

Two at one stroke

Jeff Rowland has taken more than a decade to develop his new phono amplifier. Around 2005, the previous top model Cadence last left the factory. In 2017, the new Conductor was ready for series production when the champion from Colorado Springs certified it. This test report writes hifi history. And we haven't even talked about the sound.

Input 1 with standard gain and standard transformer for MC systems with an output voltage of 0.2 mV and above, Input 2 with standard gain and amorphous transformer also for these widely used MC systems, Input 3 with high gain and amorphous transformer for MC cartridges below 0.2 mV, Input 4 for MM cartridges and high-output MC systems. With this probably unique variability of its four possible inputs alone, the new phono amplifier from the Jeff Rowland Design Group (JRDG) stands out from the majority of phono preamps. The U.S. manufacturer, whose trademark is the discreetly shimmering aluminum fronts of its devices, has added a new crown to its long tradition of phono amplifiers with the Conductor. The story began with a pre-amplifier combination whose ideas run like a thread through the company's history: MCC-Preamplifier, STA-1 Phonostage and MPS-1 Power supply formed one unit. The line preamp and phono preamp were fed by the common outsourced power supply. The external phono preamplifier also received its power from the outsourced power supply of the consummate line preamplifier for the next development stage, the consummate preamplifiers. Detto at Cadence, the last external phono amplifier by Jeff Rowland to date. The Cadence is also powered together with the Synergy line preamplifier. Either with the "small" power supply with two outputs, or with a Battery Power Supply BPS.

With the Conductor, Jeff Rowland continues this decades-long development. Not only can this new phono amplifier be powered solo by a switch-mode power supply, it also shares a common power supply with the current Reference Linestage Corus. Both can draw their power from a completely newly developed power supply unit, the Power Storage Unit PSU. This PSU replaces the previous battery power supply BPS. The PSU also stores energy in order to bring it to the devices as independently as possible from mains disturbances. However, it does not do this with batteries, but with extremely storable and fast capacitors ("ultracapacitors") with a total of 233 Farad. Right, that's 233,000,000 microfarads. These capacitors can react faster to sudden power demands and, above all, are much more durable than batteries. The fact that the PSU alone costs 9990 euros, which is as much as the conductor with a standard power supply unit (still without the individually selectable inputs), is again related to two typical Rowland specialties. Firstly, the consumer can order the Conductor - first of all, as in this test - with its standard switching power supply, which is comparatively inexpensive at 1000 Euros in the price list. And secondly, if the PSU is upgraded at a later date, it can supply not only the conductor but also the line preamplifier Corus and the digital-to-analog converter Aries. This puts the price-performance ratio of this innovative super power supply in a completely different light. It is always a promising option if you can upgrade a device - as soon as your account allows it again - with an even better power supply. If it can then supply its power for a total of three devices, all the better.

As can be seen from the list of players, I have been listening to music very well for a long time with my Rowland combination consisting of the phono preamp Cadence, the line preamp Synergy and the mono power amp Model 12. Therefore, I was especially excited when editor-in-chief Uwe Kirbach entrusted me with the new phono part from Colorado Springs for testing. The fact that this was successful is due in no small part to the active RB audio sales team in Innsbruck. After it had become much too quiet around Jeff Rowland in this country, Romeo Barisic has now taken over the distribution for Germany and Austria. In addition, he has the gratifying backing of his own European branch in Spain. The head of Jeff Rowland Europe, Ignacio Carrasco, was intensively involved in the development of the Conductor, as Jeff Rowland himself emphasized in a tech talk via Skype: "As a developer, the subjective sound perception of familiar people is important to me in order to validate my objective technical criteria and test procedures. Both approaches, technology and listening, need to be balanced to create a great audio product".

The device tested here was an extraordinarily rich variant with its four different inputs. Usually the conductor is ordered with one or two inputs, which places this phono amplifier in the price range from 11 590 for MM and 11 990 Euro for MC. For the Burmester B MC1 - which did not return to Berlin after testing the Burmester turntable because it cut such a fine figure at the Kuzma reference - I used the two inputs with 68 dB amplification. Once with the standard, once with the amorphous input transformer. By the way, Jeff Rowland swears by balanced signal paths. It's true that in addition to the XLR sockets for each input there is also a pair of RCA plugs. But even from these, the signal reaches the input transformers balanced and is also passed on to the amplifier stages.

