

REVIEW

# TONEAudio.

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## The Conrad-Johnson Act 2 Series 2

— Jeff Dorgay



**W**hen I started TONE, one of my goals was to assemble a reference system that offered a high enough level of quality, musicality and accuracy that could be a benchmark that I judged everything else by. I got a lot of good advice and fortunately our classical music editor, Dan Babineau just happened to have the two pieces that were at the top of my list; the Conrad-Johnson ACT2 and their Premier 350 power amplifier. The more time I spent listening, it just grabbed me; I would also choose these two for my system.

The beauty of my job is that I got the opportunity to listen to about 25 very good linestages in the process, but I still went for the ACT2. My ACT2 arrived early this year and a few months into the review process, Lew Johnson informed me that there would be an upgraded version of the ACT2, so I moved up to the ACT2 series 2 you see here.

The Series 2 version of the ACT2 features some upgrades to the power supply; some improved parts including two quieter power transformers.

**“Adding some additional internal shielding and changing the ground topologies cut 2-3db of noise on an already quiet tube design,” Lew told me.**

There has been a price increase as well; the current ACT2 now costs \$16,500. Again Lew commented, “The increase in parts cost over the last few years has been exponential. Even wire costs three times what it used to!

Other than a small “Series 2” logo screened on the lower right front corner, there is no outward evidence of any difference between this one and the original ACT2. For those of you not familiar with the Conrad-Johnson look, the Series 2 features the classic champagne front panels with round buttons that they have used forever, so if you are moving up from other CJ gear, you will feel right at home. *(continued)*





There are 6 inputs, as well as a pair of external processor loops. If you are a tape deck enthusiast, use the fixed output of the EPL 1 and you are in business. Inputs are selected via the front panel push buttons or the substantial remote control. Volume level is adjusted by a series of microprocessor controlled relays in .7db steps. The audible clicking sound from the series one remains, which is a personal favorite of mine.

### Initial Setup and Break-In

The rest of my reference system consists of the Premier 350 amplifier, Aesthetix Rhea (with Great Northern Sound Mods) phono preamplifier, SME 10 (with SME V arm and Shelter 90x cartridge), Wadia 581 disc player and the Tetra 506 customs (along with a REL B2 subwoofer). All power delivery is courtesy of Running Springs Mongoose power cords and power conditioners. (A Duke for the Premier 350 and a Haley for everything else, each on their own dedicated 20amp lines). Speaker cable and interconnects (between the ACT2 and Premier 350) are the Tetra Artet cables and everything else is a combination of Cardas Golden Presence and Golden Reference.

Just like the Series 1 ACT2 and the Premier 350, this one is full of CJD Teflon capacitors and that means a lot of break in time. Interestingly enough the series 2 sounded much better with little break-in time than the series 1 but I wasn't completely happy until about

150 hours had passed. Granted, that's a lot of time, but trust me, the reward will justify the wait!!

When you unpack the ACT2, make sure to remove the four transit screws on the bottom of the unit, allowing the subchassis to float freely on its elastomers and remain suspended from the rest of the chassis. At this time you can install the tube dampers and bolt the plastic discs back in place. CJ thoughtfully supplies a tool for this, the remote and the four tubes (a great place to keep four spares) in a nice black leather foam lined case. I suggest a pair of gloves for doing this, so that you do not get any fingerprints on the acrylic, but I'm a little obsessed.

### The Sound

Again, to reiterate, I've had the privilege of listening to a lot of great preamplifiers over the years, but I love the ACT2 Series 2 and I'll spend the next thousand words telling you why. While many of you have the luxury of just listening to music for personal enjoyment, my reference system has to be a benchmark by which I judge everything else that I review; it has to be a tool.

For my money, the combination of the Act 2 and the Premier 350 gives me more of this than anything else I have yet encountered. I've said it before, but for those of you just tuning in to

our magazine, the current crop of CJ gear is not the romantic sound that they delivered 10 years ago. Don't get me wrong; I still love the PV-1 and MV-50 in my fun system, but for this gig I need an accurate tool that I can depend on every day.

The ACT2 Series 2 provides me with the perfect balance of musical involvement and neutrality coupled with accuracy that this job requires. When I listen through this combination, I hear the WHOLE orchestra, the WHOLE band. To be even more demanding, I want the maximum amount of resolution without being harsh and the Series 2 delivers – in spades.

And thanks to only four 6H30 tubes, it's easy to maintain as well.

As I went through the same protocol with the original ACT2, I left it in my third system to play for about a month, knowing it would take some time to achieve greatness. Once that was out of the way, I got right down to business.

### The Key Element of the ACT2 Is Its Ability to Seduce You

If you have not experienced the ACT2, it possesses a degree of seduction that is truly amazing. Ever since this component was ready for serious listening, I spent a lot more time typing on the couch with my laptop because I just could not break away. *(continued)*

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I would sit down intending to spend a little time doing some serious listening and hours would pass. Big piles of records were starting to grow around my reference system to the point that I ended up hiring my daughter to put them away; I just wanted to keep listening!

This is truly the highest compliment I can pay the ACT2; once I start listening to music, I never want to turn the damn thing off! I mentioned in my review of the Conrad-Johnson Premier 350 last issue that the true synergy comes from mating these two components together and I'll hold that party line here. While I did use the ACT2 with quite a few different power amplifiers with excellent results over the year, the best combination was with the Premier 350. I'm sure it would be fantastic with the Conrad-Johnson LP140 tube monoblocks as well, but I haven't had time to investigate...

