

# Trafomatic Audio Head2 Vacuum Tube Preamplifier & Headphone Amplifier A stand out high performance headphone amplifier and line preamplifier! Review By Matej Isak

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July 2014

**World Premiere!**  
**Trafomatic Audio Head2**  
**Vacuum Tube Preamplifier &**  
**Headphone Amplifier**  
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Trafomatic Audio managed to establish strong brand recognition and brand following over the past few years. From the head-fi strictly oriented legendary Experience Head One headphone amplifier to the array of tube based preamplifiers and amplifiers, that found a stand out place within the homes of many audiophiles and music lovers around the world. You might not know, but SašaČokić and team work not only with the production models, but also with highly demanding upper echelon customers with their bespoke approach. They're flexible with their product offerings to suit any demand and in every price range. In this highly competitive market things changed rapidly and demand is of different ordnance and without being open minded and broad minded things can easily collapses. The other important and perhaps little known fact I cannot miss to point out is the Trafomatic know how and production of the output transformers. Many established companies order (or did order) them by being made to their custom specification. You would be impressed to learn who many of recognized high-end audio companies implement these specific transformers into their own final products.

You'll always know and recognize any given tube audio designer by the quality of output transformers he use or better to say, to the efforts and understanding of their importance. This is what gives the final voicing impact. Let us take for example a typical classical 300B design. I've owned over some 30 + different amplifiers over the years and they can differ like night and day. Those who made their choices with best quality output transformers and circuit design in mind did excel in their sound. Those who neglected or tried to save up in this regards failed in bringing the real musical amplifiers. There are only few really great sounding 300B amplifiers and for a reason!

## Serbian Tube Sound

No matter where you look into the different movement of our human society, there is always a strong impact from one school of thought that is predominant and sets the lucid path. It's non different in the high-end audio industry and society. We can all agree to the strong routes pointing towards the early 1920's and 1930's tube circuit designs as being the so called big-bang of tube audio movement, but it's a fact, that along that and derived from this era are certain movements and schools of typical tube sound were formed.

Meet the Serbian tube sound, which has little or nothing to do with the American, Japanese or any other type of sound orientation. With their own set of rules and preconditions they managed to find their path, which as you'll read on in the review in many ways liberates not only audio designers, but thanks God the reproduction of the music.

## Introduction

Trafomatic Audio HEAD2 was introduced at this year's Munich 2014 high-end audio show in Germany. I took the review sample directly from the hands of Saša Čokić and we found some time, to chat about music, high-end audio, tubes and life in general. Saša is a great, down to earth person with holistic look of the audio and music. One thing that always impresses me in our correspondence is his boldness. He's not afraid to talk directly about the technology and he never hides anything. Person who relies on his true know how, experience and self-confidence radiates those as a true virtues and this clearly reflect in the products. Trafomatic Audio approach to the tube making is wit and straight forward. Saša told me, that he don't have a problem building and implementing the highly exotic parts, but himself believe in the strong practical solutions when it comes to the built in materials, cables, connectors etc.



Let me elaborate shortly on this. Exotic materials can and do alter the sound in a specific way, but the industry standard electronic parts can also be of great use in the right hands. I always recall the universal ability of late Kondo San with building electronics. He built different version of his amplifiers and preamplifiers due his time, but always managed to keep his recognizing sound signature. In the same manner I do believe that Saša and for that matter every highly skilled and experienced audio designer affects the end results by their know-how and the design choices being made. The result will differ and in master hands, the final voicing and tuning will show what really matters to designer himself and how does he see the intimate world of music and consequently how he want his customers to experience the sound reproduction.

Trafomatic Audio HEAD 2 is a device with two faces. It acts as the high performance high quality headphone amplifier and as high-end dedicated tube preamplifier. With the simple turn of the left knob to its most right position, HEAD2 morphs into the fully functional true balanced stereo line preamplifier. All latest Trafomatic Audio devices came with the newly designed logo, which from the first moment reminded me on the traditional Japanese Katana sword. As everything related around that almost mystical sword, in the same spirit Trafomatic Audio reflects the best attributes of the reproduced music. The point of excellence is in the path and in the end result of the product. As with swords making, the

refined, well known, but also often hidden choices creates something special, that stands in the face of time. Saša is proud of his creations and they are his vision materialized into the musical machines, that are built to last physically and with the emotional capacity.

## Operational Duties



Trafomatic Audio Head 2 is a Class-A push-pull circuit design. It is the second headphone amplifier in Trafomatic Audio production history coming after the very successful Experience Head One headphone amplifier. The 3dB of feedback and 100% tube amplification delivery 2W into 50 Ohms. All the implemented tubes have been hand-picked based on their long established reputations for sonic virtue. The 'overbuilt' power supply features robust multi-stage high-voltage filtering, for the superior low-frequency performance. A proprietary output stage with II C core output transformers accommodates a wide range of headphone impedance from 25 to 600 Ohms.