But stop! I'm already at 5627 characters and haven't lost a single word about the sound. At least not explicitly. Between the lines it should be obvious that Jeff Rowland is opening a strikingly innovative chapter in the tradition of his phono amplifiers with the Conductor. "Expressive" and "spacious" were the first keywords I noted on The Salzburg Recital, the first recording of Grigory Lipmanovič Sokolov for Deutsche Grammophon (DG, 00289 479 4390, Europe 2015, 2-LP). What was particularly impressive on this recording in the series "Festival Documents" of the Austrian Radio was the substance with which even the quiet sounds came across and how eruptively a chord sequence in the left hand or a run in the right hand protruded from a calm river here and there. In the Chopin Preludes on the third page of this double LP, the pianist varies the intensity of his strokes in many ways, and the conductor looks at his fingers as if with a magnifying glass. Sokolov created such a dense atmosphere during this recital in the Haus für Mozart in Salzburg that one can almost physically feel the audience's eager attention listening to him. And all of this in this tingling, jumping acoustic of the small Festspielhaus, which brings the sounds of the concert grand up close to the listeners. The intensity of the playback via the conductor was also astonishing because Sokolov did not choose any exciting pieces for this recital. Rather, he expected his audience - almost like Keith Jarrett in jazz - to meditate on the piano, to step out of their hectic everyday life, which had not yet been corona-braked when the live recording was made on July 30, 2008. The playback via the conductor also created this atmosphere of concentrated listening - or better yet, of devoted listening -

in the living room, in which the listener was intuitively in the middle of it all and was part of it.

Speaking of "spacious". The Romantic Symphony by Anton Bruckner with the Concertgebouw Orchestra Amsterdam under Bernhard Haitink (first pressing 1981, here Philips 6833029, D ?, LP) demonstrated that it was not so much about a broad or deep or similar individual phenomena of spatial representation. Of course, flutes, horns, and trumpets, for example, sometimes came from very far back, but this extension of space alone does not quite capture it. It was rather a very specific "spaciousness" with which the orchestra filled the entire stage. As if the distance between all the musicians or at least between the instrument groups had been greater - if you like, social distancing long before the corona crisis. Quite obviously, this phono amplifier reduces the noise level to such an extent that the music can unfold completely free of any clouding. The fact that the Conductor is not only a meditative instrument could be heard in the Scherzo. The brilliant interplay of the wind instruments came out of the loudspeakers full of energy. Again and again it was noticeable how contoured and deep the Conductor reaches into the bass registers, how powerful it can reproduce timpani beats. Nothing is blown up, but it has thrust and definition. An example of this was the left hand of Arthur Rubinstein at the Grieg Piano Concerto (RCA Victor Red Seal, LSC-2566, US 1962, LP). On this record, the solo instrument stood in front of the orchestra as a clearly defined solitaire, regardless of how much was going on around it. In the trills in the pianist's right hand, each note was a single tone, each of the short, rapidly successive strokes stood alone, and the same was true of fast runs in the left hand.

Here it is time to address the crucial question of how the standard transformer and the amorphous transformer relate to each other. The best way to illustrate this comparison is to point out that I have had a similar experience as with the four upsampling filters that T+A has recently added to its famous reference SDV 3100 HV Streaming DAC preamplifier (image hifi 3/2020). There the Bezier filter preferred by the manufacturer has left a "more analogue" sound impression than the standard filters. Intuitively, I kept returning to this particular filter from T+A when listening to it. This experience was repeated with the two types of transformers that Jeff Rowland developed together with Per Lundahl. There are remarks about the "amorphous transformer" such as "light as a feather", "carried on an air cushion", "with a fraction of a second more pause of the piano during a ritardando". Yes, we are very deeply involved in intuitive, sensual and thus also subjective perception. But in the end, it is precisely this perception that makes the difference whether the music is simply played "right" or whether it touches the soul. Jeff Rowland himself explained that Per Lundahl initially told him nothing more about the new amorphous transmitters than "try it and you'll see". His own experience was that the standard transformer sounded a bit more dynamic and therefore favored pop or rock a bit. The amorphous transformer, on the other hand, brings more harmonic richness, which is closer to a jazz ensemble or classical music, "because more of the musicians' or conductors' intentions become understandable".

This brings us back to the DAC preamplifier from T+A. Here too the standard filters are more linear and dynamic, according to the objective frequency response. Nevertheless it is difficult to escape the enchantment of the music when it is played back via T+A's own Bezier filter. Similarly, when listening to the Conductor with its amorphous input, I noted with astonishment: "Is there anything more analog than analog? The answer is of course no, you can't boost "analog" any more than you can boost "digital". But it is quite remarkable that this phono amplifier caused exactly this question at all. The standard input is more direct, clearer, more sparkling, said a hifi experienced listener, "but for long-term enjoyment I would go for the amorphous transformer, even if the timbre is a bit darker". This differentiation could be seen very well in the second act, third part of Don Giovanni under Ferenc Fricsay (DG, SLPM 138 050/52, D 1959, 3-LP-Box). There Donna Anna came across the standard transformer with more impulsiveness and the very high notes were figuratively speaking very high up. With the amorphous transformer, this last pressure did not seem quite as intense in the highest heights, but the woman's voice simply sounded heartbreaking. Likewise, the Elvira's cry of horror after her departure penetrated more through her marrow and leg. And the appearance of the Stone Guest ("Don Giovanni, a cenar teco m'invitasti, e son venuto!") was more threatening.

