

TONEAudio.

ISSUE 6. 2006

conrad-johnson
Premier 350SA

**Building A
Reference System:** The
**Conrad-Johnson
Premier 350SA**

— Jeff Dorgay



I've been on a transistor-free diet when it comes to power amplifiers since the early '80s. I had the big Levinson, Krell and Threshold amps back in the day, because I had Acoustat 2+2s and they wanted current, baby! Back then; I would have never ever considered a tube amplifier for all the records in the record store.

Towards the end of last year, I got a chance to hear the Conrad Johnson Premier 350 in Dan Babineau's home and I was impressed in a major way. That last bit of graininess that I had always heard in solid-state amplifiers was gone. (And he's a really fussy guy...) I knew my preamp choice was going to be the ACT2 from Conrad Johnson as well, so I talked to Lew Johnson for his take on the situation, as they had some really sexy new 140-watt monoblocks coming out soon.

Even Lew admitted to me that their new 140 tube monos had just a slight bit more musicality. "About 5%". He also gave me some great advice:

"Jeff, you are a reviewer, you need something that will work with everything and drive any speaker, no matter what."

That's when the light bulb went off, it would be transistors after all, and it's been an excellent choice.

These days the Premier 350 retails for \$9500, which puts it on the list of serious amplifiers. Like its name suggests, it puts out 350 watts per channel into an 8-ohm load and double that into 4 ohms. It weighs pretty close to 100 pounds and uses a 20-amp power cord. It is a very simple, yet elegant and unassuming box with the trademark C-J champagne front panel and a big power switch. The rear panel sports four fuse holders, a pair of speaker binding posts and the RCA input jacks, as C-J does not feature balanced topologies in any of their gear.

In typical C-J fashion, the Premier 350 is built like a tank, and should provide years of trouble free listening. Opening the top revealed a very tidy layout, top shelf metalwork and the best quality parts available to the audio industry.

(continued)



Initial Setup

The Premier 350 comes with a short instruction manual and a fairly beefy power cord, but this went back in the box and a Running Springs Mongoose 20amp cord was substituted. When I was wiring my studio, I planned for hi-fi, so there are two dedicated 20 amp circuits and two dedicated 15 amp circuits. The Premier 350 has its own dedicated line, upgraded power cord and Running Springs Duke power conditioner. This has proven to give all of the amplifiers we have tested here the ability to sound their best.

As with any high power amplifier, the Premier 350 will give you that last bit it is capable of at high

volumes with a dedicated line, but even on a 15 amp circuit with the rest of the system plugged in, I could push it really hard without running out of juice, so don't pass up the opportunity to own a Premier 350 if you only have a standard 15 amp circuit.

The rest of the system consists of my C-J ACT2 (now upgraded to the ACT2 – series II), SME10 with Shelter 90x and Aesthetix Rhea (upgraded by Steve Huntley of Great Northern Sound) and a Wadia 581 CD player. Power cords and conditioning by Running Springs and all other cables from Cardas (Neutral Reference) round out the system with my Tetra 506s and a REL Britannia B2.

Anticipation, it's making me wait...

The only agonizing part of using this amplifier is part of what makes it so awesome in the first place; it's massive power supply. You guessed it; these Teflon CJD capacitors are going to take 2-300 hours to really be all they can be. Fortunately, I had spent a fair amount of time listening to Dan's ACT2/Premier 350 combination, because when I took these two out of the box, they sounded pretty sluggish. So, if you follow me down this path, don't panic, it gets better, a LOT better.

Just when you think that it's really incredible, it takes another jump right around 300 hours and that's really the magic number.

better every couple of days until the 200 hour mark. Just when you think that it's really incredible, it takes another jump right around 300 hours and that's really the magic number. I'm not the world's most patient guy, but this was worth every minute! If you want to speed up the break-in process, do what I did; hook your iPod up to the input jacks and let it play all night long. Two weeks later, you are just about done!

Plays well with others

Over the course of this review, I probably tried the Premier 350 with about fifteen linestages, as it is my benchmark. It offered up fantastic

sound with everything I mated it with, so whatever you might have as a front end, rest assured you would have no problems incorporating this amplifier into your system.

As Lew predicted, this amplifier was able to drive anything that I threw at it, including my 2-ohm (sometimes 1 ohm) Apogees without any problems or sense of strain at any volume. For the last few years, I've been listening to a lot of tube amplifiers in the 3-100 watt per channel category and I thought I was happy. The Premier 350 is a lot like the current 505hp BMW M5; it never runs out of power! If you like music with a lot of dynamics, the Premier 350 will never disappoint you.

