic biasing. Make your connections, plug in the amp, and give it a half-hour or so for full warm-up. Then using the traditional C-J red swizzle stick (a non-conductive rod with both ends beveled to a screwdriver-like edge), you dial in the appropriate amount of bias by first turning the tube-appropriate pot until the indicator light illuminates and then back it off *just* until the light goes out. That's it -- the tube is biased, and you move onto another.

The MV60 is rated from 30Hz to 15kHz at not more than 1% THD, both channels driven into 4, 8 or 16 ohms. As I also mentioned, the amp comes with a single pair of speaker outputs rather than giving you the choice of a 4-ohm or 8-ohm connection. This is because the MV60 actually comes wired for 4-ohm use. As the majority of speakers are nominally rated at between 4 and 8 ohms and most of these speakers are known to dip below their nominal impedance, chances are the 4-ohm output will be appropriate. If it is not, the amp can be re-connected at the output transformer for the proper load impedance, which must be done at the C-J factory. And if you wish, you can purchase the MV60 wired for triode operation with an output of 25Wpc.

Review system

I used the MV60 with my Silverline Sonata II speakers as well as pair of Magnepan MG1.6/QRs. Preamps were either the Conrad-Johnson PV-12a or the Herron VTSP-1A. The digital sources were a Pioneer DV-525 DVD player feeding a Bel Canto DAC1.1 or a Sony SCD-CE775 SACD player. Speaker cables were from Silverline, and all interconnects were from DH Labs. Vibrapods were used under all components with the exception of the MV60, and all analog gear was plugged into the Audio Magic Stealth power-line conditioner.

Bloodlines

C-J's Lew Johnson explained that while there was considerable technological trickle down from the popular Premier Eleven A amplifier, including some parts upgrades normally reserved for C-J Premier products, the MV60 is an evolutionary product improving upon the MV55. In fact, the MV60 uses the exact same wide-bandwidth Transpectral output transformers as those of the Eleven A. Input and output connectors have also been upgraded from those of the now-discontinued MV55. Further he told me that a few *very* cost-effective tricks had been learned recently that yielded performance that is in some ways better than that of a Premier Eleven A, and at a more accessible price. In fact, Johnson told me that given the negligible power differential, and no significant sonic advantage over the MV60, it did not make sense to continue the Premier Eleven A in the line, so the MV60 in effect replaces both the MV55 and the Premier Eleven A.

I could not have known these specifics, but they came as little surprise. The MV60 had already been in my possession for months, and it had already impressed me more than the Eleven A ever had, although it could well be that the MV60 just has more synergism with my current system than the Eleven A had with my components back then. As compared to the MV100, the MV60 is a *vastly* improved amplifier, and while I've never had the MV55 in my home, I have heard the CAV-50 (which is basically an MV55 with a passive line stage), and its basic character is forever etched on my mind.

The MV60 demonstrates a lot more lineage to the MV100 than it did to the CAV-50. Where the CAV-50 had a very sweet and amber-ish sound, the MV100 was much more neutral -- absolutely neutral, as a matter of fact. Where the MV60 differs from both amplifiers is in the midrange to upper midrange, where it is considerably more lively than the CAV-50 and subtly more so than the MV100. It's not a large deviation and certainly not something that will distract your attention (although I have to admit that I found the sound inviting), but after 11

years with my old C-J, it was an obvious one.

There are lots of other differences too. The MV60 does detail much better than my old MV100 -- and very well by any standard. The opening violin from James Taylor's "Enough To Be On Your Way" from his *Hourglass* CD [Columbia CK67912] is considerably more transparent and detailed over the MV60. The newer amp produces a crisper and cleaner string tone, but beneath it there is a *woody* signature that the MV100 can't quite duplicate.

Transient attack, decay and microdynamics are very good too. With the MV60 you clearly hear the reverb around every syllable of Taylor's voice as opposed to the way the MV100 only gives it to you at the end of each phrase, and even then the MV60 produces that decay in a smoother, more natural and extended way, while the MV100 produces a more abrupt dissension to silence.

Drum transients from the same James Taylor cut are sharp and incisive with the MV60. Both amplifiers do an artful job of throwing the appropriate drum strikes to the outside of the left speaker (both amps *excel* at soundstaging), but the MV60 is so quick on both the onset as well as the decay, which also gives the drum a sharply defined location in space. Once again, the swift decay of the transient *thump* allows for more of the specific tuning of the drum to come shining through.

The MV60 is very clean and transparent. It strips away a layer of the haze from Taylor's voice. And as with the aforementioned drum, Taylor's voice occupies a more focused point in space. Gone with that haze went a touch of grain too. What the MV60 did for the violin, it also does for Taylor's guitar, which was crisp, clean and fast with excellent sustain.

The only area where the MV100 reigned supreme is that of bass *power*. The traveling bass drum strikes from "Gaia" exhibit a little more weight and *thud* from the MV100. But once again the MV60 reveals a more detailed presence with more texture and less amorphous *boom*. More on this later.

In absolute terms, the aforementioned increased liveliness of the midrange was *never* obtrusive, and it did sometimes prove a real boon for older and dryer recordings, giving new life to Stevie Ray Vaughn's *The Sky Is Crying* CD [Epic EK 47390]. Sonically speaking, this posthumously released CD is sorely lacking -- much of its sound is devoid of air and has a shut-in quality about it. The MV60 did a near-miraculous job of opening up the soundstage to the heavens and giving the performance some breathing room. While "Living Life by the Drop" remained an opaque disappointment, the rest of the CD really did come to life, with a solid bass line, fleet-footed rhythm, and extraordinarily transparent treble. Percussion instruments were surprisingly crisp and tangible -- all excellent evidence of the clean and extended treble of the MV60.

