



November 22, 2015 / 4 Comments / in Amplifiers, Featured / by Dubstep Girl

THE TRAFOMATIC AUDIO HEAD 2



Trafomatic Audio is a Serbia-based audio company that specializes in transformer-coupled tube amplifiers and pre-amplifiers. Their first headphone amplifier, the Experience Head One, featured 6S45P triode amplification, a power output of around 300mW, 30/100/300 ohm output impedance switching, and pre-amp capabilities. The timeless aesthetics and performance of the Head One were well regarded and justified its \$1700 price tag.

The Head One however, was released back in 2008 when the headphone scene was still represented largely by the HD 600/DT-800/K701 trio and the various offering from Grado and Audio-Technica. Though the Head One was able to drive these all wonderfully, it would have difficulties driving newer power-hungry planar-magnetic headphones from HiFiMan and Audeze.

With a new planar lurking around every corner and an ever-increasing demand for balanced amplification, a sequel had to be in the works. The Trafomatic Audio Head 2 is the modern high-end successor to the Head One and at \$2500, is a serious Summit-Fi contender that lives up to the reputation of the original and is one of the most dynamically engaging amplifiers that I have heard to date. Big, Big, wonderful sound!

Design:

The Trafomatic Head 2 is one of the more attractive products I have reviewed thus far. The glossy wood laquer finish is available in either black, white and any color offered by www.ralcolor.com. Both the wood and white finish are incredibly smooth feeling and make the Head 2 look absolutely gorgeous and classy. For even more luxury, soft touch Porsche topaz brown is also available as an option. The amplifier has excellent build quality and feels quite heavy and solid, with smooth rounded edges and large sturdy feet.

The bottom of the amplifier is vented and made of aluminum as is the grill on the top that let you take a peek at the glowing tubes. The large knobs and outputs are nicely laid out and I just love the power button on the side of the amp. The impedance knob on the front of the amp lets you match the output impedance to your headphones and can be set to 25, 50, 100, 300, or 600 ohms, which takes care of just about every headphone out there with a few exceptions. The impedance knob can also be set to "Line Out" to allow the Head 2 to function as a pre-amplifier.

The volume pot on the Head 2 is one of the best I have ever tried, featuring excellent volume spread and control, with clean even gain throughout and enough finesse for more fine adjustments. The Head 2 has single-ended and balanced headphone outputs, as well as balanced and single-ended inputs and outputs in the back, for full balanced amplifier and pre-amplifier function.

The Head 2 uses ECC88 input tubes and 6N30P output tubes, one in each channel for a total of 4 tubes. The tubes are in a Class-A push-pull configuration with output transformers. The amplification is 100% tube based and can deliver up to 2W of power into 50 ohms or 26dB of gain if using the Line Out. I am a huge fan of the ECC88 tube family as most of them have low noise and a clean linear tube sound. The Head 2 comes stock with Electro-Harmonix 6922 and Sovtek 6N30P tubes which worked well and provided fantastic sound right out of the box. Tube rolling is possible and I can only imagine how awesome the Head 2 might sound with a pair of NOS tubes from Amperex or Siemens.

Equipment:

I used my HiFiMan HE-6 and Sennheiser HD 800 for most of my listening with the Trafomatic Head 2. The amplifier kept its stock Electro-Harmonix 6922 and Sovtek 6N30P tubes for this review and I did not feel a need to tube roll at all. I used Audioquest King Cobra interconnects as well as Audioquest Power and USB Cables. My source was lossless music files from my computer fed to my Mytek Stereo192 DSD DAC. As usual, my music choices varied and included just about everything.



Sound:

The Trafomatic Head 2 sound in one word: *Vibrant*. The Trafomatic is one of the most dynamic and lively sounding amplifiers that I have heard. There is so much energy and presence in the sound, power and emotion.

Individual instruments and voices are layered vividly in 3D, with lifelike timbre and resonance, the volume dynamics of each of them is distinct and clear, which adds to the realism. There is zero congestion or compression as the amplifier resolves complex passages quite well, with no distortion or harshness. Transparency is top-level and the tonality is linear and sweet, characteristic of 6922 tubes.

Having only 2 watts of power, one would think that the Trafomatic would not be an ideal choice for driving the HiFiman HE-6, which often require upwards of 5+ watts of power and even speaker amplification to achieve decent volume levels with no distortion. However, I was surprised to find that the HE-6 was well-driven and free of any distortion or treble harshness that is often found when the HE-6 are underpowered. Honestly, it felt more like 5 or 6 watts, as I was able to get as loud as I wanted to in any recording and the bass and treble felt under control at all times.

