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Balance

BS/IS Yes

Volume

Mute

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The Herron Audio
VTSP-2 Vacuum Tube and
HL-1 Solid-state Pre-amplifiers

The Herron Audio VTSP-2 Vacuum Tube and HL-1 Solid-state Pre-amplifiers

by Roy Gregory

I doubt that either Herron Audio or designer Keith Herron will be familiar to too many readers in the UK. Nor can I promise that that situation is about to change with the line being picked up and heavily promoted by some big-noise distributor. But back in the USA where these units are built (St. Louis, Missouri to be precise) the Herron products have been quietly building quite a following. Not in itself a reason to review them you might well point out – and I'd have to agree. Which begs the question – what makes Herron Audio so special?

I've always maintained that we should review products because they're interesting. They might be interesting for a number of different reasons, or even a combination of them, and that's the case here. The tabloid version is pretty simple; Herron offer a pair of externally and operationally identical pre-amplifiers, except that one is solid-state and the other uses tubes. One costs \$5000 (the one that glows) and the other \$3500. Then there's the option of adding an internal phono-stage to the solid-state design, which lifts the price back to the \$5K mark. It's all too symmetrical, too perfect a contrast to ignore. However, there's also a sub-text and it's about the way the high-end is going in the US. These Herron products are surprisingly low-key and low-cost for American designs with genuine high-end aspirations. Yet their reputation places them in company with some of the most august and revered names around, in a market where reputation is everything.

Small, neat and nicely rather than ostentatiously finished, there's an air of self-contained competence about these products. Operationally there's also a refreshing lack of foibles, a calm confidence about the way they go about their business. Plenty of thought has gone into the facilities on offer, plenty of care into the casework, and that attention to detail extends to the electrical design and



performance parameters too. You just know that Keith Herron is one of those guys who'd be driven insane by switching noise or hum levels, unpredictable interfacing or a remote control that only works within touching distance of the unit's fascia. Technically, electrically and functionally there's only one word for these products and that's "sorted". Which, when it comes to the high-end, is all too rarely the case. I've already described the VTL TL7.5 as a benchmark product, waxing lyrical about its completeness as a design. The Herrons are smaller, cheaper and visually less substantial, but the underlying philosophy is exactly the

same: Expensive hi-fi, if it's to justify its price, needs to perform both sonically and functionally. Products that get weirder and wackier the more they cost are a dying breed, and it's products like these Herron pre-amps that are killing them off.

As I've said, both the VTSP-2 and HL-1 are identical in feel and function when purchased as line-stages. A large, oval volume level display dominates the centre of the front-panel, flanked by a pair of small, rotary controls for volume and balance. Either side of these are five push buttons with LED tell-tales above them. Switch them on

and the unit identifies itself, flashes all its LEDs at you and then goes through a 60-second (30 in the HL-1) soft-start countdown, at the end of which it sets the volume level to 10. The volume range goes all the way to 100 and the numerals are large and super legible. The five left-hand buttons select the five inputs, the ones on the right offer mono, mute, phase invert, tape monitoring and adjust the brightness of the display. Press the video button for two seconds and the input switches to unity gain for inclusion in a home-cinema set-up, the display letting you know what you've done. If there's anything else you're likely to need I can't think of it, and all these functions except balance and the unity gain option are available on the dinky little remote control. This works really well, but I can't help feeling that its propensity to disappear could prove frustrating!

Round the back there's RCA/phono sockets for the line inputs, tape



▶ loop and two sets of main outputs. There's a ground post and in the case of the solid-state HL-1, the option to install an internal, fet-based MM/MC phono-stage. Sensitivity can be changed by holding down the phono selector switch on the front panel; once again, the unit identifies its setting and goes through a 20-second countdown. Both units also feature a rocker switch that enables the user to reverse the mains polarity. An often overlooked yet valuable tweak, I wish this facility was much more common.

Internally, the Herron products display similar clear thinking and attention to detail. Keith Herron prefers to keep his power supplies close to the components they're feeding, hence the one box logic.



