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nuforce

Reference 9 SE amplifiers

as reviewed by John Brazier



Like most folks, I too peruse the Internet, and faithfully read a few print magazines, to keep in touch with the world, or more specifically, the audio world.

It was 8 or 9 years ago, when I first read of the Bel Canto Evo "digital amp" and watched in wonder as the internet went ablaze with the news of this revolutionary and awe inspiring amplifier. Like so many, I purchased one sound-un-heard. I liked it, was impressed, but ultimately found it a too sterile for me.

Over the years I have kept myself safely on the sidelines of the digital amp evolution and/or revolution. Taking notice when information warranted but never voting with my Adam Smith dollars that "digital" amps were the wave of the future. Even when some of the power players of the industry voted with their dollars as investment. I still abstained.

That was then, this is now. The NuForce amps hit a few years ago and the response among the Internet circles was reminiscent of the Evo amp days. True to form, I stayed in the fray.

In the fray I stood, until I read Bob Levi's review of the NuForce Reference SEs for *PFO*. I knew I shouldn't have, but I sent him an email and a dialog ensued. The result being that I received a pair of the SEs for a "follow-up" review a few weeks later. So, for the details of the NuForce Reference SEs, I suggest you visit Bob's recent [review](#). My review will skip over the technical details and focus on the sound.

On the other hand, a few bits of *technical* information you may wish to know is that I used Cardas Golden Cross power cords and Acoustic Zen Reference II interconnects. The amps and the cords were pretty fresh and needed a few dozen hours to settle in. My point of reference for this review is the Edge G3 integrated and which, for this review, was used as my preamp. And, although my system description reads that I use the Reference 3A MM De-Cappo i's, for the duration of this review I used the recently reviewed DeVore Fidelity Gibbon Super 8—which I now own (read that review [here](#)).

My first impression was that switching amplifiers have, in fact, evolved. Just as CDPs took some time to graduate into a truly satisfying tool, it is clear that whatever technology a "digital amp" employs has also matured. I suspect that there remains an issue of where they are in the evolution process. That is a good question, I can tell you that the difference between the sound of this amp and the first generation Bel Canto "switching amps" are night and day. I could live with these as the center generator of power for my system and, if I recall correctly, the Evo lasted about 2 months before I had to move on.

Overall the music was significantly less edgy and much smoother than what I had expected and have become used to with the Edge.

Listening to Gillian Welch's *Revival* disc, the simple sounds emanated effortlessly with a decidedly sophisticated touch and a level of refinement I have not recently heard in my home. It was as if the vocals had been lightly buffed with a soft cloth and polished like an old tea set before a yard sale. I have reviewed an amp or two where the sonic signature was clearly engineered to sound "tubey" or "slamming" in a very inorganic way. Distinctly different is the ability of the Reference SEs to reproduce the event as a single presentation and not of discrete performance amalgamated onto one recording.

JOHN BRAZIER'S SYSTEM

LOUDSPEAKERS

Reference 3A MM De Cappo i's atop Z5 24" Sound Organizations Stands. Each filled with a unique mixture of sand from Mother's Beach (in Marina Del Rey, CA) and sand from Venice Beach.

ELECTRONICS

Edge G3 integrated.

SOURCES

Naim CDX2 and XPS2 power supply, which is sometimes cabled with Naim's Chrysalis RCA to Din, but otherwise cabled with Acoustic Zen Silver Reference IIs.

CABLES

Acoustic Zen Hologram Speaker Cable (single wire), Acoustic Zen Silver Reference II or Naim Crystal for connection between CDX2 and the Edge G3.