The Head 2 was designed to drive many pairs of headphones with no sacrifice in fidelity and with ease. This is the ideal amp for shared listening sessions. The Head 2 was also design to be working as a great tube preamplifier capable to drive all power amplifiers even those with the very low input impedance. The unit features uncompromising quality in build and design throughout and with its timeless monument design built to last a lifetime and deliver an unmatched sonics.

## Headphone Amplifier

To make the Trafomatic Audio HEAD 2 as versatile as possible it spots the adjustable output impedance of: 25, 50, 100, 300 and 600 Ohms. This should cover all of headphones (except the electrostatics of course) and I really loved the option of the selectable impedance on the front panel. Along the selector on the right side there is volume knob and on left side panel you'll find on/off power switch. Everything is organized in simple and straightforward way. For me, quite a bit happens on the first notes strikes and HEAD 2 showed its real potency without any reservation. Quiet, low noise operation was evident through all of my listening sessions connected with the high performance impact. Now, it is easy to deal with low noise in a certain filtering way as with design of the phono preamplifiers. You can kill the noise floor, but in most cases this is connected to the actual muffling of the sound. Making a low noise device, without destroying the real bandwidth and open like nature of the sound, is an art in and of itself. Here the real expertise's comes to a place and quickly shows the advanced capability of any tube designer.

HEAD 2 never lost the ability to move the music effortlessly and with the authority. Let it be Beyerdynamic T-1, Sennheiser HD-800 or other headphones on hand, HEAD2 controlled

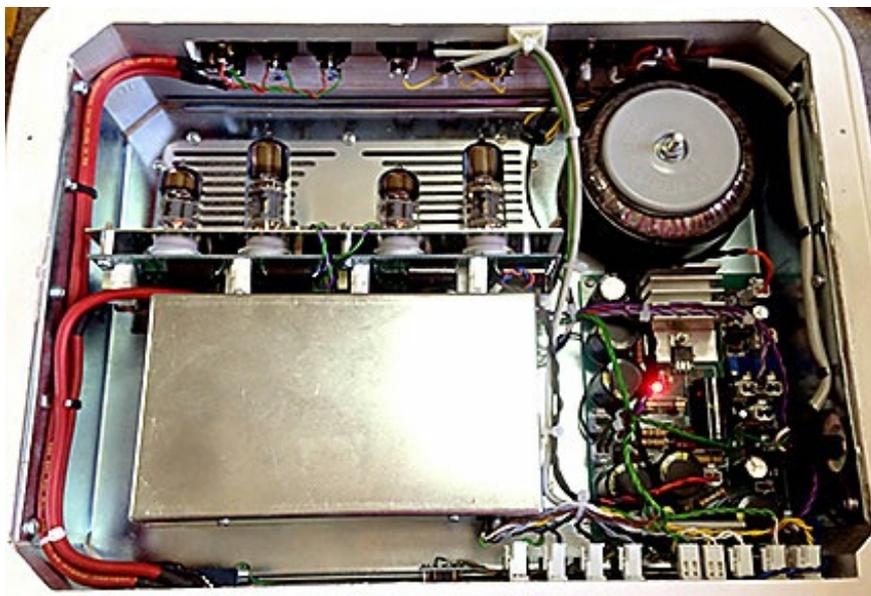
the output with so called musical precision. This means music nonstop. Emotional flow without lacking the dynamic simplicity, that is so strongly connect to the live music. When it comes down to performance my take on the headphones amplifiers is perhaps a bit more demanding then in general. I've been around the headphones phenomena from 2000 with a few systems in prior to that era and went through many full headphone setups over the years. With headphones, there is not just a simple matter of pushing the enough gain throughout the "pipes". This can be easily done. At top reproduction you want to drive the headphones to their full potential and without losing the pace, rhythm and musicality. To combine all this in a great workable musical package it takes an extra mile or two. And not many are able to walk the walk.

Trafomatic Audio HEAD 2 follows its own path. In delivering the music one word would constantly pop up in my listening notes: "The wholeness!" Music coming out of the headphones was presented with the full layers of real word propensities and not as the bland sum of its parts. Like with listening to the live orchestral music. You can spot the separate instruments, but still music always comes as a whole. Think of it like a giant bubble of positive energy coming towards you. It is an experience that embraces all the senses, including your ears of course, with a transducer filled with an abundance of energy. In similar way HEAD 2 managed to create the connection to my favorite music with highly emotional dose of musical energy carrying the messages of performers with the full potency.