James Horner's soundtrack from *Casper* [MCAD-11240] also demonstrated the increased detail. "Casper Makes Breakfast" showcases oboes and violins that were illuminated, smooth, airy and spectacularly textured, particularly over the Magnepans, which have a fluidity and organic life about them that was always appealing. The frenzied violins at the end of "Dying to be a Ghost" were highly resolved, and they had a stimulating sense of timing that just seemed right to me. Simple passages such as "Casper's Lullaby" were enchanting over the MV60. They say that chamber music is classical music raised to its highest form, but I'm not sure. A steady diet of it doesn't exactly appeal to me. But on the other hand, cuts like the aforementioned prove that when properly reproduced, there really *is* something extraordinary about the emotional appeal of chamber music. The MV60 gave that to me.

Treble was always as detailed as the midrange and just as smooth and graceful. Chimes and

triangles were suspended in air with a wonderful delicacy about them yet with a completely palpable nature. Well-recorded cymbals were always reproduced with outstanding detail, shimmer and the proper decay. Check out the SACD release of *Kind of Blue* [Columbia/Legacy CS 64935]. This SACD shows cymbals that were captured with all the palpable presence that borders on the visual -- never harsh, always sweet, detailed and iridescent. SACDs really show off the high-frequency air of the MV60, and it doesn't take top-flight audiophile recordings either. Try Billy Joel's *The Stranger* [Columbia CS 69384, SACD], for example. Cue up "Just the Way You Are" and listen to the sense of space. Sure, it's artificially induced with lots of reverb, but that reverb is transparently rendered. Completely free of haze, it sounds more natural than ever before. The brass section also has presence, a hear-through quality, and bite that rings just as true as does the piano from "Scenes From An Italian Restaurant."

So far I've described a real giant-killer of an amp and from 40 or 50Hz on up -- the MV60 is just *startlingly* good. But as you move into the bass you are made aware of two things: this is a modestly powered amplifier and a modestly powered *tube* amplifier. Your take on its bass quality will be highly dependent on the speakers chosen. When the amp was mated with the Silverline Sonata II, bass was *very* good and seemingly lacking only the very last iota of detail and slam as found with large solid-state amplifiers. While the C-J lacked this iron-fisted grip, it was nevertheless a successful match. The highly damped bass of the Silverlines seemed to enjoy the free-spirited low end of the tube amp. The ultimate in detail? Maybe not quite, but nicely fleshed out and with an excellent sense of rhythm.

But when it came to bass, the MV60 wasn't exactly a synergistic match with the Magnepan MG1.6/QR. The Maggies need something with more available current, as their bass was just too loose with the MV60. Too bad, because from the midrange on up, the amp and speaker were a *spectacular* match. Maggie owners who are into biamping (or using a subwoofer) and are in search of a good amp for the top should hear the MV60.

With a manufacturer-rated 95dB sensitivity, the Silverline Sonata IIs had as much power with the MV60 as they could use in my room, and the combination was very potent. With a low-ish 86dB efficiency and a resistive 4-ohm load, the Maggies again taxed the C-J. With bass-heavy material such as the *Casper* soundtrack, I frequently clipped the amplifier. No surprise and no shame there, though: the Magneplanars are just too demanding for the modest 55-watt output. But if you have sensitive speakers or can live with modest volume levels, the MV60 may have what it takes for you.

More comparisons

It's been an interesting year, amplifier wise. I've had quite an assortment of review pieces. From the 225-watt solid-state Blue Circle BC8 to the 7Wpc SET Audiopax integrated, I've sampled amplifiers that have run the gamut. Standing very squarely in the middle of the field is the Conrad-Johnson MV60. It doesn't have the bass wallop of the large solid-state amps such as the Blue Circle monoblocks or my own Herron M150s, but it doesn't miss by a immense margin, and this minor shortcoming is well compensated for by what the amp does so right. Not quite as neutral through the upper-mids as my Herrons, the C-J amp reminded me just a tad of the Blue Circle BC8: not bright, not brittle, just a little more lively than the rest of the pack. Midrange transparency was not quite up to the standard set by the tiny Audiopax integrated, but it was as good as that of the rest of the pack, which makes it *very* good indeed. Through the treble, the C-J holds its own with the very best amps I've heard.

Conclusion

By every measure -- on its own or as compared to amplifiers costing much more -- the MV60

is a *superb* amplifier. From the moment I fired it up, I knew I had a winner on my hands. This amp is so satisfying that you will easily accept the high degree of detail without words like analytical or clinical ever creeping into the listening notes, and this just may be the MV60's greatest victory. Sure, it has limitations, and I've probably already made too much of them as it is. But the fact is that most reasonably sensitive speakers -- in fact, the vast majority of quality speakers available -- will take an instant liking to the MV60, as I did.

Those looking for a reasonably priced tube amp that is relatively neutral with just enough elevation in the midrange/upper midrange to lend an element of added excitement while still showcasing the rich and smooth flavor of tubes will want to seek out this amplifier. And those who think they want solid state because they haven't heard tubes and are under the misguided impression that tubes are still mushy on the bottom and dark and rolled off on the top will most definitely want to seek it out, if only for the education the MV60 will provide.

Of all the amplifiers I've reviewed over the last year, the one most likely to one day achieve "classic" status has to be the Conrad-Johnson MV60. It gets my vote, anyway.

...*John Potis*

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Conrad-Johnson MV60 Stereo Amplifier

Price: \$2795 USD.

Warranty: Three years parts and labor.

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