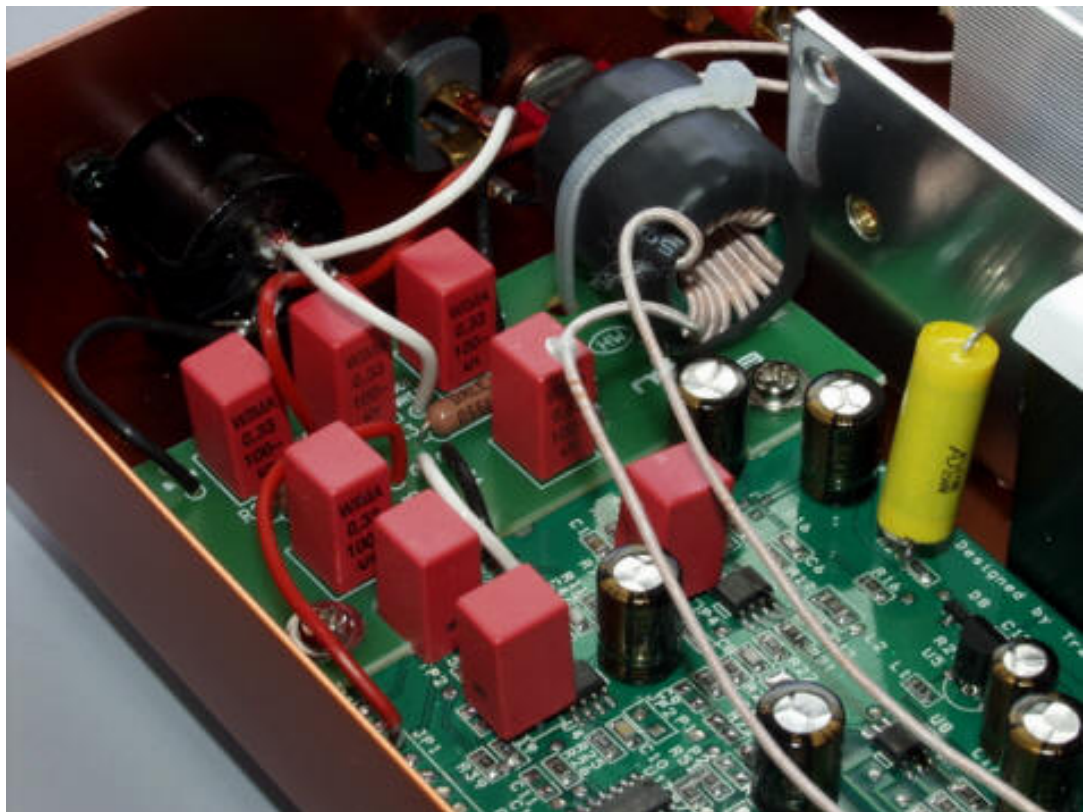
ACCESSORIES

Acoustic Zen El Nino Power Cords, Wiremold Outlet Strip.

Part and parcel with the concept of one cohesive musical event comes a real sense that the musicians are, in fact, in the same room playing with each other and feeding off each other's performances. This was new for me within the realm of switching amps. The downfall and at the same time the uniqueness of prior switching amps I have listened to is that each individual instrument or vocal performer sounded as though they were performing independent of one another. I liked that to the extent that your mind's "ear" wanders the sound stage, every performance is strikingly clean and digitally perfect. That in and of itself was new to me. Yet, the lack of a perceived interaction left me wanting.

The NuForce has backed off that engineered individualism in favor of a more holistic musical event.





Take the latest effort by Dr. John, *Mercenary*, which is chock full of that full-bodied Dr. John music. I found it to be very fulfilling and not once leaving me wanting in most areas of the spectrum. The usual gritty vocals were there in just the right balance and credibility. All the while a generously large and well-organized sound stage hung behind the good Doctor.

The bottom end was tight and deep and when called upon to do so, it rocked. The

Red Hot Chili Pepper's *Stadium Arcadium* offered a very fun reference point. Their music is punctuated with the type of thumping beat that does not occupy my living room the way it once did. But, when I feel the need for some good rock 'n roll, I usually reach for the Peppers. Their newest disc filled the house and had the wall bumping.

For the most part, I cannot find fault with the NuForce. If anything, I would caution that there is a slight disconnect in the higher regions. I cannot put my finger on it exactly, but it sometimes possessed a dishonest queue. It sounds accurate in and of itself, yet when compared to the rest of the range there is something just slightly off. It is not in a digital tizzy way, not it is more in a harmonic reordering. But, that is really all I can pick at.

When you combine all the positive attributes of these little guys, like their size, their weight, their temperature, and their sound they tally up to be a tremendous value. On almost all points, I agree with Mr. Levi in his review. However, I am not sure how they stack up against the best solid state amps out there, having only heard a relatively small sample of what is available. I may never know the answer to that question. I do know this, with my system they are by far the best power amps that have come to play with the rest of the gear. If I cannot appreciate the subtle differences that an amplifier 2 or 3 times the cost of the SEs that that is money in the bank and I am none the wiser. But, I sure would like to try one out for a while. Of all the accolades these amps have garnered on the 'net and in print there is one statement that nearly all the reviews have included as the icing on the cake, and I too am compelled to join in that song.... "I like them so much, I am buying the review sample." **John Brazier**

Reference 9 SE amplifiers

Retail: \$4200 a pair.

NuForce

web address: <http://www.nuforce.com>