As great as the Premier 350 worked with every linestage I tried it with, the real thrill comes when you mate it with the ACT2. Adding the seductive qualities of the ACT 2 makes this a combination that has not been bettered by anything I've yet heard. But we'll talk about the ACT2 next issue. I have noticed this to be pretty common these days; usually gear from the same manufacturer sounds the best together.

The lack of sound?

Every amplifier adds some kind of coloration to what passes through its circuits. Much as we would like that proverbial straight wire with gain, it just doesn't work that way. What I like about the Premier 350 is that it doesn't sound like a solid-state amplifier, it just sounds good. To be more exact, it does everything I want a reference amplifier to do: It has endless dynamic reserve, a lot of weight and slam, yet a lot of control without sounding grainy or harsh like some solid-state amplifiers can, all the while having an airy presentation that is not unlike the best tube designs.

Lew gave me a bit of insight into the design of the 350 and told me that the Mosfets in the gain stage have a predominantly even-order distortion characteristic (just like tubes), which is very related to the original notes, musically. *(continued)*

They also have almost no distortion after the fourth order. Another aspect of using the Mosfet is that they are available in complimentary pairs (n and p types), so in this configuration, cancel almost all the distortion in the circuit without any feedback. The signal is then passed on to a composite Mosfet/bipolar output stage and the subsequent lack of distortion is what gives the Premier 350 such a detailed presentation without being harsh.

To celebrate the break-in process being complete, I brought out a treasure from my record collection; sealed copies of GNR's Use Your Illusion 1 and 2. Yup, that's right, NEVER played them till now. This was an amazing experience, but I couldn't stop there I had to play the new Wolfmother CD. Trust me, this disc will kick your ass into the next room!

However, raw power without finesse is nothing. Shelby Cobras are a blast to do burnouts with, but you won't beat any Porsches on a road course. The Premier 350 has finesse in spades. Some people have discussed the importance of the "first watt" of power and that if it is not good, the rest is not good either. For the most part, I agree with this theory (no disrespect to Mr. Pass and his First Watt amplifiers, because I own one of those as well) so I gave the Premier 350 a fairly unrealistic test; I hooked it up to my 101db 2nd Rethms.

Now no one in their right mind would do something like this, but I'm obsessed. Rest assured that even the first watt of the Premier 350 is excellent and this amplifier passed this test with flying colors as well. The Premier 350 even gave my Rethms more oomph and control on the bottom end than my SET, even at a one-watt level!

This is what makes the Premier 350 so special.

All of the usual female vocals and jazz standards were fantastic through the Premier 350, with a sound that again, kept feeling like a lack of sound. The 350 is one of the best amplifiers that I have heard. It acts like a conduit of music, imposing very little of it's own colorations on the material to present the music to the listener. Real instruments sound like real instruments and it possesses a lot of air and depth in the presentation. Thanks to the extreme lack of midrange grain, you might even be tricked into thinking this was a tube amplifier, but it's just too clean for that.

It's been said that power is your friend and now that I've had this experience, served up the way I like it, I would have a hard time going back. One of the most important and overlooked aspects of listening to music is the ease that comes from having enough power

to properly reproduce dynamics coupled with accurate tonality. No matter what type of music I was listening to, these factors really added to the realism of the presentation, even at modest levels.

Should you get a chance to hear the Premier 350 (already broken in) at a friend's house or your C-J dealer, I hope you will enjoy it as much as I do.

In The End

We're all going to be worm food. But while I'm here, I'm glad I have a Premier 350 to listen to. If you want that last bit of tubey warmth and don't want to get it from a source component, you might consider something else. (Like the C-J LM 140s) But if you just want to enjoy music and not worry about tubes, biasing or all the associated hoo hah that goes along with owning a tube power amplifier, this one's as good as it gets. Plan on seeing this one in my associated components list for a long time. Just remember to give this one plenty of time to break in before you listen seriously! ●

MANUFACTURERS INFO

Conrad-Johnson Design, Inc.
2733 Merrilee Drive
Fairfax, VA 22031
703-698-8581
www.conradjohnson.com

PERIPHERALS:

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson ACT2, Aesthetix Callisto, BAT VK42-SE

Speakers: Penaudio Serenades, Tetra 506LTD, Apogee Caliper

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

Digital Source: Wadia 581, Metronome CD-3 Signature

Interconnects: TARA RSC, Acrolink, Cardas Golden Reference

Speaker Cables: Cardas Golden Reference

Power Cords: Running Springs Mongoose

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco, Duke



TONEAudio is published six times a year online at:

www.tonepublications.com

© 2006 Printed with permission from ToneAudio. All rights reserved.