Likewise, input and output topology has been engineered specifically to avoid external interference with the audio circuitry. Internal interference is taken equally seriously, with circuit boards painstakingly designed and laid out by hand. The extensive micro-processor control circuitry is extensively shielded while the display elements and LEDs are constantly lit (rather than multiplexed) in order to avoid RF artefacts. The financial logic of sharing casework and control circuitry between two different products should be obvious. Simply change the main board, tell the

micro-processor what it's controlling and away you go. As I've already intimated, both these units are a joy to use, but one thing stands out in particular. The volume control used for both the HL-1 and VTSP-2 tracks perfectly, even down to the lowest levels, the control logic is beautifully weighted and the display can be read from the other end of the house, let alone the listening seat. The fact that you can dim it means it doesn't even light up the room like cosmic afterglow (unless you want it to – or are still playing DSOTM on a regular basis).

Well thought-out and superbly executed, it serves as a metaphor for the products as a whole.

At Keith Herron's insistence I tried his two pre-amps with a whole range of matching power amps, including those from VTL, Hovland, KR Audio and Jadis, but it was the Tom Evans Audio design Linear A and Bs that really clicked (and later, the RADIA, but more on that anon). Not surprising once you get talking to Keith about his design philosophy. He stresses three interlocking criteria: timing, neutrality and low-distortion. Get one wrong and you get a knock-on effect in the others. Colouration means spurious energy which disturbs timing: poor timing puts things in the wrong place at the wrong

time and that generates distortion: distortion alters the energy spectrum and that results in colouration. It's a circular logic that's as undeniable as the financial benefits of shared casework. The problem is in developing the circuits and products that deliver the linearity and phase coherence it demands. When Keith starts talking about "correcting distortion" and "the coloured tints of boutique capacitors" it's like an echo direct from the Welsh mountains. Above all he stresses accuracy and natural sound – and that's exactly what you'll hear.

Let's start with the cheaper, solid-state HL-1.

In a world where too many pre-amps seem to do more harm than good (why else would the bizarre obsession with passive controls survive?) the baby Herron is a breath of

fresh air. Here is a unit that does everything right in operational terms and very little wrong in musical ones. Teamed with the Tom Evans amps it forms a spectacular partnership that is natural, open and musically forthright, in a wonderfully unobtrusive, unobstructed way. It simply lets the music get on with things. Indeed, for a long time I preferred its performance to that of its bigger brother. Further listening with the other amps on hand helped to sort out the true nature of the combination. The HL-1 majors on getting stuff in the right place at the right time. It is inviting and sweet, musically eager with a natural tonal balance that, if anything errs slightly to the warm and rounded whilst softening leading edges slightly, especially at low frequencies. Indeed, in many ways it sounds like an exceptionally good valve pre-amp, ▶

▶ with its sense of colour and presence, broad soundstage, easy flow and expressive, responsive rhythmic quality. Team it with the super fast, super transparent and wonderfully even Linear A and you get just the lift it needs in terms of attack and immediacy.

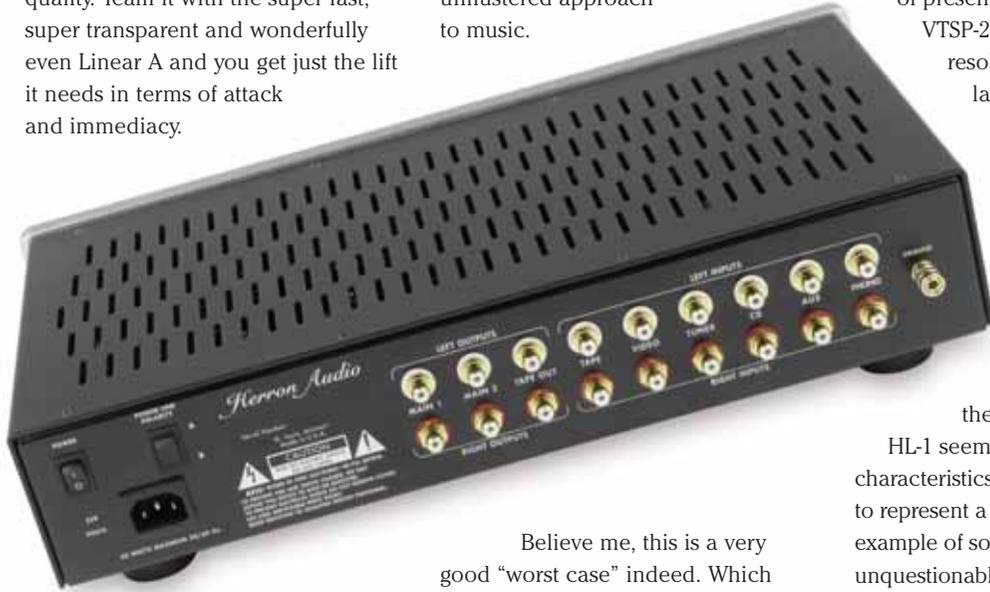
rhythmic snap and absolute transparency, underlining the pre-amp's ordered, even-handed and unflustered approach to music.

