

BOUND FOR SOUND

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Reprint

Martin G. DeWulf - Publisher

Sonogy Cantata™ Power Amplifier

Amplifiers are wonderful things. Stoic, silent, bereft of controls, and hopefully powerful, your amplifier faces the near impossible task of not only amplifying an extremely complex waveform, but it also has to power a loudspeaker with that same delicate waveform amid an onslaught of wildly fluctuating amounts of resistance, capacitance and inductance. A great amplifier is part ballet dancer and part NFL lineman; it's smooth, delicate, fast - strong, powerful, rugged. A wonderful amplifier is all of these things without ever calling attention to such attributes. And while it may be all these things, with a wonderful amplifier you don't hear smooth, delicate, fast, strong, powerful, rugged . . . you hear music. Music without active distractions, without annoyances, appearing perfect even though it's not.

As little as three years ago wonderful amplifiers were also extremely expensive amplifiers, costing 6, 8, 10 or more thousand dollars. Today we are fortunate; for the sound and musical accuracy obtainable at \$10,000 just a few years ago is now available for around \$2000, sometimes less. In our midst is a new generation of products which so outdistance their predecessors that it may ultimately require a new vocabulary to replace the hackneyed and worn out phrases so relied upon today.

Of these new, wonderful amplifiers, the Sonogy Cantata is a member. In retrospect, the Kaye XL-280 amplifier reviewed many months ago might have been considered a harbinger of what was to come in terms of wonder amps now, and a most worthy charter member of this most wonderful class of electronics. The question then comes to mind: Are there any other amplifiers in this class? I would put the Krell KST-100 in the group, as I would the Parasound 2200, but for much different reasons. I suspect that the Coda 10 would qualify, though I can't say for sure due to the abbreviated audition of it. If tested today,

theMuse 150 might also qualify as I suspect the McCormack DNA and Bryston 4B would, though I haven't had listening time with either of them yet.

USE AND BUILD. Ample heatsinks are located on the sides of the amp leaving the entire back panel open for neat things like inputs and speaker terminals. The Sonogy has the unusual distinction of being the first amp known to me to have the standard complement of RCA jacks and only one XLR for balanced operation! The reasoning behind the lone XLR is really quite elegant, it being; hooking the Sonogy to a balanced preamp via the XLR jack results in full mono operation of the amp without sonic compromise. 85 wpc in stereo turns into 340 (!!!) wpc in mono with no additional circuitry. Since the amp is unconditionally stable into any load above an ohm, bridged operation into mono is a cinch. I can't tell you how effortless the sound becomes when operated in that fashion, even at low output levels.

This amp uses bi-polar amplifying devices throughout, employing 6 Motorola output devices per channel. This is a high bias class A/B amp that uses no negative feedback, no nested loops, no global networks, no feedback anywhere. No wonder it images like crazy and resolves low level information to the furthest recesses of the stage. Internal layout is truly modular, meaning that you don't need a tech-man to easily pull out the pre-driver cards to have them fixed or upgraded. One last construction note: You'll find three transformers in each Sonogy amplifier, a large input toroidal and one smaller transformer per channel for the pre-driver cards. These smaller transformers allow the Sonogy's designer (Daryl Kubicki) to boost and fine tune the voltage in any way that he desires. This use of high voltage here is reminiscent of many of the finer tube designs, including the Kaye XL-280 which uses a donut toroid to power its tube pre-driver section. Hey boys and girls, I sense a trend here and a correlation with good sound.

SPEAKING OF GOOD SOUND. This amp is so very nice to listen to. After a full four weeks of burn-in, the sound was truly full range without grain or grunge, almost tube-like, but with real guts and extension in the bottom octaves. In case you haven't guessed, I'm becoming a real believer when it comes to bi-polar amps in the bass and midrange. In addition to the Sonogy - Krell, Coda and Parasound all use bi-polar output devices, and each one of these amplifiers have phenomenal power and extension without being bloated or loose in the door rattlin' range. The only mos-fet based amp that I know of that can even come close to these guys is the Muse 150 and Counterpoint SA-220; and that's it. Regardless of what you hear about the superiority of fets and tubes, a good bi-polar amp is still tough to beat.

Stage perspective . . . what's that you say? Some reviewer talk about stage perspective as being "up front", "recessed" or in terms of "rows of audience". I was never exactly sure of what the proper perspective should be, after all, shouldn't home electronics merely reflect microphone placement in the recording venue? And shouldn't that be dependent upon the software being used? Nonetheless, some products do seem to have a signature in this regard, wherein all recordings seem up front, recessed or whatever. When I heard the Cantata I immediately knew that it had gotten this aspect of music reproduction as nearly perfect as any amp I had ever heard; floating vocals and instruments on the soundstage with a naturalness and precision that was right, if only because it seemed right. That's the only way that I know of to describe it; it just feeeels right.

I mentioned a tubey quality before, a quality that no doubt results from the overall lack of grain. This lack of grain and glare may compel some to complain that the amp is dark sounding. I don't believe that it's dark (the slightest bit warm, maybe). I think that it basically refuses to veneer everything that goes through it with a silvery sheen that masquerades as highlighting or detailing. Nor does it add the mist so often associated with mos-fet amps. No, the Cantata strikes me as being extremely transparent in this regard, and for that reason this amp often begs to be listened to for hours on end without making its presence an issue. This is a wonderful amplifier.

But . . . it's not perfect. Once area that could stand some improvement is the highs. (A strength of many mos-fets

and tubes.) Up on top the Sonogy is extended and it sounds very clean, but it can lack some delicacy here and it really never sounds wispy. But hey, what would the guys at Sonogy do if they got it right the first time out? Anyway, the highs are articulate enough not to draw attention to themselves, and only after listening to the Musical Designs amp did I notice anything askew at all.

Imaging? We've talked about that already, but I want to reiterate this amp's ability to open up clear ambient space between the notes in ways that can really humble the competition, including the high price spread.

CONCLUSION. At \$1995, the Sonogy Cantata is capable of competing one-on-one with the likes of Madrigal, Coda, Threshold, Krell and Audio Research. A choice between these products and the Sonogy may be more a weighing of subtleties than an outright declaration of "better". It's like that when you are dealing with a class of truly fine products. Still, each will have its fervent proponents declaring the others to be little more than belches from a healthy Klingon after a big meal. But do you really believe that?

Short of going into the mono mode, I would like to see the Sonogy have a little more power. There's a lot of current here, but 85 wpc an still leave you aching for more with some loudspeakers, in some situations. In terms of flat out power, the Coda 10 and the Krell KST-100 both have more muscle, and the Parasound 2200 has even more power still. I would also like to see a second set of speaker terminals for ease in bi-wiring. For me the lack of a second set of posts is a real liability. Look for a preamp soon, and in an upcoming issue, we will talk about the Sonogy Duette Balancing Module.

Underline added for emphasis

Out thanks to the staff of

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 **Sonogy**TM
*"The delicacy of tubes.
The authority of transistors."*