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Amplification Reviews

Conrad-Johnson MV60 power amplifier

By Sam Tellig • January, 2002

It's always good to tear into a good steak with Tor Sivertsen, Conrad-Johnson's main marketing man.

Tor, who hails from Norway, was for many years the public face of Tandberg in the US. He knows what's important: first food, then hi-fi; first tubes, then transistors. As Tor says, "If you like frozen meat, buy transistor equipment. If you like 21-day aged beef, buy tubes."



We were talking on the phone. "I could have the new Conrad-Johnson MV60 amplifier sent to you," said Tor, "but it will be more fun to hand it to you in the parking lot of the Union House, a new steak restaurant in Fishkill, New York." (1108 Main Street. Tel. 845-896-6129)

Tor has staked out every steak house in the Northeast.

"They opened just a few weeks ago and they serve really good aged beef," he continued. "Up here in the country, we call it 'hanging beef.' "

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A few days later, we met in the lot behind the Union House, where Tor handed over an MV60 amp, as well as a 17LS line stage and a PV10B preamplifier. I hadn't expected the last two.

Tor then reached deeper into his trunk for another box, this one from a nearby German butcher named Otto—Otto Mahn, to be exact (footnote 1). The box contained two double-thick smoked pork chops, three pounds of aged London broil, and what Tor described as the ultimate prize: aged hamburger meat.

"No one ages hamburger meat, but this Mahn Otto does. You must try it. Real hanging beef."

(The next night I turned the meat over to Marina's mother, who turned it into Russian *kutlyeti*—that often delicious concoction of ground meat, onions, celery, and whatever.)

"The smoked pork chops are tough to come by," Tor said. "Double-thick. They're already cooked, so all you have to do is heat both sides in a heavy pan."

"Like an All-Clad skillet."

"Precisely. And you know to make the London broil—over charcoal, preferably on a Webber grill."

Tor and I were joined a few minutes later by Frank Huang, of Audio Outlet, in Mount Kisco. If Tor is the maven of meat, Frank is the aficionado of wine. He's even been known to serve some nice wine with cheese at his store.

"I don't know, Frank. When it comes to wine, I prefer quantity over quality. Otherwise I'd go broke."

Hardly a word about tubes all evening. Or about Conrad-Johnson, for that matter.

Bill Conrad and Lew Johnson launched Conrad-Johnson in 1977 with a cheapskate tube product—a \$500 preamplifier that later became known as the PV1. It was followed a year later by C-J's first power amp, the MV75, which came into the world naked for \$1000. You had to ante up extra for a tube cage and faceplate. I'm surprised they didn't sell the tubes à la carte, too.

In 1977, buying tube gear was an act of downright rebellion. Manufacturing tube gear was even more so. And starting a new company to produce tube gear? Well, that was an act of courage—or, as some thought at the time, an act of folly. But just as McIntosh, Marantz, Harman/Kardon, Fisher, Quad, and a host of others abandoned tubed electronics, companies like Conrad-Johnson, Quicksilver, and Audio Research jumped in and, in effect, kept tube gear alive. Musicians did their part, too, refusing to part with tubed guitar amps.

A few years later, Tor was still toiling for Tandberg and I was not yet reviewing for *Stereophile* when I bought my first piece of C-J gear, a PV2

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tubed preamp, and mated it with a pair of Quicksilver 8417 mono amps. I became a tube believer largely because of Bill Conrad and Lew Johnson—and Mike Sanders, of Quicksilver.

Early on with *Stereophile*, I reviewed C-J's PV5 preamplifier and MV50 power amp. I put them on my Quad ESL-63 speakers and went straight to tube/electrostatic heaven. I bought the review samples—even though I'd already heard more revealing, more resolving gear, with more bass control and definition. It was musicality I was after, and the PV5/MV50 combo had it in spades. That's when I coined the catchphrases "truth of timbre" and "palpable presence."

Footnote 1: East Fishkill Pork Store, Inc., Glove Valley Plaza, Route 55, Beekman, NY. Tel: (845) 724-5005.

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Sam Tellig May 2003

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