The lively and dynamic sound signature of the Trafomatic Head 2 worked well with the HE-6, which already has a very visceral and engaging sound. The treble was extended and present much more than in other tube amplifiers, bringing out tons of detail and nuances with an unreal clarity. The dynamics however, were the most impressive part of the combination, as the Trafomatic handled the HE-6 with authority despite being down on power. The HE-6 were great for rock and acoustic music as the raw presentation of the Trafomatic brought live performances and bands to life. Lacuna Coil's *Within Me*, Three Days Grace's *One-X*, and the entire Linkin Park discography were just some of the albums I really liked with the HE-6, it was like listening to them all over again.

The soundstage and imaging of the Trafomatic Head 2 is excellent as well, having great depth and space, as well as coherency. The HE-6 can easily sound congested and narrow when underpowered, but there was none of that here. The sense of presence and separation were excellent and rivaled that of the Allnic HPA-5000, a \$5500 tube amplifier that is one of the best HE-6 amplifiers I've heard. With the Trafomatic, the HE-6 had warm and slightly forward midrange and fast, punchy bass that worked well for many genres of music and great for pop, rock, and electronic music.

The music is just placed right in front of you and there is never any congestion or aggressiveness, even on poor recordings. The HE-6 bass was tight, deep, and well-controlled. There was no bass distortion until you reached ear-deafening volume levels and the bass never felt underpowered. Overall, the Trafomatic Head 2 delivers 2 very good watts of power to the HE-6 and because it can match the 50 ohm impedance of the HE-6, none of it goes to waste.

The Trafomatic's impedance switch allows for perfect impedance matching with many popular flagship headphones for maximum performance. My Sennheiser HD 800s sounded fantastic driven out of the Head 2. Music emerged effortlessly and the huge soundstage of the Sennheiser HD 800 went beyond the headphones, you can really feel the space in the recording.

Like with the HE-6, the HD 800 sounded most impressive at louder volumes as there is never any distortion, just bigger and better sound! Listening to Steve Vai's *The Story of Light* was one of my better moments with the pairing as the super detailed and clean treble of the HD 800 helped extract detail and texture in Vai's notes. Tracks like "Gravity Storm" and "The Moon and I" were just awesome! I really enjoyed the HD 800s here with High-Res recordings as the treble could become slightly too hot on poorer recordings.

The Trafomatic Head 2 is a revealing amplifier and does not "tame" the treble but rather, just brings out every little detail as well as flaw or error in a recording. The detail and grain-free presentation was never analytical and I felt that the Head 2 was perfect for those who want a tube amplifier for the HD 800 but do not want to lose any detail or extension in the treble.

Some Comparisons:

Throughout my listening, I compared the sound of the Trafomatic Head 2 to that of my Woo Audio 5 and Headamp GS-X MK2. All three amplifiers vary quite a bit in price, the GS-X is a few hundred more than the Head 2 and the base WA5-LE costs over a grand more. Despite this, all three are world class headphone amplifiers and compete in the same endgame tier. Transparency and resolution are pretty much equal on all three, as all three are free of any grain and are able to drive most headphones to their full potential. These amps

however, are quite different when it comes to their design and sound signature.

The Trafomatic Head 2 is a tube amplifier with the warmth and dynamics of the 6922, and thus, is not as lush and polite sounding as the WA5. The Head 2's more forward midrange and extended treble make it much more dynamic and detailed in the top-end compared to the WA5, but also slightly more unforgiving of poor recordings. Bass on the Trafomatic is also punchier and tighter sounding than on the WA5, which has good bass detail and decay but could use a little more oomph. The Trafomatic has a wider and more forward soundstage than the Woo, which has a slightly deeper and more rounded soundstage. In the end, it's all a matter of preference and you can pick between beautiful open 300B sound vs. dynamic and musical 6922 sound.

The differences in sound between the Head 2 and the GS-X are quite different, as the solid-state GS-X is pretty much completely neutral whereas the Head 2 features the 6922 sound. The GS-X has tighter bass and more bass quantity than the Head 2, as well as a slightly faster more fluid sound. However, the Trafomatic is more musical and euphonic, and has a more 3D soundstage because it is a tube amplifier. The Headamp GS-X MK2 is pretty much free of colorations and serves as an excellent reference amplifier, but it is not as fun sounding and lacks the forward momentum of the Head 2.

