



conrad-johnson Premier 350 Solid-State Power Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

Every so often a company (if it's lucky or particularly inspired) will hit a purple patch. Well, currently conrad-johnson are basking in a prolonged lavender glow. First came the MV60SE, followed by the awesome Premier 140, both exceptionally accomplished and refined products at their respective price levels, combining tonal and textural finesse with a real sense of power. Of course, these valve amps are exactly what c-j are best known and most respected for, the latest in a long line of front-rank thermionic pre- and power amps. Which is why the mischievous glint in Bill Conrad's eye was so intriguing when he first introduced me to the Premier 350. "The best amp we ever made" he stated, in that measured, understated way of his – the kind of manner that you ignore at your peril. And you know what? He's right. But the real surprise is that the 350 is a solid-state design.

Outwardly there's nothing terribly exciting about the Premier 350. It's a large, bluff block of an amplifier, whose proportions give it a compact, solid appearance that belies its considerable weight. 85 lbs is awfully heavy for a solid-state amp, even one this powerful. Yes, I've had heavier units at home, but they've tended to be either pseudo-Class A or the kind of products that come wrapped in ostentatiously styled casework, probably machined from a single billet of grain orientated and hand selected aerospace alloy. I'm sure you're familiar with the kind of thing to which I'm referring...

In stark contrast, the plain exterior of the c-j could not have been more straightforward. To say that form follows

function misses the point, especially when compared to the competition. The simple, heavy gauge casework is devoid of embellishment. Even the heat-sinking is confined to the left-hand side of the chassis where most manufacturers would double it up for aesthetic reasons if nothing else. Besides, physical separation of dual-mono circuitry is at least visually congruent and a picture's worth a thousand words. c-j have ignored even this most basic of marketing imperatives. Indeed, the lopsided appearance is echoed in the actual balance of the amplifier, the massive, offset mains transformer making it an even more obstreperous beast to manhandle. Heat-sinks and a single row of cooling slots in the top-plate aside, there's nothing else to look at. Even the rear-panel is a model of practicality and almost Trappist minimalism. You get a 20Amp mains input, RCA/phono signal socketry and single pairs of basic, gold-plated binding posts for each channel: That, and a deeply unfashionable row of rail fuses is your lot. The front-panel is similarly Spartan, with nothing but an on/off switch and a power LED. The single, curved groove and the textured relief area it encloses are the sole concessions to styling, the sweep of the arc echoing the offset heat-sink.

So, no balanced inputs, bi-wiring options, fancy terminals boasting more gold than a rap star. No handles, intricate CNC work, meters or intelligent status displays. If any product ever embodied the ethos of "Less is more" then this is The One.

And that logic carries over to the bits that actually matter: the insides.

Despite being c-j's latest power-amp, the actual circuit on which the 350 is based is the very first solid-state layout that Bill Conrad devised. It just took him a while to get it to work! Boy, was the perseverance worthwhile. Twenty or so years on, what we find is an amplifier that on the inside, just like the outside, is easier to define in terms of what it lacks. For a start, you get an FET voltage gain-stage, a bi-polar output-stage and that's your lot: that's two stages where most solid-state designs would boast four or five. The only other transistor amps that I'm aware of with this direct a circuit topology are the late, lamented Pass Labs Aleph single-ended designs, making this a rare beast indeed. Another thing missing is global feedback, along with local feedback within the driver stage. Add that to a rated output of 350 Watts per channel and this c-j is unusual to say the least.

c-j chose FETs for the voltage gain-stage on the basis of their extremely low odd-order harmonic distortion, further protecting their audio performance with dedicated, fully regulated power supplies. However, for the output stage, the lower output impedance characteristics of bi-polar designs offer greater control over real-world loudspeaker loads, delivering greater dynamic control, transparency and harmonic texture, especially at low frequencies. Component quality is, as you'd expect, exemplary, with a mix of critically selected polypropylene, polystyrene and, above all the recently introduced proprietary



► Teflon (PTFE) capacitors, laser trimmed metal-foil resistors and specially selected internal wiring.

