

High Quality Headphone Amp

A Sophisticated Class-A design by J. Linsley-Hood

LISTENING with headphones offers a curious mixture of advantages and limitations which is not always apparent on initial acquaintance. On the credit side, properly designed headphones can have a bass response substantially better than can be obtained in a normal-sized living room, where the loading characteristics of the enclosed volume of air make it increasingly difficult for a conventional loudspeaker system to generate true low frequency pressure waves without substantial distortion. Also, again assuming proper design, the small mass of the driven diaphragm of the headphone and the absence of room reflections allows a cleaner and more transparent treble than can normally be achieved in the domestic environment. Finally, the absence, normally, of crossover networks and spatial incoherence between the transducers leads to a more uniform spectral distribution with headphones than is attainable with even the best of speakers.

On the debit side, the absence of any perceived sound field in which the listener is situated, and the occasionally unwelcome weight and restriction in movement imposed by headphones, tend to make prolonged listening through these a more artificial experience than through even a relatively inferior pair of loudspeakers.

From the point of view of the amplifier designer a different set of considerations exist, and these almost entirely favour the use of headphones—because of their light loading and often high load impedance—and make it possible to envisage simple amplifier designs free from the performance constraints implicit in the nature of higher power systems. This freedom from the need to accept some degree of performance compromise, if coupled with a phono preamplifier of appropriate quality, can reveal unsuspected nuances and subtleties of detail in ostensibly familiar recordings which can be quite astonishing on first experience.

I recall two instances of this type during trials of an RIAA/headphone-amp, made as a Christmas present for a friend, both with recordings I thought I knew well. In one of these I could distinctly hear someone, perhaps the conductor, periodically turning over the pages of his score, and in the other, on a well liked and frequently played disc, one could distinctly hear, about half-way through the second side, the noise of a music stand falling to the floor, accompanied by a muttered 'Oh d... n'. (Presumably neither the producer nor the engineers responsible for this disc had heard this on replay, or it would have been removed on editing.)

So, wearing my amplifier designer's hat, I feel that the benefits which can accrue to the use of good and well designed headphones (and these benefits are substantial) will only be partly realised if they are hung on the back end of a power amplifier whose design has mainly been optimised to provide large powers, safely, to low impedance loads.

Design of headphone amplifier

There is a considerable, and justifiable, interest at the present time in the fact that similarly specified power amplifiers can sound different to one another. This is more surprising to the layman than it is to the amplifier designer, who knows the performance compromises which have been made in the design, both as a result of the impossibility of reconciling mutually conflicting design requirements, and as the result of commercial pressures to keep costs down. Naturally, the designers (some of whom are mainly in it for the money) are not going to admit that their achievements are in any way short of perfection, but nevertheless this is the sad truth. The actual sound of the unit then reflects, to a degree which depends on the perceptiveness of the listener and the quality of his reproduction environment, the nature of the balance of compromises chosen by the designer.

I note, with some regret, that I am still 'out on a limb' in my choice of the order of importance of defects, in relation to my co-workers in this field, and it is therefore pleasant to be able to put together a circuit design which not only satisfies the conventionally chosen (and to my mind largely irrelevant) performance requirements, but also, to a fuller extent than normally feasible in a high power design, the requirements which I think to be musically desirable.

These are, not necessarily in precise order

of importance: the absence from the distortion component residues of the amplifier of any significant amount of high-order (7th, 9th, 11th, etc) harmonics, particularly when these are of 'odd' order; the absence of the intermodulation products due to these high-order components, particularly when these arise from discontinuities in the transfer characteristics of the amplifier around the central (low signal level) regions; the complete absence of glitches, overshoots and 'hang-ups' in the transient response, especially on reactive load (*ie*, real-life) conditions; the absence of significant slew-rate limiting and transient intermodulation effects, again particularly when these arise on real-life type loads (as distinct from the artificial, laboratory-type, loads on which systems are so often specified and reviewed); and the absence of any load-induced or shock-excited instability—be it never so fleeting in duration—arising from the incautious use of excessive feedback bandwidth in the pursuit of impressive high frequency THD figures. To these prohibitions I would add, in a more positive sense, a plea for a rapid 'turn-on' time, to avoid loss of desirable signal detail, a rapid 'settling' time, as a measurable guarantee of good transient response, and a square-wave reactive load response which is smooth and does not add to the transient energy.

