

# TONEAudio.

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## The Conrad- Johnson CA200

— Jeff Dorgay

Talking to Lew Johnson at CES this winter, he said “Take a look at this, we have a new product I think you might be very interested in.” He led me over to this very elegant, unassuming, but pretty heavy box called the CA 200. My first thought was, cool integrated amplifier, but Lew went on to explain that it was not an integrated amplifier at all, but a control amplifier. It is a scaled down version of the circuit used in the Premier 350 combined with the switching circuitry of the Premier 18LS. At first glance, it looks just like an 18LS until you notice that bank of heat sinks along the left side!



This combination results in an amplifier capable of producing almost 200 watts per channel (185 to be exact) with the control flexibility of the flagship CJ products. Because of the small chassis, they could not use the new CJD Teflon capacitors that contribute to the sonic signature of the Premier 350, even though the circuit is similar.

Having my own ACT2 and Premier 350 made this a particularly enjoyable assignment and made it very easy to make this comparison. But first, break-in! Fortunately, the CA200 arrived here just before we had to make a weekend trip, so I could leave the CD player on repeat and come home to an amplifier with some hours on the clock.

### **So, what's a control amplifier anyway and why do I want one?**

Instead of being an integrated amplifier, with a preamplifier and power amplifier on one chassis, the CA200 uses a stepped attenuator that is similar to the one in the ACT2 and Premier 18LS that connects right to the power amplifier, eliminating the interaction that would result from using a purely passive controller and a length of interconnect to the power amplifier. Passive controllers come in and out of vogue and under the right circumstances can be magic.

However, when the planets do not line up properly, they can roll off the highs and be compromised in terms of ultimate dynamics. The CA200 side-steps this issue by having it all in one box. I like simplicity and this is where the CA200 excels. No tubes to worry about and only one good power cord to buy. (Not to mention one less interconnect)

### **The Virtues of Patience (if you want to be a Jedi)**

I can't stress enough here the importance of giving a component a lot of break-in time before doing critical listening. I have heard of too many people actually selling a piece of gear with less than a hundred hours only because it didn't sound right. Even if you have to find some cheap speakers on Ebay or a used receiver and CD player somewhere, just so you can really give a component the time it needs to break in properly, you will really be rewarded in the end, no matter how difficult this seems. This is a bit harder with tube gear that you can't always leave on for days continuously, but again I stress patience.

Because the CA200 does not have the CJD Teflon capacitors from the Premier 350, it sounds a lot better right out of the box, and is pretty darn good after about 150 hours. However, the real magic of this amplifier (and every other high end component I have auditioned in the last few years) really starts to unfold around 300-500 hours.

### **I can't stress enough here the importance of giving a component a lot of break-in time before doing critical listening.**

I have spoken at length with the people that design capacitors and a few brainy physics types and they all seem to agree that electrons in a component need to find their own path. If you have

ever connected a broken-in pair of interconnects back up the opposite way, you know what I mean.

While I'm harping at you on patience, read the manual. I didn't and paid the price of no sound for about 20 minutes, bad return on investment. Before I called CJ and confessed my ignorance, I got the manual back out and read it CLOSELY. Sure enough, you need to hold the mute button down for about 15 seconds before the CA200 comes to life, otherwise it will stay in standby mode. *(continued)*



When not in use, the CA200 comes out of standby immediately and is up to full bloom within 15 minutes. Just like my Premier 350, it does not run terribly warm unless you are listening at concert-hall levels.

### Initial Setup

After a little break in time, the CA 200 was installed in my second system. It easily passed the Apogee test, powering the 3-ohm speakers with ease, so if you have a somewhat difficult or inefficient pair of speakers to drive, rest assured that will be no problem. The next couple hundred hours was spent listening through the outstanding Penaudio Serenades. These speakers are somewhat inefficient at 87db, so I was able to goose them a bit more than I am used to with my Pass Aleph 3.

I put the AC cord back in the box, installed a Running Springs Mongoose, put the CA 200 up on a Symposium Ultra platform and was ready for serious listening!

