

NuForce

HA-200 headphone amplifier

IT MAY BE a relatively new name on these shores, but we've seen several of NuForce's products recently. The California-based company has been rattling the bars of the audiophile cage stateside for some time now with a raft of cutting-edge products with highly alluring price tags. The HA-200 is a single-ended design Class A headphone amplifier with RCA stereo phonos. The trick it has up its sleeve is the ability to drive headphones in balanced mode, although it can't manage it on its own due to its topology and hence it sports only a single XLR input. You need to buy a second HA-200 in order to run each XLR-connected channel discretely and you will require a special balanced cable adaptor to connect the headphones. Balanced connections cancel out RF interference, resulting in exceptionally low noise and a more accurate sound and in this dual-amp scenario, voltage is doubled and power output is quadrupled.

Hot water

A minor hurdle to overcome when using two discrete amplifiers with separate volume controls for each channel is that setting the gain is like using separate hot and cold taps to fill a bath rather than a mixer. In other words, you have to set each channel's volume separately.

For this test I only have one amp so use the RCA inputs in two setups. One with a transport and the other on a desktop with a NuForce μ DAC3 DAC (HFC 399) connected to a computer playing hi-res files.

Design-wise the HA-200 is, like most of NuForce's products, alluringly compact. It's just 217mm wide and 2.2kg in weight, with a durable, minimalist finish, rounded edges and a simple rotary volume dial that is perfectly engineered. The one aesthetic blemish is the ugly plastic tab that covers the single XLR out next to the 6.3mm headphone jack. Peak power output is quoted as 937mW per channel at 32ohm with an output impedance of 5ohm and 10Hz to 20kHz frequency response.



One slight disadvantage that Class A amplifiers have is that the transistor bias current must be set such that the output transistor continually operates in the midpoint between its fully-on and fully-off limits. Therefore, regardless of the actual audio power being used, Class A amplifiers continuously consume their full-rated output power and dissipate that in the form of waste heat. In other words, they get hot and remain so when switched on, so there is no standby mode, just an on/off rocker switch on the rear.

Partnered with a pair of Oppo PM-2 headphones, the HA-200 delivers a pleasing combination of clarity and substance regardless of source. Its soundstage is broad and dynamic, with plenty of headroom, and it reveals itself to be especially adept with higher frequencies.

The cacophony of Frankie Goes to Hollywood's *Two Tribes* on SACD is served up with real gusto and a sense of scale that gives the vocals an extra edge, allowing them to rise above the distraction of the heavy guitars.

With the computer as source, the piano in Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No.5* in E flat major is focused and well defined, but not teeth-grindingly sharp, retaining a pleasing degree of texture. It's a finely balanced act that the HA-200 pulls off throughout the

dynamic range, allowing each layer of sound to be heard distinctly in more complex passages so that the strings, wind instruments and percussion are delivered with aplomb. Removing the HA-200 from the equation and using just the μ DAC3 robs the piece of some much appreciated warmth and control, and shows just what the headphone amp brings to the party.

Flame on!

Spinning the Flaming Lips' *Yoshimi Battles The Pink Robots* on CD perfectly encapsulates the HA-200's capabilities. The mesmerising vocals are elevated wonderfully, yet remain smooth and rounded. Guitars and keyboards mesh nicely and are dynamic, while the synth at the start of *In the Morning Of The Magicians* is stunning. In terms of bass, the extension pulls up a tad short but the timing is spot on and the lower end always feels muscular and tight.

Whether used in a desktop rig or with traditional analogue sources the HA-200 acquits itself admirably. It's a simple and straightforward headphone amp that has a well balanced and beautifully revealing sound. The option to use it in a balanced configuration is handy, but you'll need to splash out on a second unit to run both channels. **AJ**

DETAILS

PRICE
£300
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OUR VERDICT

★★★★★