This is a fairly formidable 'shopping list', which is not met by any commercial amplifier within my knowledge to an extent which I would regard as adequate, especially in respect of reactive-load transient behaviour. The things which are often found and, I think, only of value in impressing the gullible, are THD values at 15 or 20 kHz of the order of 0.1% or less (and I've never found anyone who could hear the second harmonic of 20 KHz, let alone the third) and S/N ratios of 70 dB or more, referred to a relatively low-level signal. Quite apart from the fact that there is virtually no readily available programme source which could match this specification, to make use of it would demand a dynamic range which is currently beyond our grasp.

The purpose of this homily is not simply to provide me with an opportunity for grumbling at the state of contemporary amplifier design (although I do admit that it is enjoyable to do so), but to indicate the nature and extent of the problems which are there, so that one might more clearly see the ways by which the low power requirements of the typical headphone untie the hands of the designer. In particular, the relatively low power demands of the headphone allow the use of a Class -A design, and this can, moreover, be of a

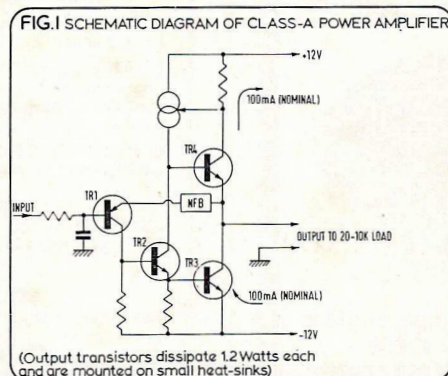
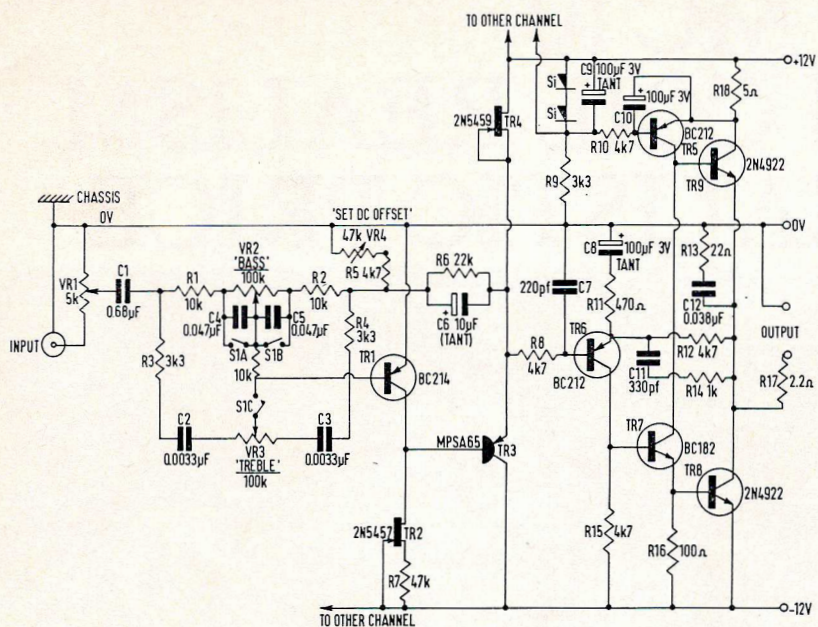


FIG. 2 HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER (LEFT-HAND CHANNEL SHOWN)



NOTE: Switch S1A, S1B, S1C is a tone control 'cancel' facility

single-ended, rather than 'push-pull' configuration. The use of Class-A completely eliminates the high odd-order harmonics which it is so difficult to remove fully and permanently from Class-B, and the avoidance of the conventional push-pull layout ensures both that such harmonics as do remain will be low order and 'even', and that the bends in the transfer characteristic are well away from the central 'small-signal' region. This, in turn, leads to a much more favourable distribution of the steady-state intermodulation products, with an associated transparency of tonal quality seldom otherwise attained.

