



the Stereo Times

The Complete Audiophile Magazine

Andromeda Cables

by Vitus Audio

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Conrad Johnson ACT2 Series 2 Preamplifier

Simply Irresistible

December 2007



Associated Equipment:

Analog Front End

Merrill Heirloom
Turntable
Jeff Rowland
Compliment Tonearm
Transfiguration Phoenix

Digital Front End

Esoteric DV50S CD
Player
Blue Circle Audio
BC501 DAC
Blue Circle Audio
BC501ob DAC

Amplification

Klyne 7LX3.5P
preamplifier
GamuT D3 preamplifier
GamuT D200 MKIII
amplifier
GamuT M250 amplifier
Soaring Audio SLC-
A300 amplifier

Loudspeakers

Almarro M3A
LSA Group LSA2
Martin Logan Quest

Cabling

Atlas Cables – Elektra
DCCA Audio Eminence
Dynamic Design THB
Sunny Cable
Technology S600
Signal Cables

Speaker Cables:

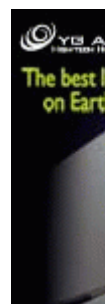
Atlas Cables – Ichor
DCCA Audio Eminence
Dynamic Design
Platinum Speaker
Cables with Nebula
Bass Bi-wire



How can it be permissible

I'll admit to being a bit sheepish when it came to approaching Conrad Johnson about doing this review. I thoroughly enjoyed the last Conrad Johnson offering I reviewed, the Premier 350 amplifier, and felt that the experience went well, save for the blown fuse and channel that I accidentally blew out. It had been nearly two years since I heard from them so I figured that was the end of my CJ equipment reviewing days and moved on. Always, though, our editor Dave Thomas, kept on me about following up with CJ. He would constantly remind me that they were one of the classier companies in the business and not likely to hold any previous missteps against me. Besides, one of his sources had given him the low down on some new CJ products and he knew that it would be worthwhile for me to contact them.

So I finally got up the nerve to call them, and to my surprise, they were glad to hear from me. "We were wondering what happened



Sunny Cable
Technology SP600
Speaker Cables

Dynamic Design THB
Power Cable
Dynamic Design White
Power Cable
Sunny Cable
Technology P600
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"The XT8
line array
loudspeaker
has reference
caliber
performance,
at an
affordable price."

Dennis Parham
Stereotimes.com

WWW.SELHAUDIO.COM

to you," said Lew Johnson. I was relieved and felt like a weight had been lifted off of my shoulders as I began talking to Lew about review possibilities. I had heard about a new version of the great ACT2 preamplifier now called the ACT2 Series 2 and was really hot to hear it. When I first spoke to Lew, it did not seem like it was going to happen. He told me that he didn't have a unit that he could part with for too long so I told him I would only need it for thirty days. He gave me ninety.

After talking to him I had one of those grins on my face that went from ear to ear. I had heard what one of their top-of-the-line amplifiers sounded like in my system, but hadn't had the opportunity until now, to experience and evaluate one of their newer, state-of-the-art preamplifiers. Would the wait be worth it? Read on.

The trend is irreversible

As usual, the ACT-2 Series 2 arrived precisely when the folks at CJ said it would, carefully packed and double boxed. The Series 2 is solidly built and has some heft to it, weighing in at 30 pounds, unboxed. After carefully unpacking it I read the well written instruction manual. I took particular note of the instructions for loosening the transit screws that hold the Series 2's critical audio circuits. These circuits are mounted on a flexible sub-chassis that is mounted to the main chassis with flexible isolation mounts. To protect this sub chassis from damage during shipping, CJ uses four silver screws, with white washers, inserted through the bottom of the chassis. These screws should be used anytime you need to ship your Series 2 preamplifier anywhere. Then remove the screws from the top plate of the tube guard and install the accompanying four 6N30P tubes. Re-install the tube guard and place your Series 2 preamplifier in its place of honor and let the listening begin.

I have to admit that it took me a little while to get used to this CJ preamp's new styling. Being an "old school" purist, this new look for CJ, which started with the ART preamps, was just a little bit too radical for me at first. Now, the more I look at it (which is quite often) I've come to appreciate its styling as unique and distinctive. But even though CJ changed the look of their preamps, two things they didn't change were their dedication to using single-ended (RCA) input and output connectors and inverting absolute phase. In reference to the single-ended versus balanced debate, I have heard pros and cons for both sides. But what it always comes down to is excellence in execution. A well executed single-ended design gives nothing away to a well executed balanced design. No one builds better sounding single-ended designs that Conrad Johnson.