Though all three amplifiers are capable of driving the HE-6. The Head 2 is probably the most practical and offers the most value out of the three. The GS-X delivers more power into the HE-6 than the Trafomatic, but I feel that the GS-X distorts faster in the bass and is slightly leaner sounding with treble sizzle on some recordings; it feels strained at higher volumes and is not totally ideal for the HE-6. The Trafomatic is able to match the impedance of the HE-6 and thus, avoids much of this despite being down on power. The Woo Audio 5 delivers 9W out of the 4-pin XLR, and is in my opinion, the best of the three to power this headphone, but the base WA5-LE lacks this output and as a result, you would need to drop almost 6 grand for the full version of the WA5 with the speaker outs.

While comparing the Head 2 to the WA5, another Woo I had previously owned kept coming to mind, the balanced WA22. At \$2000, the transformer coupled Class A push-pull tube amplifier is more similar in design to the Head 2 than the WA5. Upgraded tubes and a balanced configuration make these pretty much direct competitors. However, there is no comparison as the Head 2 absolutely *kills* the WA22. The WA22 is lush and warm with a huge soundstage and a lively midrange. Yet, the WA22 lacks the transparency and detail of the Trafomatic, as well as its incredible dynamics and bass tautness.

The WA22 is more forgiving of poor recordings due to its warmth and colorations, but that's about it. Even with upgraded tubes, the WA22 still does not have the presence or palpability of the Trafomatic running the stock tubes. Additionally, the impedance selection switch and pre-amp output make the Head 2 much more practical and allow it to drive different headphones more effectively than the WA22.

Pre-Amplifier:

The Trafomatic Head 2 features a properly designed pre-amp section that is simply amazing. I used the Head 2 as a pre-amp for my Forte 1A speaker amplifier which powers my Omega Super 3 Desktop speakers and I immediately noticed the benefits of having it in the audio chain. With 26dB of gain, no added noise, and excellent dynamics, this is one of the best pre-amplifiers I have heard at this price and would recommend it alone for that purpose. My little desktop speakers sounded like full-size floorstanding speakers, the room immediately filled with music and the sound was powerful and dynamic, with true-to-life realism that I previously had not experienced with other pre-amps. Volume control was excellent and I just wanted to keep going louder as it never felt like there was a limit to the power I had on tap, nor was there any added compression or congestion in the sound. More volume, more music, and it just kept sounding better and better!

Most of my listening in fact, was done with the Trafomatic Head 2 functioning as a preamplifier as I fell in love with the sound of it in the system. Highlights of my listening experience include Vanessa Carlton's *Be Not Nobody*, as the system brought voices and instruments to life. On tracks such as "A Thousand Miles" and "Sway", Vanessa's voice was placed front and center on stage, with the piano and bass filling up the air around her, every instrument in the background easily discernible from one another. On "Twilight", textures were cleanly layered in a natural soundscape, palpable vocals were silky and organic and the treble was extended and clean,

never feeling bright or analytical in its presentation.

Like other 6922 tube pre-amplifiers I've tried, the 3D imaging and sweet, fast, open sound of the Head 2 worked best with live music, vocals, and instrumentals. I particularly enjoyed listening to ambient electronic music and chill-out, as well as new age music with the Head 2. One of my favorite albums is the *Wider Horizons* compilation, where tracks like "Escape From Tulse Hell" and "Earthgarden" can relax you and draw you into a spiritual trance, the music experience surreal and psychedelic in nature. The Trafomatic allowed the music to effortlessly flow out of the Omega speakers, holding nothing back. Artists like Solar Fields, Carbon Based Lifeforms, and Entheogenic were just as sublime to listen to as their trippy tracks could easily take me to another world, merging me with the fabric of the universe and taking me to distant galaxies, I could really feel the energy now!

Conclusion:

Overall, I really enjoyed my time with the Trafomatic Head 2 and was sad to see it go as it is one of the better tube amplifiers that I have heard in a long time. At \$2500, the Head 2 can hold its own against many TOTL tube amplifiers and is able to drive just about any headphone out there including the HE-6. The pre-amplifier has tons of gain and would be a great addition to any system. With true-to-life dynamics, sparkly treble, and all the awesome qualities of the 6922 tube, I simply cannot recommend this amplifier enough.

Link: <http://headphone.guru/the-trafomatic-audio-head-2/>