I can't argue with any of this, especially given the amplifier's performance. However, c-j's almost dogged resistance when it comes to the visible trappings of audiophilia is beginning to compromise utility. I'd like to see slightly nicer input socketry, but I'll take what I'm given on the basis that we all know that good looks and good sound don't necessarily travel hand in hand. But those binding posts need to go. Fine, only fit one set, but at least provide a transverse

4mm entry for those people who need to attach more than one set of cables for bi- or tri-wiring. The choice here is between compromise within the connector and compromising the connection itself. There are better alternatives out there and this amp truly deserves them. That minor, personal gripe aside, the 350 is c-j's normal model of common-sense and practicality. The only thing you need to watch out for is that like their other designs it phase inverts. No problem if you're using a c-j pre-amp but reverse the speaker connections if you're not. Simply hook it up, switch it on and you're away.

I used the 350 with the Hovland HP100 and Tom Evans pre-amps, and chose to drive Living Voice OBX-R2, Perigee and Audioplan Kontrast III loudspeakers. I also wheeled in the ProAc Tablette Reference Eight Signatures, with frankly astonishing results. Cabling was Nordost Valhalla

with Wadia 861SE and Kuzma Stabi Reference, Triplanar, Lyra Titan front-ends. Like any good amplifier, the c-j will benefit from a decent support and I placed it on the bottom shelf of one of my Pagode HD Master Reference racks.

With all the boring bits out of the way we can finally get to the fun – and, boy, was this amp fun. Hovland's RADIA arrived in my system like a breath of fresh air, managing to combine the musical benefits of a small amp with the headroom

perspex, its beautifully deliberate styling a statement in itself as well as a stark contrast to the 350's prosaic exterior. But sonically they could be brother and sister. The c-j is better at being a big amp, not quite so good at being a small one, but you'd only pick up on that in a direct comparison between the two. In use it is astonishingly free of the drag and slurring, the earthbound quality, that betrays the lurking potential in so

many large amps. And make no mistake – this is a genuinely powerful beast, capable of delivering awesome levels from each and every speaker I used it with, even the demanding Avalon Eidolon Diamonds. With the more modest demands of the Perigees and Audioplans, headroom was effectively limitless, for the first time

exposing the limitations of the RADIA in this regard. With the little ProAcs, the sheer scale and weight of the delivery belied the size and bandwidth limitations of the speaker, yet hook-up the OBX-R2s and the 350 is agile and fleet of foot enough to match the efficient speakers' rhythmic dexterity and textural subtlety. So often, these virtues are mutually exclusive that to find them coexisting in such seamless harmony is both unusual and exciting. The kind of performance in fact that sends you scrabbling back through your record collection, looking for old abandoned gems to disinter. The sort of performance that has you hauling this ungainly lump round to friend's houses, despite the physical effort that entails!

But, and if that wasn't enough, the c-j adds its own, specific quality ►



and lack of strain that comes from a big amp: the precision, detail and resolution of a solid-state design with the tonal and dynamic evenness and energy of a valve amp. As such it escaped the fingerprint of either technology and set new standards for musical honesty and the invisibility of its contribution. It provides stern competition for visiting amplification, so imagine my surprise when the sound of the Premier 350 proved to be a lot more similar to the RADIA than it was different.

Now, part of that surprise lies in the fact that the two amps, placed side by side, simply look so different. The RADIA is all cool silver and frosted

► to the mix, over and above the performance of the RADIA. It's partly grounded in the company's traditional virtues of tonal warmth and harmonic accuracy, partly in the copious power on tap and the speed with which it's delivered, but what the 350 brings to musical performances is a sense of absolute stability and graceful authority. If you want to hear it at work, look no further than a piano piece. Playing the recent Speakers Corner 180g re-issue of the legendary Byron Janis Rachmaninoff *Piano Concerto No. 3* (Mercury SR90283, Dorati and the LSO) the notes are crystalline and definite without ever becoming brittle, his variations of pace and key pressure effortlessly captured and encompassed, yet without dynamic constriction.

