

Violectric Headphone Amplifier HPA V200

Convicted hi-fi enthusiasts would never seriously consider driving loudspeakers with a Mickey Mouse amplifier purchased in a hi-fi supermarket. A similar taboo seems not to exist for headphones. When they are nonchalantly connected to a CD player, for example, its amplifier section frequently only exists to spoil all the fun of the headphones. Any competent headphones have, therefore, the same right as any competent amplifier - to be driven by a competent amplifier, like the Violectric HPA V200 headphone amplifier.



Violectric is a product line designed for the hi-fi and high end market by the pro audio manufacturer, Lake People electronic GmbH, located on Lake Constance, in the town of Konstanz more precisely. To my shame, I must confess that I only learned about this successful company from Konstanz at the 2009 High End show in Germany. They have been producing equipment for the studio sector for over 25 years and caused a true sensation in the pro audio community with its 20-bit D/A

converter in the beginning of the 90s and have been building headphone amplifiers from day one. There, at the High End show, I learned about the Violectric stand in a round-about way, first through the Ultrasonic stand where headphones were being demonstrated using the compact Violectric HPA V200 and then at the Funk Tonstudioteknik Berlin booth. Thomas Funk was full of praise for the amplifier from his competitors from Lake Constance. Thus conditioned, I remorsefully confessed to Friedrich Reim, the managing director of Lake People, of my ignorance relating to equipment from his company. To remedy this embarrassing situation, I ordered an HPA V200 to test. This is the top of the line of all three Violectric headphone amplifiers. Upon introduction to the market, two other products are available from Violectric – a phono preamplifier and a D/A converter.

By the way, Friedrich Reim was really not that offended that I never heard of Violectric headphone amplifiers. The age of the Violectric product line is just as young as the time the Lake People company has been trying to establish itself in the hi-fi marketplace. I was lucky. Speaking of the HPA V200: Its development began about two years ago, based on a 1970s Nakamichi circuit having an enormous damping factor for its time, operating with a relatively low bias current and impressive total harmonic distortion and low noise, pretty much by design. Besides that, it was as good as indestructible. Not a bad prerequisite for the development of a class-A headphone amp, the HPA V200 having eight transistors per channel and an operating current of +/- 30 Volts, best equipped to drive high impedance headphones like the Sennheiser. For low impedance headphones, à la Grado, there is an ample supply of steam to drive them, thanks to a circuit with high power output. The high damping factor in conjunction with its low internal resistance holds both high and low

impedance loads tightly under control, while extremely low noise and hum should guarantee a “black background” in the sound reproduction. It sounds very promising. Before I get to my listening test, we still need to do a little more tech-talk.

Two sets of headphones may be connected by way of 1/4" headphone jacks, found on the front of the unit, to the output stage of the amp, which provides more than a 120dB dynamic range for a 150 kHz frequency. It has balanced and unbalanced inputs, where the latter can also be switched to a buffered output. That can be used, for example, to loop the input signal to a second amplifier – in my case to the driver unit of my Stax headphones. In order to operate the Alps volume control independently from the connected amplifier in the optimal sonic region (above the 12 o'clock position), the pre gain is switchable in 5 steps on the back of the unit by way of tiny DIP-switches. Last, but not least, the HPA V200 has a D/A converter on board with a USB port. This allows 48kHz - 16 bit signals to be received from a PC or MAC. A digital signal will always have priority over an analog input signal that will automatically be muted. Since the RCA inputs could also work as outputs, on board the Vioelectric amplifier it is possible to convert a digital signal from a computer into an analog signal and send that to an amplifier driving the speakers of a hi-fi system. In that way the Vioelectric can replace the usually sub-par sounding converter (the sound card of the computer) or make an outboard D/A converter redundant. It's hard for any USB DAC to exceed the quality of Vioelectric's on-board Benchmark USB converter. And this brings us to the sonic competence of the HPA V200.



Its ability as a headphone amplifier, per se, is naturally more interesting than its quality as a USB converter. Recommended headphones for the listening test, due to their extreme impedance ratings, are my low ohm Grado GS 1000 and the brand new, high ohm Sennheiser HD 800. I will introduce those headphones in more detail in a future review.

With its 30 ohms per transducer, the Grado GS 1000 especially demands current from the headphone amplifier. More precisely: Quick and relatively abundantly delivered current, in the rhythm of the music, is required to be able to produce the typical bodily focused stance putting lots of meat on the bone without sacrificing clarity, precision and exuberant details. Anyone who knows his GS 1000 knows that deep bass control is required to produce a



stable sound image on a very powerful bass foundation. On the one hand, the Grado requires resolution and extremely low distortion from its amplifier partner in order to make sure the violin doesn't lose its glow in the lushly present high frequency range. And on the other hand, not to wrest the clarity and transparency from Grado's relatively large transducers using the right dosage from the amplifier to produce a true work of art. The GS 1000 certainly does not place any small

demands on its signal supplier - should it lack the adequate expertise in the above mentioned disciplines, it can quickly become a lout. This is not the case with the Vioelectric headphone amplifier. It is truly an optimal playing partner for the Grado, which carries on one hand, the necessary bass control to totally rock out and on the other hand, doesn't miss any clarity or transparency in its highs. It's not at all guilty of robbing the violins of their glow. For me, the GS 1000 has never given as lively a performance as with the HPA V200. This headphone amplifier outperforms anything I have ever connected my Grado to - tube or transistor. Incidentally, the Vioelectric drove the Grado with maximum transparency with a pre gain of 12 dB - the optimal region of the volume control.

With its 300 Ohm impedance, the Sennheiser HD 800 presents a true challenge for headphone amplifiers that do not deliver a lot of voltage. It is, however, essential in order to make



any headphones blessed with a few hundred Ohms truly sing. That is not possible with operational amplifiers and consequently the headphone jacks on CD players as well as most discretely built amplifiers with low operating current.