Speaking of designs, one significant change is that the Series II now comes with a detachable AC power cord. But that doesn't mean that they recommend going out to look for the after market cord d'jour. I had heard that CJ had tested different OEM power cords and felt the one supplied with the ACT2 Series 2 was the best one to use. By CJ's standards, the cord is very nice looking, especially for an OEM AC power cord. During one of our listening sessions I had friends start to ask me if the CJ AC power cord was the best one I could find to work with the ACT2 Series 2. I responded that it was the one CJ likes and that was why I decided to use it. That response got me nothing but a bunch of incredulous



looks. When we changed AC power cords, to the Dynamic Design AC power cords, the performance of the ACT2 Series 2 improved noticeably. I asked Lew about this and he responded, "In selecting the AC power cord for the ACT2 we compared quite a number of OEM AC cords, and found this particular medical-grade AC cord to be (by quite a margin) the best of the lot. I have little doubt that there are some "audiophile" AC power cords available that will further improve the sound of the ACT2, but also know that there are some - at notably high prices - that do not. One problem we have with various audiophile AC power cords is that most do not have UL or similar safety markings, which would raise liability concerns for us as a manufacturer." There you have it. Think safety and reliability first then consider cost versus performance when choosing a power AC cord to work with the ACT2 Series preamplifier.



The ACT2 Series 2 has all of the flexibility you could reasonably want in a high end preamplifier with five sets of RCA inputs, two sets of RCA outputs, and two external processor loops. Of greater importance to most of you guys is the inclusion of the gold colored CJ remote. Yes, it still clicks whenever a function takes place, but as Lew explained to me during a recent seminar at Holm Audio regarding the clicking sound during the changes in volume, *"The relays are selecting between an array of resistors, shunting a single fixed resistor in series with the signal. While there is never more than that one resistor in series with the signal, there may be several parallel resistors shunting the signal to ground. The key fact is that this is a genuine, discrete, stepped attenuator. Besides that, at least you'll have peace of mind knowing that something has changed without having to guess"*. Looking at it from his point of view, I guess it makes sense. The CJ remote can take a lickin' and keep on clickin'.



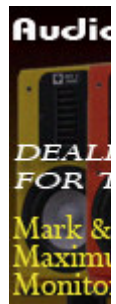
She's anything but typical

I spent a lot of long hours listening to and gaining the measure of the ACT2 Series 2 preamplifier. To put it mildly, it was the best preamp I've ever heard in my system. I hate even trying to dissect its sound in this portion of my review because it made most everything I played sound more real, like live music. No *one* attribute about its performance really stands out from another. It *all* stands out and causes you take notice of its sonic naturalism. To start, the ACT2 Series 2 has an extremely quiet background. Remember, we're talking about a tube preamp that rivals the best solid-state units in this area. Tonally, the Series 2 is neither bright, cold, soft, rolled, or tubey sounding, unless the recording engineer wanted the music to sound that way. With the Series 2, neutrality rules the day. There were no sonic irregularities that I needed to hunt down and tame with a different cable or AC power cord. No anomalies that I needed to try and tame by inserting a piece of "rolled off" sounding interconnect or hope to balance off with another piece of electronics. This preamplifier elevated the performance of the other equipment I had in my system and allowed them to perform at their best.



Let me start with the ACT2 Series 2's staging capabilities. With the Series 2 in place, my stage width seemingly expanded past the boundaries of my walls and deeper than the back of my listening room, but always with a lifelike quality. There was never one aspect of the stage replication that seemed to be emphasized for

the sake of another. Also, the stage was largely neutral, being neither forward nor seeming to be too far in back of the speakers. Performers at the back of the stage were just as easy to follow as those at the front of the stage. The micro and macro dynamic replication of the ACT2 Series 2 is uncanny. Sounds on the periphery, such as drummers changing sticks, pages turning, off-mic conversations, vocalists walking around the stage or tapping feet, setting the pace for the musical intro, all were on display with the ACT2 Series 2 in place. Other preamplifiers possess this capability, for sure, but the Series 2 handles this aspect of music reproduction effortlessly. High frequencies were refreshingly open and extended. Never was there a feeling that music was compressed or closed in, instead it flowed naturally, never calling attention to itself. Midrange performance is "intensely" musical. Vocalists are both captivating and engaging while choirs come across with an uncanny amount of rhythmic diction. Instrumental solos are reproduced with verve and panache and the ability to make you feel like that individual is not playing for anyone else but you. Bass reproduction from the ACT2 Series 2 is some of the most honest, lifelike bass I have experienced, especially from a tube preamplifier, in line with and rivaling most any solid-state offering. The low end was deep, detailed and controlled.