No matter what I play, whether LP or CD, the ACT2 never ceases to amaze me. Here's what the ACT2 does in a nutshell:

It has a big, deep soundstage for starters. On any good recording it just seems like the soundstage expands in all directions; musicians go from about three feet in front of your speakers to well behind them. This is where this preamp starts to pull you in. Put on a

couple of your favorite recordings and you notice instantly that something special is going on. This goes well beyond the usual audiophile clichés, it has to be experienced.

One of my favorite vocal records is **Music in a Foreign Language**, by Lloyd Cole. On other systems, the vocals on the title track are right in the middle, yet here you can hear them move around a little bit from mid left to mid right, while it appears that there is one more overdubbed acoustic guitar in the mix than you might have thought before. Another oldie from the record bin of obscurity is Tim Curry's **Simplicity**. On the first cut, *Wor-*  
*kin on My Tan*, when he says "Take a bus, take a truck" you would swear that bus is going to run you down! Impressive to say the least.

Next, it has tremendous dynamic range. Thanks to the already massive power supply in the ACT2, the upgrades have made it two clicks better than the original ACT2. No matter what kind of music you enjoy, if it possesses a lot of dynamics, you will be floored at how much more of this you are now able to experience. Everything from the lowest bass notes to the uppermost treble has power, weight and control to the nth degree, which allows you to see much further into a

recording; Complex musical passages no longer sound constricted, you get all the music.

I put Stravinsky's **Firebird** on the turntable and I thought my Tetras were going to roll over in front of me! That's the kind of punch that gives recorded music real excitement! Granted, we can't put a concert hall in our living rooms, but this kind of range sure makes it a good alternative. The ability of the ACT2 to convey the weight of a performance is another dimension to be experienced.

### Space, The Final Frontier

No matter what kind of music you enjoy, I guarantee you will freak out at the way that the ACT2 recreates space in your music room. Listening to one of my favorite guitarists, Adrian Belew on King Crimson's **Thrak** album was another amazing experience. I was hearing a lot more spatial information and again it was as if someone added a few more guitar and keyboard tracks that just weren't there before.

Even though it is a bit wacky, if you still have a copy of John Klemmer's **Cry**, dig it out and put it on your turntable. This one is definitely spooky through the ACT2. If you really want to freak out, give **Joe's Garage Act 1** a spin, The Central Scrutinizer sounds as if he's hiding behind your couch! Yet all of this would just be more audiophile parlor tricks without tonality that is spot-on. Again, the ACT2 does not disappoint. Listen to your favorite Anne-Sophie disc and dig that sound! It's the subtlety of the presentation that sets the ACT2 apart from everything I've heard yet.

Granted, you will experience this a lot more with good recordings, but what I enjoyed most with the ACT2/Premier 350 combination was that even some of my favorite records (that are less than ideal recordings) revealed more information than before. Notice I'm not saying that the ACT2/Premier 350 made them sound better, that would imply a lack of detail. (continued)

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But it did allow more information to come forward than I had heard before and that is an important distinction. Too often, audiophiles that have upgraded their systems to a very high level complain that now their systems only sound good with a few records that have been flawlessly mastered. This is not the case here.

Last but not least, the ACT2 does a fantastic job at retrieving the most miniscule inner detail from a recording. The longer you listen to it and the more you go back to things you are intimately familiar with, it will just keep offering surprise after surprise. The ultimate test; if you still have it, put your old preamp back in your system after you have really become accustomed to the ACT2. That brings it home instantly!

### YES, IT'S THAT GOOD

Many other major audiophile journalists have been extremely enthusiastic about the ACT2 for good reason. It's time for me to be a mind-reader again; I'm sure there are a few skeptics in the audience that think the ACT2 can't be as good as some of the boutique linestages that cost as much as a Porsche. Keep this in mind, Lew and Bill build about 300 ACT2s a year. If they built them in lots of five each, they WOULD cost 50k. That's why the ACT2 series 2 was chosen to get one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2006. At this stage of the game I can have anything I want for my reference and I'm still happy with the ACT2 after listening for a year.

You can count on seeing this one in my system for years to come. Is there anything better? If I come across it, I'll let you know. I suspect the ART series 3 will have even better performance, but I can't have one and as they are only making 25, you probably can't either. By the time this article makes it to you, I suspect the remaining 22 ART 3s will all be spoken for. (Lew and Bill kept one for themselves and our Classical columnist; Dan Babineau is getting one too.)

But fear not, we'll let you know how good the ART 3 is in the near future.

If you are ready to buy a linestage that is at the pinnacle of audio performance, I would give the ACT2 series 2 a serious listen before you make your final decision. I've yet to experience anything that has brought me this close to the music. ●

### MANUFACTURERS INFO

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### PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifier:** Aesthetix Callisto, Emotive Audio Poeta

**Amplifiers:** Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, Red Rock Audio Renaissance, Nagra PSA, Pass F3

**Speakers:** Penaudio Serenades, Tetra 506LTD, Empirium Acoustics Nicole

**Analog Sources:** SME 10/Shelter 90x with Ray Samuels XR-10B phono stage.

**Digital Sources:** Wadia 581, Metronome CD-3 Signature, Meridian 808

**Interconnects:** TARA RSC, Acrolink, Cardas Golden Reference, Tetra Artet

**Speaker Cables:** Tetra Artet

**Power Cords:** Running Springs Mongoose

**Power Conditioning:** Running Springs Jaco and Duke

**Vibration Control:** Finite Elemente Pagode Signature rack with full compliment of Cereballs and Cerepucs

