

Paul Seydor... "The Absolute Sound" (issue 125)

Placette Audio Preamplifier: Transparency, Transparency, Transparency

Guy Hammel is a man with an obsession and a mission: the obsession with transparency: the mission to build a better volume control. "The main thing I'm trying to communicate to people is the extreme importance of the volume control." If this seems a Quixotic mission at the time when the preamplifier as a component has all but disappeared from some systems, Hammel is quick to point out that despite two-volt outputs from CD players and DACs, the need for a preamplifier is "more related to the need for an accurate volume control. Accurate in the sense of not introducing non-linear distortions and in that it can track both channels at every possible volume setting, and still keep both right and left channels at exactly the same level."

Once the basics of circuitry have been addressed, volume pots, Hammel believes, are the primary culprits behind sonic degradation in most electronics. For several years, the material implementation of Hammel's mission has been a line of preamplifiers called Placette, that has acquired a substantial following made all the more impressive considering that in the beginning his advertising was small-ad only and his products had received no reviews. Placette's high reputation has been made almost entirely by word of mouth, through customers who've taken Hammel up on his 30-day, money-back guarantee home-trial, and elected to keep the product.

The line numbers three preamplifiers: a single-input, passive version Neil Gader reviewed in Issue 119, a three-input alternative of the same, and a fully active version¹. All are built around Vishay resistors, which Hammel advocates. Vishay is a manufacturer of high-quality electronic parts and components, among them the S102 bulk metal-foil resistor that, according to the Hammel, "presents an extremely low inductance load at audio frequencies and offers the easiest possible load that a source can ever drive into. The noise that is present in all resistors is very near the theoretical limit with Vishays, 20 to 40 dB below other types."²

The fully active Placette under consideration here employs a total of 50 Vishay resistors, 22 of which are used in the Class A amplification stages that make up the heart of each Placette preamplifier (it generates enough power to qualify as a small power amplifier, which, by the inclusion of a head-phone jack, it in effect is).³ The unit is direct-coupled (no output capacitors are employed) and has OFC wire in all signal paths. It is dual-mono almost with a vengeance: separate power supplies for each channel; left and right inputs and outputs on opposite sides of the chassis in a mirror-image array; relay switching to obviate the need for routing the signals through a large switch-assembly. There are additional power supplies for the remote receiver and for the control system. With an output impedance of 10 ohms at most audio frequencies, the Placette can drive any power amplifier with ease (including two at once) and is said to be essentially immune to the effects of any practical cable length (the longest Hammel has used for far is 30 meters!).

At \$4,000 the Placette is not inexpensive, but Hammel points out that no other preamplifier uses parts as expensive as his. Every Placette is hand-built and tested: "I buy Vishay resistors in batches of 13, enough to build as many volume pots. Then it takes one person two weeks to hand-trim the resistors for each batch." A standard Placette consists of two main outputs, one pair of tape outputs, and six high-level inputs.⁴ The CD input and one of the main outputs come wired with OFC jacks. The stock unit is single-ended because Hammel believes there is absolutely no practical benefit to balanced configurations. The remote control is an after-market Sony unit that, while not especially high-tech looking, is both functional and powerful (I had no trouble operating the preamp at any reasonable distance and angle).

Because each Placette is handmade, Hammel can offer a number of custom options. Those who feel strongly about balanced Placette at a hefty 1.8 times the standard cost (it gets you a true balanced circuit, not the adapter-behind-an-XLR-connector that is often billed as balanced). Though there is no balance control - "once you have a volume control that tracks this accurately, you don't need one," he says - he can modify the remote to provide one; ditto for mono selection. For an additional \$40 a pair, any additional jacks can be OFC.

¹ Hammel gives full list-price credit on either of the passive units, assuming they're in unblemished condition, in a trade-up toward the flagship model.

² For more information visit Vishay's website at www.vishay.com

³ There are few better ways to drive headphones than through a Placette.

⁴ One of these is designated "phono", but for convenience of nomenclature only; it's really a high-level input.