Just as you think his playing can't get any louder, that the system can't cope, it steps up to a new level and intensity. And even when the score is heavily biased to the right-hand there is no lack of authority or stability underpinning the playing: The piano is never swamped by the orchestra, its power and primacy never called into question. Instead the careful balance of power and delicacy that elevates this performance is beautifully captured, the sheer range of the solo instrument, the brooding potential of the orchestra.

This authority, stability and headroom delivers a spectacular soundstage, whether from studio artifice or natural acoustic space. The shipyard soundscape that opens Jackie Leven's 'Defending Ancient Springs' is delivered with an astonishing sense of

space and depth, yet with presence, focus and detail to the individual sounds. His voice is uncannily natural, the stability and dimensionality of the image adding significantly to the illusion (and enjoyment). Stereo spectaculars, like the Gregorio Paniagua recordings on Harmonia Mundi (not just *La Folia* but the others, too) are even better. Their spatial qualities are exploited to the full, yet the 350's tonal accuracy, harmonic weight and coherence binds the



(occasionally bizarre) elements into a single convincing whole, elevating the performance still further.

It's this ability to cut to the core of a recording, fastening on its strengths and buttressing them that makes the 350 so musically satisfying. You want dimensionality, you got it – but you get tonal and textural support at the same time to reinforce the effect. You want power and dynamic impact – you've got that too. But alongside it you get micro-dynamic subtlety and rhythmic agility to enliven and bind the quieter passages into the whole. Play Felix Slatkin's *Young Person's Guide...* recently (and beautifully) repressed

by Cisco and whilst the performance doesn't match the poise of Britten or the recording the spatial precision and transparency of Decca, the 350 brings the presence and gusto, the wonderfully warm energy of the American orchestra to the fore. There's no mistaking the combination of mischief and the heady joy of making a really loud noise that suffuses this reading. Cerebral? Maybe not – but then this is *The Young Person's Guide...* Slatkin doesn't miss the point and nor, just as importantly, does the c-j.

Don't go getting the idea that this is a broad-brush performer.

Its micro-dynamic definition and the accuracy with which it renders harmonic structures keeps even the quietest contributions to the whole quite distinct and identifiable, even under the most vociferous support. Once again, this detail and insight supports and enhances both the ease with which you hear what's going on and the recording's ability to convince and transport your attention. Back to the Jackie Leven and the synth bass that opens the album sounds like two interwoven tones on the RADIA. There are four or even five on the c-j. That might not seem important, but the added texture and physical volume that imparts breathes life into the music, critical to this most human of performers. It's a small thing and just one example, but multiply it many, many times across the many recordings you own and suddenly, the effect on your listening experience, the return you get from your system is dramatically transformed. The 350 ►