Musical References Please

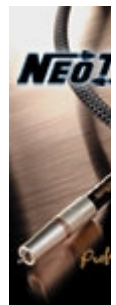


The ACT2 Series 2 portrays vocal harmonics beautifully. Corinne Bailey Rae's self titled album [Capitol] is a smooth, sultry, lyrical piece of pop fluff, yet still pleasant enough to listen to. She looks and sounds like a cross between Norah Jones and Erykah Badu, and has a vocal style that is expressive without being in your face or hard. The ACT2 Series 2 conveyed the feeling in her music and allowed me to gain a better appreciation

for her style particularly on songs like the hit, "Put Your Records On."

Another female vocalist I have gained a better appreciation for is Diana Krall. Her *The Girl in the Other Room* [Verve] is wonderful album both for her vocal and piano playing performance and for the playing of the accompanying musicians. This is a fine recording that the Series 2 preamplifier conveys in such a way that you feel like they're in the room with you with everything sounding so real. The same can be said for Sarah McLachlan's *The Freedom Sessions* [Arista]. Played through the Series 2, you get a sense of the wide, deep soundstage and Brian Minato's effortless, yet strong bass work.

The Sheryl Bailey 3's immensely enjoyable, *Live at the Fat Cat* [Pure Music Records] also benefited from the strengths of the Series 2. It delivered a wealth of detail that revealed room cues and sounds,



realistic transient response and very real sounding instruments being reproduced in my room. Sheryl Bailey is a virtuoso guitar player who deserves to be heard by a wider audience.



One of my favorite classical references is Camille St. Saen's Symphony No. 3 for Organ as conducted by Eugene Ormandy, performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra. This recording was produced in Philly's huge St Francis de Sales Church. Once the recording starts, it feels as though the air or atmosphere of the church is being reproduced in your room. The sound of the strings is beautiful, but the second movement, when the organ comes in, that is something special and memorable. I don't recall enjoying this disc as much in the past as I did when played with the ACT2 Series 2 orchestrating music in my system.



The Irrefutable Proof

I could very easily, go on and on talking about the Conrad Johnson ACT2 Series 2 but our editor wants us to try to refrain from righting novellas. I have had more than a few preamplifiers as the centerpiece of my system, but none of them bought me as much musical enjoyment as the ACT2 Series 2 did. The Series 2 has something special, a magical quality that simply makes good music sound even better. Not only did the ACT2 Series 2 take music reproduction to another level, it also took the emotional involvement to a higher height as well.

One of my favorite experiences with the ACT2 Series 2 preamplifier came one evening when I had several friends over for a listening session. We were getting deeply involved in the music and having a good time playing CD after CD. My neighbor, and fellow Stereo Times writer, Courtenay Osborne, had the great idea to replace the ACT2 Series 2 with my Klyne 7LX linestage for a comparison, which we did. All of a sudden, the tenor of our listening session changed. Various ones started to comment that the Klyne seemingly had slightly deeper, maybe tighter bass, or that the Klyne seemingly had a little more detail or a little more air. Tiring of this nitpicking talk, I asked the question: "Which preamp was the more musical, the more real to life sounding and made you feel like playing more of your music?" Without any hesitation and in unison, all four voices all said "C J!" We all had to look at one another chuckle at that. The Klyne is an excellent preamplifier, my reference, and will be back in its proper place after I return the ACT2 Series 2, but while the CJ preamplifier is in my house, in my system, the Klyne has to play the role of the host conductor, relinquishing the podium to the world famous visiting maestro and give up the baton for a while. Make no doubt about it; the Conrad Johnson ACT2 Series 2 has got to be one of the finest preamplifiers available. I'm not going to try to justify its price, but in the current market, the way things are priced, the Series 2 is a worthwhile investment that will reward its owner for years to come. Based on its performance and build quality, I am pleased to give the Conrad Johnson ACT2 Series 2 my highest recommendation.

Mike Wright

Specifications

ACT2 Series 2 Preamplifier

Gain: 21.5 db

Maximum output: 10 vrms

Output impedance: under 500 ohms

Distortion: less than .1% THD

Frequency response: at unity gain: 2 Hz to more than 100Khz

Hum and noise: 100 db below 1.0 v

Tube complement: 4 x 6N30P

Dimensions: 15.75D x 19W x 5.375H inches

Total weight: 30 lbs.

Cost: \$16,500**Manufacturer**

conrad-johnson design, inc.

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