### The Sound

Not only did I spend a lot of concentrated hours listening to the CA200, I spent a lot of time listening for the differences between it and the ACT2/Premier 350 combination. Back in the old days, CJ gear had a reputation for being a bit on the warm side (which I always liked, owning a number of their amplifiers and preamps over the past 25 years) but those days are over.

The current lineup is not your dad's CJ anymore. The new stuff is much more dynamic, powerful, and accurate. Though it will resolve a lot of detail, it is not harsh the way some extremely detailed gear can be and I was able to spend a lot of time listening without any fatigue.

Obviously, I listened to my 30 favorite tracks right away to get a quick feel for where the CA200 was coming from before moving on to more. All of the things I love about the Premier 350 are here, just in a somewhat lower concentration. Moving the CA200 to my reference system and switching between the ACT2 and Premier 350 confirmed this.

One of my favorite tests for resolution is the opening 20 seconds of the title track on Robin Trower's

Bridge of Sighs. If you have a good vinyl pressing, that's great, but the MoFi version on gold CD is quite good too. Get right in the sweet spot and listen to the chimes, they should distinctly go from right to left and have a very airy presentation, with someone talking in the background very softly in the lower right side of the soundstage. This was one of the many places where I could really hear the lineage to the ACT2/Premier 350 combination, with the CA200 offering a good portion of what makes them so seductive to listen to.

Another favorite test from the past is the Sheffield recording of James Newton Howard and Friends. While you might argue (and you would be right) that it's really hard to judge any kind of musical

accuracy with a lot of synthesizers, this record is very dynamic and is great for hearing whether a component possesses overhang on fast transients. The bass drum on *Slippin' Away* really showed just how much power

this little amplifier possessed. Though the CA200 did not have the limitless power reserves of the Premier 350, it played louder than I needed it to on all but the most inefficient speakers. I suspect that if you have speakers in the 86 – 90 db range you may never need more juice than this.

All of my favorite jazz and female vocal discs revealed a level of accuracy and resolution that exceeds what I would have expected at this price point. Remember, we are talking about the CA 200 replacing an amplifier and a preamp, so \$6500 isn't an outrageous sum of money for both boxes. Not to mention you won't need an expensive interconnect or power cord for two devices, so it's as if the real cost of a CA200 is only about \$5000! (continued)





### Cheating the Amplifier Gods

For those of you thinking you can cheat the amplifier gods and get an ACT2 and a Premier 350 in a small box for a third of the price, the answer is not quite. But you can have MOST of the dynamics, accuracy and musicality that CJ's best gear has to offer at a very affordable price and if you aren't as obsessed as I am, the CA200 will be all you ever need. It's more like buying a "standard" Porsche 911, rather than buying a custom RUF model.

If you are someone who loves music, wants very high quality playback, but just isn't interested in tube rolling, or a lot of cables, power cords and the like, this is YOUR amplifier! Thanks to being packaged in a slim, attractive box, you shouldn't get any arguments about whoever you share your living quarters with.

Here's my recipe for easy, instant high-end sound: Take the CA200, add a great digital source (CJ's new combination player is quite outstanding and the cosmetics match) and add your favorite \$5-10 thousand dollar pair of speakers. Throw in a good pair of interconnects, a pair of speaker cables and a pair of decent power cords. Set it up, put it on repeat for a week to burn in, DONE. Not only could you be thrilled with this system for the rest of your life, it's going to sound better than most of the other things you will hear, and even when you hear the mega-expensive stuff you won't be unhappy with your purchase.

Or, you can be obsessed, the choice is yours. But remember, while your obsessed audiophile friends will be moving speakers in 1/8 inch increments or trying the latest doodad, you will be digging your music.

### THE VERDICT

The CA200 control amplifier offers a lot of performance in a very compact and attractive package. Thanks to the trickle-down of their best technology, CJ is able to offer up a very good portion of the best sound they have to offer at a very reasonable price.

If you want great sound in a compact package, the CA200 is the amplifier I highly suggest putting on your short list. Considering my 29-year-old PV-1 is still running just fine, you can keep this one in the family for a long time. ●

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