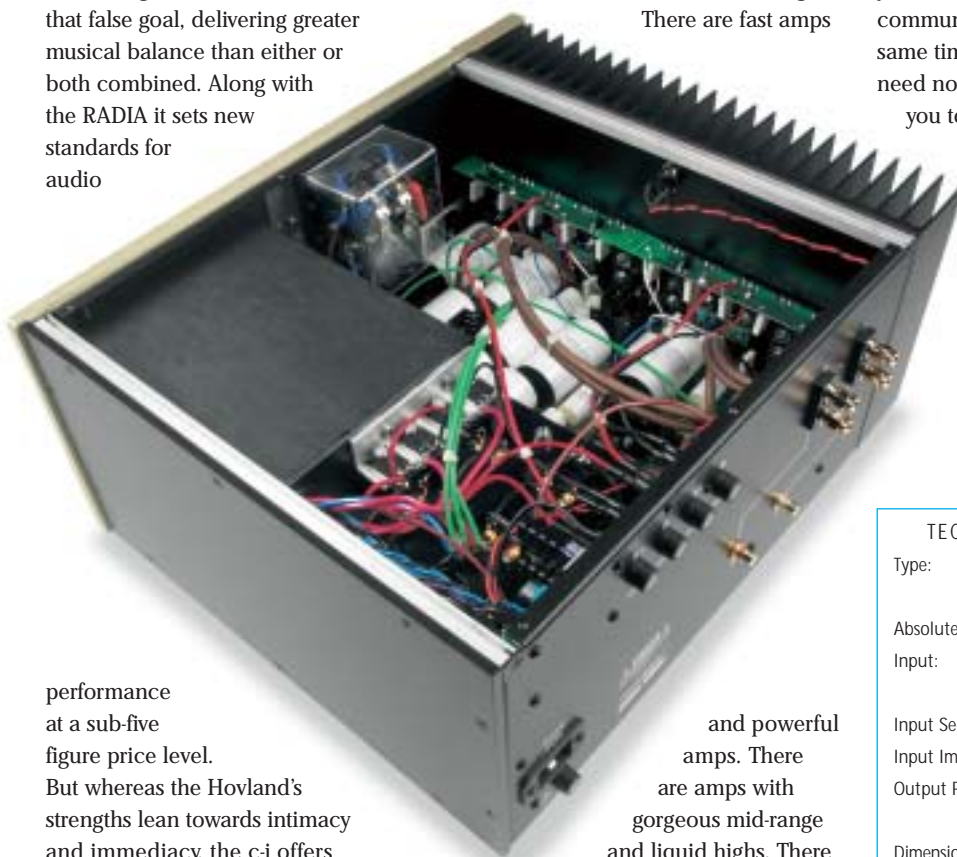
makes most amps sound flat and two-dimensional (spatially and tonally). As such it advances the musical reality and communication of almost any system, which is after all, exactly what it's supposed to do.

The notion of an amp that combines the best qualities of valves and solid-state is more a cliché than an audio grail. The 350 transcends that false goal, delivering greater musical balance than either or both combined. Along with the RADIA it sets new standards for audio

indeed is, genuinely expensive. But it's also a bargain. Considerably cheaper than c-j's previous flagship, the Premier 8, it handily outperforms that amplifier. But the important thing is the way in which it does it; not by simply offering more of the same for less money, but by extending the breadth across which it delivers musical balance and insight.

There are fast amps

and indeed, all power amps. I'm very lucky – I've got the RADIA at home. But that doesn't mean that I'm not going to miss the Premier 350 when it goes. "Best" is in the ear of the hearer, but the sheer fact that the c-j has exposed the first chinks in the Hovland's armour demands both respect and affection. Big and powerful yet naturally intimate; versatile, communicative and capable all at the same time, the Premier 350 should need no help from me. Listen, and you too will be besotted. ➤+



performance at a sub-five figure price level.

But whereas the Hovland's strengths lean towards intimacy and immediacy, the c-j offers power and grace under pressure as well as natural tonality and harmonic discrimination that broaden your system's musical compass and banish listening fatigue. The problem comes in trying to place it in context.

That this is the finest amplifier that conrad-johnson have ever produced I am in no doubt. It's also one of the best amplifiers that's ever enjoyed long term residence in my system. Have I heard better? Yes I have, but never at less than three times the price, and that's the point I'm trying to get across. The Premier 350 might seem, and

and powerful amps. There are amps with gorgeous mid-range and liquid highs. There are amps with thunderous

bottoms and others with expressive constipation. The real strength of the Premier 350 is not just its lack of a single real strength, but the number of strengths that it can elevate and offer at once, without ever drawing attention to them and thus itself.

I've been relying on the RADIA for some time, but it's nice to know that the Hovland amp isn't the only game in town. Both the RADIA and the conrad-johnson represent a new benchmark for solid-state design –

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

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| Type: | Solid-state power amplifier |
| Absolute Phase: | Inverting |
| Input: | 1pr single-ended RCA/phono |
| Input Sensitivity: | 1.1V |
| Input Impedance: | 100kOhms |
| Output Power: | 350 Watts per channel into 8 Ohms |
| Dimensions (WxHxD): | 475 x220 x 390mm |
| Weight: | 38kg |
| Finish: | Champagne gold front panel with black casework |
| Price: | £8000 |

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