



The Threshold S/500 Stasis Power Amplifier Solid-state stereo amplifier. 250 watts/channel, max. current 22 amp. Frequency response 1 to 100k Hz, +0/-3 dB. Damping factor 100 from 20 to 20kHz. Slew rate 80V/usec. Dimensions 19" W by 19" D by 9-1/2" H, overall. Weight 92 lbs. Price \$2970. MANUFACTURER: Threshold Corp., 1832 Tribute Rd., Suite E, Sacramento, CA 95815

It's interesting how tubed and solid-state power amplifiers have been sounding more and more similar of late. Not too many years ago, you could identify the kind of amplifier you were listening to in about 30 seconds (often less). Solid-state amps were tight and controlled at the low end, slightly flat and grainy and rather withdrawn-sounding through the middle range, and more or less tipped-up and sizzly-crisp at the high end. Tubed amps were warm, mellow, fat through the midbass, deficient in deep bass, bright and forward in the middle range, and pleasantly, consonantly soft at the high end. I have tended for some years to assume that the ultimate correctness, if indeed there is any such thing, lay somewhere in between, but whether the tubes or the transistors were hewing closer to the mark was something about which I was not prepared to hazard a guess. Tubes sounded more "musical," but transistors had greater detail and better low end.

With the arrival on the premises of two top-performing (and top-priced) representatives from the two camps—the solid-state S/500 Stasis and the tubed Conrad-Johnson Premier I—I have enjoyed the opportunity of comparing them side by side. No longer is there an immediate that's-tube-and-that's-solid-state difference. But the same differences remain, even though diminished in degree.

The Conrad-Johnson does not have the glary middle-range brightness which, through the years, I have come to associate with tubes, but neither does the Threshold have that withdrawn, distant middle range that was for so long the trademark of the solid-state amplifier. By comparison, the C-J still has a softer high end than the Threshold, but the difference is no longer night-and-day dramatic. I will still hand the edge to the C-J for musicality through the most revealing speakers: electrostatics.

But the Threshold is so close to it in this respect that the choice might now be made on the basis of personal taste rather than on what sounds good and what sounds awful. The C-J seems to reproduce depth and perspective better than the Stasis, but the Stasis seems to have more solidity and ease at comparable listening levels—a difference I cannot attribute merely to a 25% difference in rated output. The C-J gets hot in normal use (of course it would, with all those tubes), while the Stasis just squats there with its cooling fins barely warmer than your fingers, practically daring you to blow out your speakers.

But it is at the low end where the S/500 stands out from the crowd. I have never, ever heard an amplifier that can control woofers the way this one does. Low-end detail from every speaker I fed it to was better than I had heard from those speakers before. It is also one amplifier that has the capability of wiping out a bad load instead of vice versa. I did not try the amplifier on the Quad 63s, but I have a strong suspicion that Quad's throw-a-crowbar-across-the-amplifier output-protection system would be splattered all over the map by this amplifier, simply because of its ability to throw overkill-type power at anything that stands in its way. (An accidental speaker-cable short caused a white flash that melted the offending wire strands.) I had the feeling this thing could cold-start a Mack truck.

The S/500 is the second solid-state power amp I have found which does superbly on Acoustat speakers. It is slightly tighter and deeper at the low end, and perhaps a tad smoother at the top, than Acoustat's own amp. Differences are small though, and whether or not they are worth almost three times the price of Acoustat's TNT-200 is something only a prospective buyer can decide for him or herself.