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For someone as obsessed with low noise and transparency as Hammel, he surprised me by his inclusion of a remote, given the kind of noise relays are said to radiate. Not for nothing have designers at Levinson and McIntosh begun putting the switching and remote receivers into separate enclosures from the audio circuitry. Hammel, though, has taken a different, rather novel approach. The remote operates the relay only, which in turn selects the combination of resistors that determines level; the receiver itself remains in an analog sleep mode, awakening only when you instruct it to perform a new task. Once the task is carried out, it reverts to sleep mode. Nifty.⁵

The unique volume arrangement will not be to all tastes. Volume is controlled by combinations of resistors. There are 126 discrete steps that, with one caveat, permit as fine a resolution of volume as you could ask. Level is visually indicated by a column of LEDs on the face of the preamplifier; next to this column is a toggle switch that lets you make gross adjustments at the chassis, but the full 126 steps are accessible only via the remote. As you press the volume up or down, each step is announced with a small click. The top LED is red; when this is reached, the yellow LEDs start reading from the bottom again, only now indicating a correspondingly higher level. This sounds more complicated than it proves in use, which turned out to be surprisingly intuitive and quick to grasp. Still, I have friends who love the sound of the preamplifier but find the operation of the volume control annoying.

More serious is the Placette's lack of fine volume adjustment at the first few settings (which drives my wife crazy). The first stop up from silence is entirely too large, and the next couple of steps after that offer less fine gradations than I would like. Keep in mind, however, that the levels I am talking about here are far lower than those at which normal listening would occur. Still, if you like to listen late at night, it could be a concern. Hammel makes an outboard pair of male/female connectors he calls "Snubbers" that use more resistors to attenuate the overall output. He also says the design has some latitude to tailor the output to the individual sensitivities of most power amplifiers. Given the 30-day home trial, prospective buyers will have more than enough time to see if either option is necessary in their system.

Otherwise, I am delighted to report that this volume control is altogether an amazing invention. At anything above a super-quiet level, it offers the finest resolution of output than any I know. It's not until you've enjoyed tracking this precise that you realize how often you've put up with shall channel-to-channel imprecisions as settings vary. About all I wish is that Hammel would consider replacing his stacked LEDs with a numerical read-out à la Levinson or Sim Audio, so that any given level can be returned quickly just by referencing a number.

The Placette is rather plain Jane: strictly utilitarian black case, nothing to impress the polished chrome-and-brass crowd. The expense has gone inside, in the quality of parts and hand assembly. And there are niceties that are not immediately apparent: The unit comes supplied with Sorbothane feet; the circuitboards are mounted on Sorbothane and granite; the wiring is given an epoxy coating to minimize vibration and other movement; and various damping compounds are used elsewhere. (Hammel is big on isolation via damping, as opposed to hard, pointed feet.) A nice touch is a back-panel switch that allows the ground to be floated: Hammel is as obsessed with vanishingly low noise and hum as he is with transparency. "It must be perfect," he says, and once traveled Boise, Idaho to Seattle when a Placette owner couldn't eliminate a ground loop. Hammel guarantees each unit absolutely for ten years and has not found any instances of adjustments going awry in the field. Customer satisfaction appears to be extremely high.

So what does this thing sound like? To be brief, under circumstances that I can control or am otherwise familiar with, I haven't heard a better preamplifier than the Placette. Whether its transparency is owing to the 50 Vishay resistors, the unique volume configuration, the extra mechanical damping, or all of these, I cannot say, but is unquestionably there. I directly compared it to at least four other preamplifiers (by Quicksilver, Bryston, Electrocompaniet, and Plinius) and the only one that came close to holding its own was the Plinius (a relatively inexpensive older model that, alas, is no longer made). It's a cliché to say that veils are lifted, but they really are lifted.