In addition to this, the fundamental linearity of the Class-A system permits the use of much lower orders of negative feedback for a given THD level. While NFB is not, of itself, a bad thing, the use of it in large amounts does require a great deal of care in design—it is, in truth, the electronic engineer's tight-rope—and it does impose a number of restrictions in respect of the high frequency loop characteristics, which can only be solved as a compromise in one way or another. If one can get away with less, so much the better, and so much the easier to achieve a good, fast, clean, transient response without penalties in THD or reactive-load behaviour.

Finally, the use of Class-A, with the output stages allowed to draw a substantial, and largely constant amount of current permits, in the case of transistors, both rapid small-signal turn-on times (because the transistors are operating under conditions in which the HF performance is not impaired) and also fast turn-off response (because to turn off the signal does not necessitate turning off the transistor, with all the complications arising from hole storage and carrier recombination). This gives a characteristic aural response only obtained with some difficulty by other means.

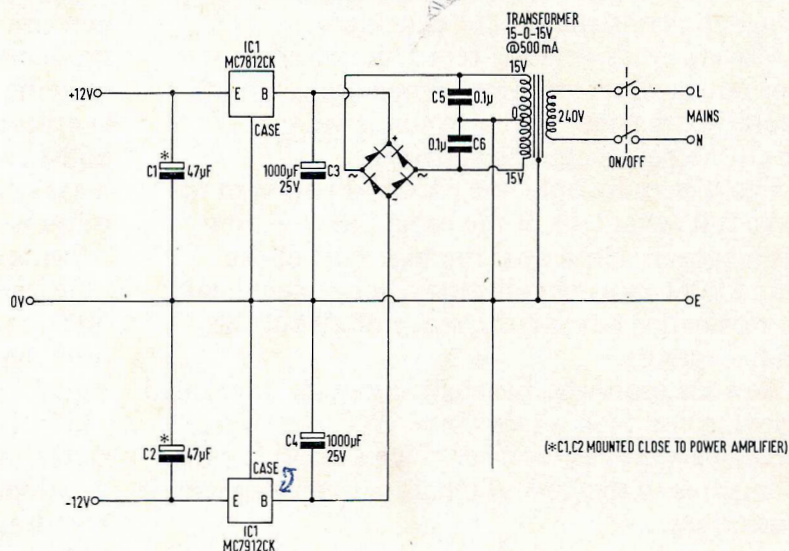
Circuit design

The circuit of the 'power' amplifier is shown in schematic form in fig. 1. This is basically a Class-A transistor amplifier stage (TR₂) driving an output emitter-follower (TR₄), which has an active emitter load (TR₃) also driven by TR₂. A constant-current source coupled to TR₄ serves both as a load for TR₂ and as a means of maintaining the output stage operating current at a constant mean value.

An input transistor amplifier (TR₁) serves to provide a somewhat larger loop gain and to restore the signal input level to near the '0 volt' line, since in this case it is intended to operate the amplifier in a direct-coupled form. Because all the transistors employed have high transition frequencies, and the loop stability—because of the very modest open-loop gain—is very high, no formal HF compensation, such as the ubiquitous and deplorable capacitor normally included between base and collector of the second amplifier stage (in this case TR₂) is necessary for stability. Consequently, neither slew-rate limiting of transients nor TID can occur. However, because it is neither necessary nor desirable that the amplifier should have a bandwidth extending into the MW radio band, an input CR integrating network is included in the amplifier, which gives a smooth roll-off in the HF response beyond 50 kHz. The closed-loop gain of the amplifier is also reduced from 10 (its low frequency value) to about 3 beyond this frequency by means of a step network connected across the feedback resistor. This is to minimise the risk of HF instability within the 'power' amplifier because of inadvertent proximity between output and input leads.