For a long time that's how this review was looking. In comparison to the HL-1's honesty and sense of presence, the tube driven VTSP-2, whilst offering greater resolution and neutrality, lacked the body and substance to compete. Admirable enough, it didn't quite quicken the pulse the way the easy lope of its solid-state brother did; didn't quite let the music

breathe and live in the same way. Just as the

HL-1 seemed clothed in tube characteristics, so the VTSP-2 seemed to represent a beautifully turned out example of solid-state bland – nice, unquestionably polite but ultimately lacking musical balls.

But then this review, which was originally scheduled for Issue 41, got held over. Which was just as well because in the intervening period of time a wonderful (but rather irritating) thing happened. Already well run-in, I didn't see the point in removing the Herrons from the system as there was room enough to accommodate them. That allowed them another couple of months of passing a signal, otherwise undisturbed. Returning once again for further listening before settling down to write this copy, imagine my surprise when the VTSP-2 promptly blew the HL-1 into the weeds. Now, nothing else had changed apart from one thing: cables, partnering amps and supports were all identical, as were the source components (Wadia 861SE and Kuzma Stabi XL/Airline and Lyra Titan). The one difference was the arrival of the Nola Pegasus, a speaker with greater bandwidth ▶



It's a potent combination that punches well above its weight.

Turning instead to a worst case scenario, in this instance the KR Audio Antares (which is rather too similar in overall balance)

Believe me, this is a very good "worst case" indeed. Which tells us that the HL-1 represents that rarest of beasts, a full-facilities pre-amplifier that manages to sound excellent without costing a fortune. In fact, in sales terms, its greatest weakness might well be that it is so un-flashy and undemonstrative, exactly the areas in which the Linear A helps out. Add in the option of a very good, switchable



and even with a set-up that might be considered to provide rather too much of a few good things, the HL-1 manages to keep things together. Not as spectacularly and obviously successful as with the Linear A, listen longer and you realise that the Herron/KR combination actually only loses out in terms of

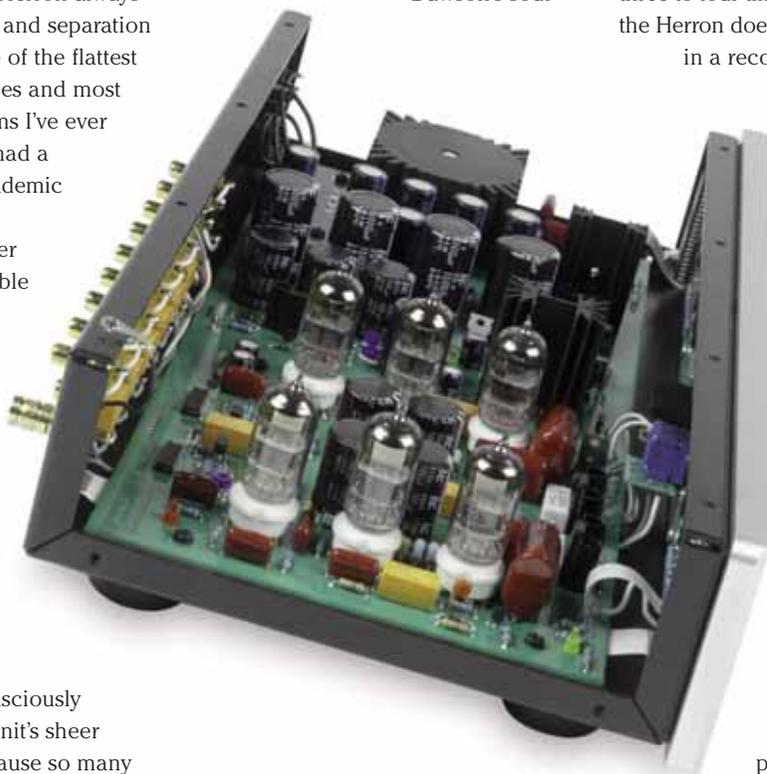
sensitivity internal phono-stage and you're looking at an audio bargain that delivers really solid musical values at a very realistic price, which places it in very select company indeed.