⁵ Hammel also says that "because all of our internal wiring is configured as twisted pairs, it is very immune to radiated noise and crosstalk. Besides, noise can be radiated from the control wires coming in and out of the box, so twisted-pair wiring is much more important than shielding. Also, we use separate power supplies for the controller and another for the rest of the control system. But the important thing here is that these are the quietest preamps available today, with a noise at the outputs of about 1.4 to 1.8 microvolts."

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I heard details in Jacintha's "Danny Boy" [Groove Note GRV2001-2] that are obscured or missing on other systems. For example, when the singer swallows. On some systems you're scarcely aware she's swallowed at all; on others, you hear her swallow and that's it; through the Placette you can tell that her mouth is getting dry. (I leave the question of the musical relevance of this sort of thing to others; the point is, it's in the recording.) Tonally, it's difficult to catch out most really good solid-state units these days, and the Placette is no exception. Perhaps by temperament I am resistant to reviewing electronic components by dividing up the frequency spectrum; this seems to me essentially false to the way we listen to music. If a specific frequency area calls attention to itself, even in the most alluring way, it tends to prove irritating over the long run. The Placette has some of the most refined delicate, and utterly silken reproduction of high frequencies that has ever graced any system of mine. On Andrew Lawrence-Kings harps and psaltery on Bitter Ballads [Harmonia Mundi USA 907204], every note is clear, distinct, and easily differentiated, while details of ambience are immediately available and audible. At the other end of the spectrum, bass is truly subterranean, as solid as you please (go to the "Landscape" movement of Vaughan Williams' Seventh [Naxos 8.550737]). The midrange is present, neutral, and - again - transparent. But such divisions are, finally, anti-music; suffice it to say that the top-to-bottom sonic character of the Placette is seamless, as it should be.

There is also a remarkable stability under dynamic conditions: When the going gets loud, the Placette really hangs in there with that difficult-to-define sense of both control and ease. There's a spectacular new recording of the Mahler First from Telarc [CD-80545] in which Yoel Levi drives the Atlanta Symphony to truly fearsome climaxes that the Placette takes in stride. Nothing ever feels strained or pushed. Soundstaging and imaging are stable; I sense no artifacts that I can attribute to the unit itself, which is another way of saying that the characteristics of the presentation vary with changes in recording and other equipment. Indeed, I find it difficult to come up with anything that I can even describe. No grain, no glare, no peaks, valleys, bumps, or grinds up and down the spectrum. Put on a bland source, get a bland sound; put on a colorful source - Levine's MET Straus disc [DG 447 762-2], for example - and colors are splashed all over your walls; play St. John's Christmas album [Chandos CHAN 8485] and, in "Jesus Christ the Apple Tree," you hear the austere purity of a boys' and men's choir which appears to be two rows deep and set slightly back; switch to any Anonymous Four disc and four separate voices in exemplary blend away, changes in recording venue immediately audible. And Dusty Springfield singing "The Look of Love" in Mike Hobbs' superb DAD Casino Royale transfer [Classic 24/96 /dad 1033] is right there in the room. When the sax comes in, look out - it's with a leap!

Is the Placette for everyone? Probably not. One friend tried it and just did not like the way the volume control worked; another felt the unit was way too plain - for his \$4,000, he wanted something that looked and felt a whole lot sexier. There is no other component that day-in, day-out gets more use than a preamplifier. If you've got one, then - rather like the steering wheel in your automobile - you use it every time you operate the system, so you better make sure you like the way it sounds, how it feels to the touch, how intuitively you find the layout of its controls, how convenient its features.

The nice thing is that Placette's marketing strategy gives you time and opportunity to make up your mind. But there is more than just generosity in Hammel's strategy. True missionary that he is, he's betting that the Placette's transparency will make converts of us all. He may be right, because this is one unit that gets more addicting the longer you use it. I know; I've been "evaluating" it for over a year now, and while some other pieces have come and gone, this one somehow seems to remain, far from glamorous, an ugly duckling. But on Ella singing "Do Nothing 'Til You Hear from Me" or the Emerson Quartet in Beethoven's Opus 132, and just see if that duckling doesn't become a swan.

PAUL SEYDOR

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