If all that is required is an amplifier having a 'flat' response, and an adequate power output to drive all normal headphones, the slider of the input gain control can be taken, via a suitable input capacitor-resistor network, directly to the input transistor (TR₁ in the complete circuit diagram). However, it was felt that some scope for tonal balance adjustment would increase the versatility of this design, and so a simple, but high quality, 'tone-control' circuit has been appended at the input. This is based on a Liniac arrangement, improved somewhat by the use of a p-n-p input transistor and a very high gain p-n-p Darlington emitter-follower with an

FIG. 3 CIRCUIT OF POWER SUPPLY FOR HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER



NOTE: IC1 and IC2 are TO3 type integrated-circuit Voltage regulators mounted directly on chassis

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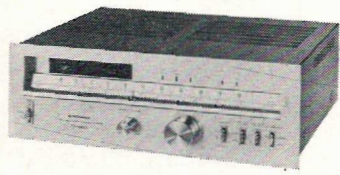
Pioneer gear

Three amplifiers, two tuners and the inevitable 'mini' system have been announced by Pioneer. The amps all feature what Pioneer call a 'Class-A non-switching' concept which uses a servo system to adjust the output transistors so that both the distortion levels and heat dissipation are minimised. The SA 9800 (£375) offers 100 W/channel and the SA 8800 (£285) 80 W. Both return a phono S/N ratio of 90 dB and overload of 250 mV plus a THD of 0.005% across 20 Hz-20 kHz. The SA7800 (£235) provides 65 W and phono S/N of 87 dB, overload 200 mV.

The matching tuners are the TX-9800 (£300) and TX-7800 (£225) which use 'two-loop locking systems' to eliminate frequency drift. The 9800 features a quartz-sampling system while the 7800 favours the servo-lock approach with ± 200 kHz capturing ability. Both

use touch sensors and have signal strength and centre tuning meters. Stereo S/N ratios are 79 dB and 77 dB and THD 0.07% and 0.08% respectively. Retail selling prices quoted are 'anticipated' only.

The mini system is believed to be the first to boast a cassette deck of the same dimensions as the other components. The CT-3000 has two Sendust heads and claims frequency ranges of 25 Hz-15 kHz (LH) or to 17 kHz (FeCr). Wow and flutter are below 0.05% WRMS and S/N with Dolby, 64 dB. The SA-3000 amp provides 40 W/channel for below 0.02% THD. The tuner, TX-3000 features a one-meter configuration to show both frequency and tuning. S/N ratio is 50 dB. The PL-3000 turntable combination is direct-drive with a separate motor for the fully automatic functions. Two speaker systems are offered, the CS-X2 two-unit and CS-X3 (three unit?). Prices not decided at time of writing.



Dolby dBs

Just as we go to press, news has reached us of a new device from Dolby labs. Not a noise reduction unit as such, it apparently enables an extra 10 dB of treble information to be squeezed onto ordinary (ie not metal) tape. The new circuit is being launched at the CES in Chicago and we will report in more depth as soon as we can.

Anyone for Dominus?

A magnetic cartridge equaliser/amplifier for semi-professional and hi-fi buffs is now available from Dominus, a Surrey based company. Developed from a design by Surrey Electronics and manufactured under licence, the Stereo Disc Amplifier 3 is a self contained, mains powered cartridge preamp offering switchable input parameters—resistance 22, 33, 47, 68 and 100 k with capacitance 50, 100, 150, 270 and 380 pF—to allow accurate matching with any moving magnet cartridge. Equalisation conforms to the IEC 98-4 recommendation and two outputs are provided—at 11 V and 2 V, capable of operating into 100 Ω and each channel adjustable

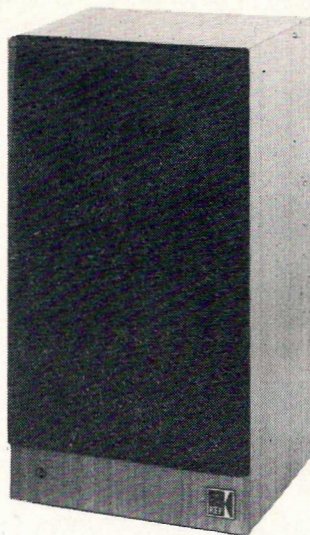
for gain. THD is typically below 0.008% across 20 Hz-20 kHz. Mu-metal shielding of the transformer helps to keep hum below the noise floor and switch-on muting is provided. The unit is also protected against RF breakthrough. Price is £165 inclusive and further details are obtainable from Dominus, PO Box 1, Cranleigh, Surrey.