► and neutrality than the OBX-R2. This alone doesn't account for the change, although a swap back to the OBXs demonstrates that it makes it far more obvious. Instead, I can only conclude that the VTSP-2 has an unfeasibly long, undoubtedly inconvenient and unconscionably frustrating burn-in period. The only consolation is that the resulting performance is well worth the wait.

Whilst the tubed Herron always had detail, neutrality and separation to burn, allied to one of the flattest top to bottom balances and most even energy spectrums I've ever come across, it also had a restrained, almost academic stance that left music sounding rather matter of fact. As near invisible as any pre-amp I've used when it comes to tonal character, it simply seemed to lack the spark that fired music into life. Whilst I admired its positive qualities that ultimate shortcoming was easy to accept, perhaps even subconsciously associated with the unit's sheer accuracy, simply because so many super-accurate, super-flat pre-amps of the past have fallen at the very same hurdle.

Now though, the sound is very different indeed. The accuracy is there, as is the even-handed invisibility of the unit (accentuated by the increased bandwidth available from the Pegasus which underlines just how flat the VTSP-2 is, from very bottom to extreme top) but whereas before it was almost as if the pre-amp was standing astride the signal, subtly muting its dynamic expression and rhythmic windings, now it's as if it has simply stepped aside. Music

flows and pulses in an utterly natural and unrestrained way that brings performances to life, imbues instruments with energy and vibrance to fill out and illuminate their harmonic shades and structures. The bass goes deeper, with more weight and dynamic range, the mid-band is more transparent and focussed, cleaner and more immediate. The walking bass that underpins Steve Dawson's soul



homage 'Love Is a Blessing' is deep and mobile, the notes natural and tactile as they establish the funkier of grooves. The duet that centres the meltingly beautiful 'Sweet Is The Anchor' is effortlessly and deftly separated, drawing the last ounce of expression from its fragile delicacy, without disturbing or intruding on its almost telepathic inner balance.

And so the examples go, from the deepest bass, right through the mids and up to the highest treble, time and again instruments and voices take on a new independence and

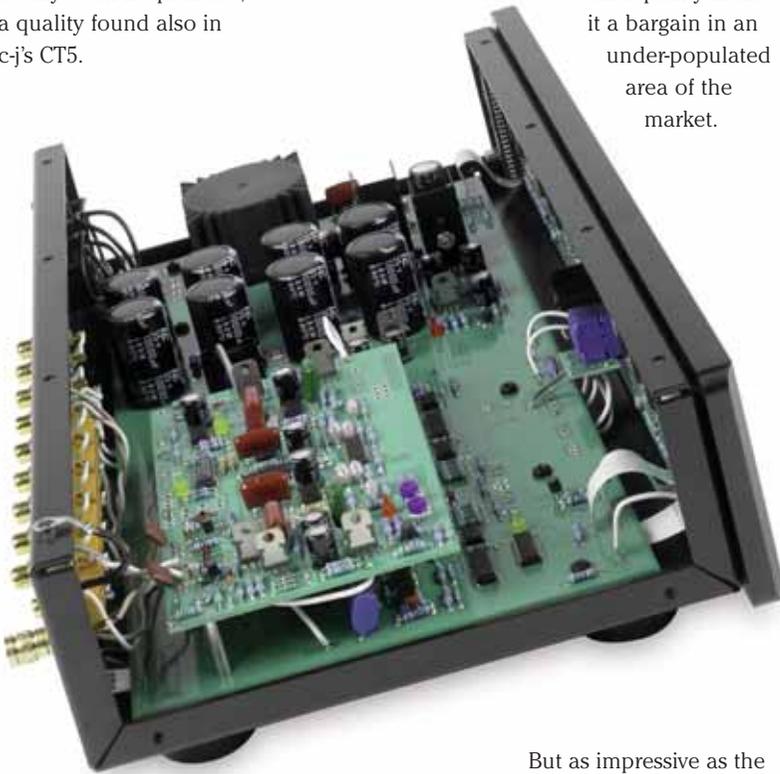
identity, almost as if the Herron pre-amp is freeing them from the constraints of the system and recording. I've heard this before from the Connoisseur 4.0, a line-stage that brings recordings close to reality. The Herron can't match the esoteric Japanese unit's presence intensity of energy and life, but then the Connoisseur can't match the VTSP-2's versatility or remote control and costs three to four times as much. But what the Herron does is allow the elements in a recording their own