### **About The Volume**

One thing that's often overlooked in the preamplifiers and headphone amplifiers -- as volume is highly important structural part -- is the proper use of volume adjustment. When done right the gain structure builds up in the way, which reminds on the crescendo rise with the real music. Logarithmic scale of HEAD 2 volume potentiometer acted greatly in both operational modes as the headphone amplifier and tube preamplifier. With a lot of high-end audio products increase in gain starts to quickly compress the volume gain structure and you'll get "squashed" sound even before 12" clock position to easily. HEAD 2 volume setting reminded me closely to my reference Robert Koda Takumi K-10 preamplifier volume knob and execution. With K-10 you'll often go even up to 3" o'clock. This might scares some, but in reality it give more wider scale of volume and let the music to be amplified with more slowly reveling gain structure. It just sound right in that way with music without feeling like trying to squash the 1000 l of waters throughout the straw. I hate that effect as it totally kills the music and act like compressor rather the a platform to let the music being elevated and fun to listen.

### **Tube Preamplifier**



Additional feature, that should be advertised as at least as a half of the HEAD2 is the dedicated tube line preamplifier. With the 26 dB of the gain and output impedance 6 Ohms with RCA and 25 Ohms with XLR this preamplifier is ready to drive all power amplifiers. This includes those with a very low input impedance. The HEAD2's preamplifier stage is a contemporary tube preamp. This means, that you can forget easily about the archaic tube colored sound and expect what latest valve based high-end preamplifiers can offer; a linear performance, that rivals and stand along with the even most upper echelon solid state preamplifiers. The unit is fast, open and sublime with a powerful impact. It holds nothing back and can stand up proudly with the other tube preamps with ease. This is pure musical preamplifier without any traces of words slow, reserved or unmusical. It opens up the world of music in a very interesting and highly potent package.

### The Music

Unrestrained said my listening notes on repeat. The flow, easiness and interactiveness with the music were spot on. The deeper side of audio voyage and the intriguing peek into the well know musical material. This is a musical machine that can "rock" and holds it pace. It doesn't fall apart with the highest energy of either rock or classical musical intake. Recent Deep Purple high-res release of legendary *Made In Japan* Deluxe Edition is remarkable live album. The energy and interplay between musicians is far out and the album is a timeless classic. With HEAD2 the preamp and amp kept the firm and almost brutal energy going through all the turns confidently. As with handling of the highly energetic music, the refinement was never lost with the Juliette Greco *Et Ses Grandes Chansons*. Her beautiful voice breathed with soul and delicacy. Returning to more complex variety with Verdi Requiem under the Claudio Abbado, this Guiseppe Verdi masterpiece cuts to the core of the soul with its dramatic aura and sound quality. The HEAD 2 was following the drama with intimate interaction and without losing the grip. Larry Coryell and Philip Catherine Twin House is among best example of great sounding vinyl guitar music. Both guitar players seems to play under one mind. This records can quickly show the flaws of any component under the "stress". As with other music, the Trafomatic Audio HEAD 2 took the sturdy performance and kept the reproduction of this 1976 recoding highly involving.

### Conclusion



As this is my first hands on with the Trafomatic Audio products I'm being more then impressed. I've seen and read a lot about their past and present products, but was always intrigued by the thoughts of how they can perform. My expectations for the high performance headphone amplifier and line preamplifier are always above ordinary as I've been bitten by the curious and musical bug long time ago. It was pleasure to get such positive impression with the Trafomatic Audio HEAD 2. This is the product done right, priced right and performing right. Saša Čokić thinks out of the box and without restrictions. HEAD 2 clearly transcribe his feelings regarding the music. Passion, emotions and love for music dictates the choices, which clearly sum up in the great result. It is not hard to recommend Trafomatic HEAD 2 as both stand out high performance headphone amplifier and line preamplifier. I'm now looking forward in discovering more creational outputs from this Serbian boutique high-end audio manufacture. If any other big high-end branded company would deliver under this product, you could expect it to cost closer to \$10,000 or more. Here is an example of a great vacuum tube preamp and headphone amp that offers high-end performance, yet at real world prices.

### **Specifications**

Type: Vacuum tube stereo preamplifier with headphone amplifier

Tubes: One 6N30P and ECC88 per channel

Output Impedance: 25, 50, 100, 300 and 600 Ohms

Frequency Bandwidth: 10 Hz to 80 kHz

Signal To Noise Ratio: 88dB

Inputs: AUX , XLR and RCA

Outputs As Line Preamplifier: XLR + RCA

Headphone Output: Neutrik Combo XLR and 1/4" stereo jack

Output Impedance As Preamplifier: RCA output 6 Ohms, XLR out is 25 Ohms

Gain: 26 dB

Maximum output power on headphone output: 2 Watt into 50 Ohms

Total Harmonic Distortion: 0.2%

Input Sensitivity: 0.5V

Input Impedance: 47 kOhm

Price: €1900 (\$2600 USD)

### **Company Information**

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