The beauty of this phono preamplifier is precisely how Jeff Rowland combines two clearly distinguishable sound worlds in one unit by allowing the user to choose between the two input transformers. In fact, the Conductor gives you two phono amplifiers in one. Ideally, the RB audio distributor has equipped the demonstration unit with both versions. But even a Conductor, which is initially equipped with only one input, does not have to remain "solo" forever. The three other, unpopulated inputs are covered at the rear of the chassis only with appropriate plates. A retrofit is possible at any time. Anyone who does not need an MM input and can manage with the standard amplification for MCs at 0.2 mV, could resort to an amorphous input for 3000 Euro as a golden middle course. With an additional standard input for 2000 Euro, the total price would be 14 990 Euro, still just below the sound barrier of 15 000 Euro - with the result that a truly diverse sound paradise opens up in the combination of different transformers with different pickups.

The fact is: twice recently, test devices have shown the limits of my system as definitively as I have not experienced for years as an image hifi employee. The SDV 3100 HV from T+A was the digital version, the analogue version is the Conductor. Jeff Rowland's new phono amplifier opens up new musical spheres, even with the standard switched-mode power supply connected here, compared to the Cadence phono preamplifier from the same manufacturer. With the Conductor, Jeff Rowland has once again taken his own technical path. The result is a phono amplifier that not only offers several inputs and different amplification levels, as is also known from others. Rather, the listener can choose between two sound philosophies, which specifically address different listening habits and music preferences, but each in its own way equally convincing. In any case, it is wonderful how "racy" the conductor blows the trumpet of Louis Armstrong into the listening room during "Moonlight in Vermont" on Ella and Louis (Verve Records, MG V-4003, US 1956, LP). And how the "o" of Ella Fitzgerald swings when she sings from the London Tooooooown in "A foggy day". It is also stirring

how a distorted guitar can sing and howl, for example in "Lord let it rain" on modern cool by Patricia Barber (Promotion Records, PREM-741-1, US 1998, 2-LP). And how deep a muted trumpet can go in the number "Silent Partner" on this album and how long it can fade away at the end.

Jeff Rowland's conductor comes from the tradition of a great house and sets the highest standards for sound. More than that: With the Conductor you are not spoiled for choice between impulsively correct or heartily musical. Both worlds of sound are wonderfully combined in a solid and noble aluminium housing. The Conductor is an all-rounder that makes listening to music a moving experience.

Jeff Rowland Design Group Conductor Reference Phonostage

Principle: Phono amplifier with different input transformers standard or amorphous

Gain: 43 dB MM, 53 dB High Output MC, 68 dB standard MC, 74 dB Low Output MC

Terminating resistors MC 50, 100, 200, 400 Ohm, High-Output-MC 47 kOhm as well as "Mouse Piano" in a housing for 600 and 800 Ohm as well as 1kOhm, 2, 3.3, 5 and 10 kOhm.

Capacity MM: 100, 200, 300 Piccofarad

Maximum output level: 16V rms, balanced

RIAA curve: +/-0.15 dB, 30 Hz to 20 kHz

S/N ratio: 68 dB, ref. 0.5 mV, 1 kHz, unweighted

THD: 0.0015%, 30 Hz to 20 kHz

CMRR: 110 dB, 20 Hz to 20 kHz

Features: four selectable inputs, fully balanced input and output transformers, fully balanced internal construction, input connectors XLR and RCA, subsonic filter, mute, standby, mono, L-R, input EQ control for optional circuit with various equalization curves.

Weight: 11,33 kg

Dimensions: 88.9 x 393 x 248 mm (H x W x D)

Price: Basic unit with switching power supply 9990 Euro, input MM and HOMC 1600 Euro, input MC standard transformer 68 dB or 74 dB gain 2000 Euro, input MC amorphous transformer 68 dB or 74 dB gain 3000 Euro. - Total price test unit with four inputs 19 590 Euro.

Player:

phono:

Drive: Kuzma Stabi Reference, Tonearm: Kuzma Stogi Reference, Cable: Cardas
Pickups: Burmester B MC 1, Benz Micro Ruby open air, Benz LP, Benz L2 Wood,
Ortofon Cadenza Red, Dynavector XV-1S, Dynavector Te Kaitora Rua

amplifier:

Line: Jeff Rowland Synergy II

Phono: Jeff Rowland Cadence

Mono power amplifiers: Jeff Rowland Model 12

cables:

Phono and Line: Cardas Golden Reference, Cardas Neutral Reference, Cardas Clear
LS: Brodmann Acoustics, Audiodata

Loudspeaker:

Isolator & Friedl, Parker 95 (update Beryllium Tweeter 2017)

Digital:

CD drive: Theta Data Basic (Philips CDM-9 Pro), converter: Theta DSPro Generation III

Hi-Rez formats: MacBook Pro with Amarra player software

Accessories:

Bfly-audio PowerBase, Clearaudio Vinyl Harmonicer, SID Analog (Sound improvement disc "A"), Millenium Carbon LP mat, Dereneville Magic Mat, Clearlight Audio RDC cone, SIC (sound improvement coupler), Audioplan Sicomin Antispikes SIAS, ART damper, Einstein power strip and power cable.