identity, separate from the fabric that constitutes the sound. Or to put it another way, rather than presenting the music, which is constituted from these various instruments or voices, it delivers those instruments and voices and allows them together, to create the music. That might sound like a semantic nicety, but think about what it means. Suddenly, each player's intention and contribution is writ clear, his or her part in

the whole laid bare, whilst at the same time, the chemistry thus revealed keeps the whole greater than the sum of the parts. The results are impressive, engaging and informative in equal measure, allowing the listener full rein to explore the complexities or simply beauty, whatever the music. The holistic quality this brought to the music is shared by and proved spectacularly compatible with the RADIA, a combination that had sounded thin and bleached before ►

▶ the Herron's transformation. Now, the life and colour of the pre-amp seemed preserved by the power amp's articulate delicacy, creating music of breathtaking yet utterly unforced intimacy.

The best products have a sense of inner balance that keeps the music in proportion. That ruler flat top to bottom linearity and neutrality are built on the ability to project energy evenly at all frequencies, a quality found also in c-j's CT5.



The Herron can't match the sheer substance and vivid colours of the connie-j but it exceeds its resolution and separation as well as its instrumental textures, while the evenness of its more modest dynamic impact still allows it to project convincing dynamic shadings, swings and authority. Its naturalness extends to its stereo perspective, with broad spacing of images and convincing depth that suggests actual placement rather than a reconstructed acoustic. Once again we find the Herron

putting the music ahead of its means of reproduction.

These two units offer convincing yet contrasting performances that defy the presuppositions that attend their different technologies. The HL-1 is an engaging and entertaining performer that backs up its enthusiasm with a solid technical and operational basis. Its unusual combination of

versatility and honest sound quality make it a bargain in an under-populated area of the market.

But as impressive as the HL-1 undoubtedly is, there's a quality to the VTSP-2 that sets it apart as something really rather special. Its sonic invisibility allows the subtle textural details in a recording to emerge, delicate facets that let the music breathe, conjuring the instruments and singers to life. There's an immediacy and directness to performances, a lack of obstruction or interpretive fabric to distract or confuse the listener. For once, accuracy is not a dirty word. Just be aware that you'll need similarly fastidious ancillaries to enjoy the full compass of the VTSP-2's performance.

It's burgeoning reputation is well deserved, even if the reasons for it might not be immediately apparent on first acquaintance. ➤+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Herron HL-1

Type: Solid-state pre-amplifier
 Inputs: 6x line-level (RCA/phono)
 1x MM/MC phono (optional)
 Input Impedance: 100 kOhms
 Gain: 14dB
 44dB (MM, 47 kOhms)
 64dB (MC, 47kOhms)
 Outputs: 2x main out (RCA/phono)
 1x tape out (RCA/Phono)
 Output Impedance: 250 Ohms

Herron VTSP-2

Type: Vacuum-tube line-stage
 Tube Complement: 6x 6922
 Inputs: 6x line-level (RCA/phono)
 Input Impedance: 100 kOhms
 Gain: 14dB
 Outputs: 2x main out (RCA/phono)
 1x tape out (RCA/Phono)
 Output Impedance: 100 Ohms

Both

Dimensions (WxHxD): 458 x 89 x 267mm

Weight:

Finishes: Black or Silver

Prices:

VTSP-2 \$4995

HL1 \$3495 (\$4995 inc.

optional phono stage)

Manufacturer:

Herron Audio

Tel. (001) 314 434 5416

Fax. (001) 314 434 6629

Net. www.herronaudio.com