

SoundStage! Equipment Review - Jeff Rowland Design Group Model 112 Amplifier (2/2001)

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Jeff Rowland Design Group Model 112 Amplifier

by Todd Warnke



Review Summary

Sound	"Slightly laid-back" and "a tad less warm than the classic Rowland sound"; "lean...by just the slightest measure" from the top of the bass to the middle of the mids"; "transparent to power needs," meaning the "112 jumps without shrinking the stage or altering the tonal balance."
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Features	Offers 150Wpc as well as RCA and XLR input jacks; Cardas binding posts are "easy to use and tighten."
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Use	A striking conversation piece that runs cool due to the use of the chassis as heatsinks for the output devices.
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Value	"An amp for people who appreciate quality, will pay for it, and then settle down for the long run with their choice."
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Take an honest look at your system. Chances are it's big and visually dominates the room it's in. While those things are not necessarily bad, the fact that it may be ugly too is. Sure, if you turn the lights down, squint, and repeat Louis Sullivan's dictum, "form follows function" long enough, your audio system begins to look...well...functional. But beautiful? Sure, just like Phyllis Diller was to her mom.

Why this look? Because we are hair-shirt ascetics, and in order to enjoy the virtue of musical ecstasy we must endure the vice of visual sloth, one sense paying for the other's joy. Perhaps this why the Jeff Rowland Design Group receives so much criticism about the appearance and size of its casework. The audiophiles who do so, I call them Shaker-philes because they associate aesthetics with morality, besides

committing the cliché of allowing the cover to detour them from book, also miss the reasoning behind the Rowland design ethos.

Take the Model 112 amplifier for example. While massive, if not quite to the proportions of earlier amps, it makes *sense*. The output devices are mounted directly to the chassis, so the entire amp is used as a heatsink. With so much mass acting as the sink, the thermal environment is inherently and extremely stable. Run hard the amp heats up, but only slightly. This leads to a very stable output as well as a device that has a long life. In turn, this superb thermal linearity leads to greater measured linearity, and that contributes to the Rowland sound -- a tube-like warmth coupled with solid-state drive, control, extension and detail. This, truly, is form following function. As for the fine metalwork, Rowland looks at it much as any true artisan does -- once you've started the job, finish it off right. Sure, it costs more, but doing anything right costs more -- more time, more effort, more skill, more thought, more money. But the result has greater durability and brings greater joy. In the end, this was what Sullivan meant by form following function, that a thing should be both intelligently designed *and* well built. And while Sullivan might have a slight issue with the décor of the jewel-like finish of the faceplate, he would certainly have embraced the thought behind the functional massiveness and minute attention to every detail.

Enough with the physical and metaphysical. Let's get the review housekeeping out of the way and then dig into to the aural aesthetics of this box.

Built like a ...

The Model 112 shares many features with its upscale siblings, the Model 10 and the Model 12. The top of the line 12 is a two-chassis mono amp with one chassis holding the power supply, for a total of four chassis per stereo setup . Likewise, the Model 10 is a two-chassis stereo amp with one chassis holding the power supply. Finally, the Model 112 is a single-chassis stereo amp. All three amps share chassis styles as well, so each is 17.5"W and 11.7"D. The Model 10 and Model 12 chassis are 3.1" tall, while the Model 112, which holds both power supply and circuitry, is 5.2" tall. Each chassis is machined from solid aluminum with a cutout for the front and rear plates. The front and top plates sport the customary Rowland shiny, milled surface, while the rest of the chassis is finished in a softer tone, except for the rear plate which is finished in black. The top plate has a cutout that grasps the front and rear plates firmly and is bolted to the chassis quite securely. Finally, the chassis has what looks to be hand holds on each side, and in fact that is how I used them. But in reality they are the mounting points for the output devices. This allows for greater air circulation while providing excellent protection.

Inside, the Model 112 uses six 150-watt output devices per channel. The power

supply is in a sub-chassis and isolated from the rest of the amp. Layout is as perfect a marriage of art and technology as I have ever seen: clean, massive, obsessive. Power output is 150 watts into 8 ohms and 275 into 4. Gain is selectable: 26dB (standard) or 32dB.

On the back, the Model 112 has two sets of inputs, one single-ended and one balanced. Each channel has a separate switch, located between the input jacks, to select the RCA or XLR. Speaker posts, a pair per channel, are the exceedingly cool Cardas numbers. I have these on my



Merlin speakers as well and love them. They are easy to use and tighten. Up front there is a small round power button, located center-bottom and flush-mounted. Immediately below it is a smaller but bright amber power indicator.

Yes, this thing is solid, inside and out. It's built like a brick ...ah...tank. But it's also built with a watchmaker's sense of detail, which would make it the first Patek Philippe Abrams tank, were there such a thing. Lastly, the Rowland website has a tremendous amount of information and white papers on the details of the entire line and is worth looking up if you want more technical information than my very brief overview provides.

Sounds like ...

Over the course of the review I used the Model 112 with a variety of speakers, starting with a two-month stint driving Wisdom Audio M-50s. The amp also spent time with the Silverline SR15, Greybeard KB/2/1 and the tried-and-true Merlin VSM-SE. The Rowland amp received signal, via balanced interconnects, from the Wisdom Audio Active Brain crossover and an Atma-Sphere MP3 preamp, and via single-ended interconnects from my Lamm LL2 and a Conrad-Johnson Premier 17LS.