Other observations: The S/500 has superb inner definition. Revealing individual voices in complex program material as well as any amp I have heard to date.* It is very quiet, and except for a momentary dimming of the house lights when first turned on, it just sits there and does its thing. At this point, I would rate this among the best amplifiers available, for use with the widest variety of speakers. C-J's Premier I, I feel, is still slightly more agreeable-sounding with most electrostatic speakers, but I also think the S/500 is the closest an amplifier has ever come to being All Things To All People. If this does not become a Classic in its own time (i.e., before it is replaced by an s/500), I will be very surprised. JGH

* It is both amusing and chastening to recall that when I reviewed the Infinity HCA amplifier some four years ago, I declared that audio electronics had become about as good as they needed to. That was before the Berning TF-10 preamp, the Acoustat PNP and TNT-200, the Conrad-Johnson Premier I, the Threshold S/500, etc.,etc.I have since become more prudent.

After Modification Review

This amp features a 1000KVA toroidal power supply, backed by 116,000 uF of storage. The design of this optical bias amp is to have no global negative feedback. It has a bipolar transistor output, and a generous area of heat-sinks around the case. What you end up with is an 82-pound battleship, with about as much firepower. Since the S/500 was introduced in 1984, the audio community and media have given it nothing less than stellar reviews, placing it among the most topnotch "A" list equipment. This is deservedly so.

I purchased my S/500 in used/mint condition in 1999 for a paltry \$1,300 . I felt like I stole my way into the high-end. I have heard a number of new power amps costing upwards of 9 kilo-bucks that I didn't like better. That says a lot about the original design genius of a 13 year old amp! This old amp extracted every bit of detail off a source. It reproduced music in a neutral, grain-free, non-fatiguing manner. I used material like Linda Ronstans "For sentimental reasons" for vocals. The midrange was a liquid, transparent presentation, which unlike many SS designs didn't sound flat, sterile, brittle, grainy, opaque, or cold.

On classical material like "Mars, Bringer of war" and "Hut on Fowl's legs" the bass proved to be the tightest, deepest, most unblinkingly powerful I could hope to extract from a sound system. The very deepest notes had incredible control and definition. During a net search for Threshold information, I found Jon Soderberg's website. He offered repair and upgrade to Threshold/Forte products. I thought, if nothing else, maybe I could get the chassis freshened up on the inside, - 13 years can be a long time for some internal components. What does \$425 buy in the year 2000? As far as amp mods go, a functional bargain-basement tweak that really works well. I dropped my amp off on a Monday, and picked it up on Saturday. The modifications included upgrading the four 29,000uF/80v storage caps to 37,000uF/100v caps . The power reservoir was now kicked up to 148,000 uF . The bias was adjusted for modification to the front end circuit, and the aged power switch was replaced for good measure.

Almost immediately, the effects of this modification were obvious. No need for extensive DBT here. The same source material was now more forward. By that, I do NOT mean "bright." I mean that the air around instruments increased, and the soundstage was markedly improved. It's like you went from row "E" to row "C." The conveyed sense of room dimension was now more defined, and fine details became more prominent. Michael Bromek's "Celtic Guitar", track 2 - "Second two O Carolan's pieces" simply bloomed. The strings expanded outward magnificently, and when he taps his hollow-bodied guitar, the sound of flesh on wood is very realistic. Horns on "The best of Maynard Ferguson" and "The best of Chuck Mangione" from the stock amp were fluid, but now it feels like you could step BEHIND the horns. You sense the heat from staccato horn hits. The bass test came via Telarc's "Space spectacular" the main theme to "Battlestar Galactica " , "Star Trek TMP " and "Superman the movie." The bass impact was there as before, but now with an edge. It's like the information was more finely separated and etched. The visceral slam was improved. Zaranthrustra REALLY spake...loudly.

I've seen companies offering questionable amp upgrades that are also very expensive. They are nothing more than replacing all the guts of an amp for the price of a new one. By contrast, this is a cost-effective deal-and-a-half. I highly recommend this upgrade to any owner of a Threshold product. It merely makes the already excellent amp more of what it already is. It is like a product evolution. Nelson Pass has over-designed superb products for years. Threshold provides the tube community with a solid state alternative for detailed musicality without fatigue. For those of you looking for a means of increasing personal enjoyment of a Threshold amp, this upgrade will not disappoint!

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