Decca Cartridge

Due to a printing mishap, an editorial footnote appended to a reader's letter in last month's issue (p. 81) lost its meaning at one point because of a missing line. Lines 6/7 of the right-hand column should have read (in part): '... inferior at high modulations and performed badly compared with other cartridges ...'.

Hyper-Shure

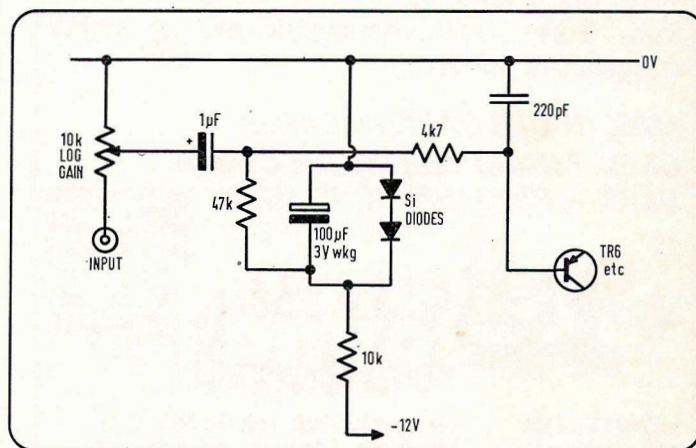
Shure have produced a new cartridge to head their 95 series. The M95HE uses the same hyperelliptical stylus as the V15/IV. Track at between $\frac{3}{4}$ and $1\frac{1}{2}$ grams at 47 k into 400-500 pF recommended load, it claims a minimum channel separation of 25 dB at 1 kHz and channel balance to within 2 dB. Price £36.60 plus VAT. Owners of existing M95s can upgrade by purchasing the N95HE stylus assembly for £22.50 plus VAT.



KEF 101

The KEF 101 is the third in their Reference Series, following on from the very successful 105. The new speaker is a sealed-box type, of 'bookshelf' dimensions, its internal volume being a mere 6.7 litres and it is a result of the same design concepts as the 105, undergoing a similar computer-aided matching and quality control regime. Two units are used, a B110 bass driver and the T27 Melinex domed HF unit, with a complex crossover network which maintains the nominal 8 ohms impedance. The bass driver is mounted on an 'anti-vibration gasket' which provides a degree of acoustic isolation from the enclosure, improving the low end performance. New on the 101 and to be fitted in future 105s is KEF's Steady State Overload Protection

(SSTOP), a self-powered electronic protection circuit which drastically attenuates the output level if the preset threshold voltage on either driver is exceeded. The circuit resets automatically. Frequency range is 90 Hz-30 kHz, ± 2 dB at 2 metres on the measuring axis (-10 dB at 47 Hz and 40 kHz). Directional characteristics: horizontal ± 2 dB of axial response up to 20 kHz for $\pm 20^\circ$; vertical ± 2 dB for $\pm 5^\circ$. Distortion: 2nd harmonic 1%, 120 Hz-20 kHz; 3rd 1%, 60 Hz-20 kHz (at 1 metre at mean spl of 90 dB, anechoic). Maximum output level is 98 dB spl on peaks. Dimensions are 340 x 180 x 190 mm with teak or walnut veneers. KEF 101s are sold in matched pairs and cost £160/pair exclusive.



A change of tone

In the text of his headphone amplifier design in January, John Linsley Hood mentioned the option of leaving out the tone controls.

He has since supplied the following amendment to the input configuration. TR6 shown is the input transistor in fig. 2 of the article.

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