Regardless of upstream or downstream partners, the first impression of the Model 112 was of unlimited power. Let me modify that a bit; rather than the sensation of power pulsing behind the coils of Cardas wire, the Model 112 simply felt transparent to power needs. Ask for the silk glove of half a watt during a late-night spin of the Harold Budd/Brian Eno ambient masterpiece *The Pearl* [EG Records EEGCD 37] or ask for the iron fist it takes to control a full-volume session with Tony Williams' last project, Arcana's *Arc of the Testimony* [Axiom 314-524 431-2], and each is presented as if the amp had been made expressly for that purpose. No matter what I tried, the Model 112 remained completely composed and completely up to the task.

Another way to describe the power of the Model 112 is with the word *natural*. On large dynamic swings, at low or high volumes, the 112 *jumps* without shrinking the stage or altering the tonal balance. I love to use "Man From Monterey" from the Dizzy Gillespie album *With Gil Fuller and Monterey Jazz Festival Orchestra* [Blue Note CD-80370] as a dynamic torture test. When the massed horns jump, most amps flinch, but not this one. It kept its composure and kept the music flowing. In this respect, it was better than anything I've heard here at the Warnke Nordic Ski and Music Hut.

Tonally, the Model 112 is a tad less warm than the classic Rowland sound, and that can be a good thing. Starting at the bottom, the 112 has full, deep and articulate bass. I spent tens of hours listening to the Jacques Loussier Trio play Erik Satie [Telarc CD-83431] just to hear the acoustic bass of Benoit Dunoyer de Segonzac as he plucks, stretches and bends notes. An overly warm amp will obscure the finesse and speed of de Segonzac, while a thin amp will miss the impact and drama of his instrument. The Model 112 is neither.

On the other hand, from the top of the bass to the middle of the mids, the Rowland is lean, but by just the slightest measure. I'm going to risk the elitist label by saying that the difference is so small that unless you are very intimate with the sound of live music, it's very difficult to detect. I play at playing the piano, and with that as my touchstone, when listening to the aforementioned Jacques Loussier set with the Model 112 in use, I don't hear quite the same wood-to-string ratio as when I play, with just a slight emphasis on string tone. I wouldn't mention this if this were the only recording with which I heard this effect, but after hearing it here first, I heard it elsewhere as well. But keep in mind that this is a very subtle tonal shift and one that took me quite awhile and several speakers to confidently and repeatedly lay a finger on.

Moving up, the treble range was extended, smooth and detailed. Cymbals were full with just the right mix of sparkle and sheen, while overtones of piano, trumpet, sax flute and piccolo were rendered in full texture but without edge, grain or fatigue. Detail, like the dynamic skills of the Model 112, is presented very naturally, with the etched, dry, false emphasis that is the downfall of so many solid-state amps nowhere to be heard. Whether listening to vinyl, CD or even FM radio, I discerned musical information as opposed to pure sonic data. In absolute terms, I have heard better detail extraction with other amps, and I suppose that's why Rowland has the Model 10 and Model 12 amps in the line, but I never felt I was missing anything while the Model 112 was playing.

As for staging, this thing renders images that stay 100% in place. Crank the volume and the stage stays put, no running forward to take a solo, no wandering, nothing but rock-solid, layered stage. And a stage that spreads beyond the speakers and

waaaaay back as well. The front of the stage was almost always behind the speaker plane, offering a center-row perspective, but once you're in the seat, the stage stays set. With that depth, as you'd expect, the Model 112 has superb layering of instruments as well.

Other players

My two long-term solid-state reference amps are the 100-watt Warner Imaging VTE-201S and the 25-watt, single-ended, class-A hybrid (tubed input stage) Blue Circle BC6. These three amps along with the Rowland make an interesting set as they have overlapping skills, with no one cornering the market.

The Warner has tremendous power and an immediate emotionality. It goes almost as deep as the Rowland, and offers almost as much detail in spite of being a tad warmer across the midband. The Blue Circle has exceptional refinement and an engaging sense of involvement. While it can't woof with the other two, it still goes plenty deep and defines bass with superb nuance. Yes, it boogies, but only so loudly. It also offers the greatest amount of detail of the group. Lastly, the Rowland has the refinement of the Blue Circle paired with the oomph of the Warner. While not impeding emotions, unlike the other two amps, it doesn't bring them to the fore either. This is a combination that can sound polite, especially if the rest of the system tends that direction. But if not, it is also a very nice combination of traits to have on hand. Sure-footed and powerful, the Rowland will take you anywhere the music points.

Final analysis

In all, the Rowland Model 112 is the definition of jewel-like mass. Everything about it is designed with careful thought, attention to detail, and with a music-lover's heart. The tonal response -- full, accurate, but tight and extended on bottom; mids that are detailed if just a whisper lean; highs that are extended, sweet, detailed and grain-free -- leads to hours of inviting, fatigue-free listening. The limitless power of the Model 112 allows listening to anything, from after-hours ambient to full-scale orchestra. Sonic cues and musical detail are ample, if not quite to the level of the super amps (and Rowland has several of those to offer you should you have the budget). And the Model 112 presents a stage that is wide, deep and stable. All this combines to create a slightly laid-back character that makes for an easy long-term partner.

This is an amp that's exquisitely honed to do a difficult job with unflappable control. It never runs out of steam, it goes all the way to the bottom of the musical scale with as complete composure as it goes to the top. It digs deep into a recording and delivers the goods without edge or glare. Add in a design that simply beautiful and

you have an amp for people who appreciate quality, will pay for it, and then settle down for the long run with their choice.

...Todd Warnke

todd@soundstage.com

Jeff Rowland Design Group Model 112 Amplifier

Price: \$5000 USD.

Warranty: Five years parts and labor.

Jeff Rowland Design Group

P.O. Box 7231

Colorado Springs, CO 80933-7231

Phone: (719) 473-1181

Fax: (719) 633-4158

E-mail: jrdg@jeffrowland.com

Website: www.jeffrowland.com