



the Stereo Times

The Complete Audiophile Magazine

Sunny Cable Technology



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Random Noise 4



NuForce? Of course!



Amplifiers: kinds by the dozen, again as many makes. And where would we be without them? Out and about, wandering aimlessly.

"Hey, fella, you got a home to go to?"

"Yes, officer, — sob! — but I don't have a soundstage!"

Sacre bleu! Mon Dieu! Quelle horreur!

In balmy, sunlit truth, we audiophiles have a cornucopia of amps from which to choose, from silly-watt SETs to great hulking brutes capable of instigating, and withstanding, rock slides. As to soundstages, my most pleasurable wanderings occur betwixt CDP and couch. A parlor-specific milestone: some time ago, a nifty little pair of NuForce Reference 9 SE switching amps evicted my Mark Levinson 33H monos. Do I miss the mastodons? Does the pope chat in Yiddish? The folks over at the power company have probably been wondering what we've done to cut back on consumption. Slumbering in standby, the ravenous MLs burned 200 watts each. No typo. 200 watts. In standby. Each. Their appetites better than doubled stage front. With respect to green, think hemorrhage red. (With respect to long green, think too much.)

What grabbed me from the start is the Ref 9 SE's purity, or better, invisibility.



“Purity” isn’t a color one normally encounters on a subjectivist’s palette, but it fits. This is the least obvious amp I’ve ever lived with. What you hear from your speakers is not some hardware-spawned interpretation of good sound but the recording itself. For me, that’s the kind of tough-but-oh-so-gentle modesty that touches on perfection. Spectacular neutrality, dynamic subtlety, textural complexity, muscular capability: what more can one ask? In other words, how audible an improvement does NuForce’s Version 2 amplifier board bring to its top model?

Taking chances

And here’s where Jason and his Argonauts navigate among shoals. With the understanding that I’ll be writing a review, NuForce sent me a pair of Reference 9 amps (the model one notch below the Reference 9 SE) fitted out with the new board. The plan is for me to live with Ref 9 V2 pair while the Ref 9 SEs go back for the changeover. Jason’s claim? — that the Ref 9 V2 is a better performer than the Ref 9 SE V1.

Before I weigh in on that, I’ll mention a V2 difference that makes my day. The new board does not interfere with FM reception. That’s been a problem. My wife and I have FMs in the kitchen and our studios, and we like to play them when we work. This meant having to turn the amps off. Amps perform better if they’re kept warm. Anyway, we audiophiles like to think so. Also, the fewer start-up surges, the longer our hardware’s trouble-free lives. We like to think that too. The practices and beliefs of the farther-out among us bear a resemblance to cargo cult observances.

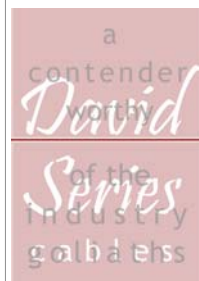
Enough of this foolishness! Does the new Ref 9 V2 best the Ref 9 SE V1?

Some challenges are tough



When I first put Version 2 of the Ref 9 pair into the system, their transparency and clout were instantly apparent. The impression has not since diminished. This is the kind of performance I’ve come to expect of NuForce amps. Indeed, but is the Ref 9 V2 a better amp than Version 1 of the Ref 9 SE? NuForce claims, among other improvements, that the V2 board is 20dB quieter, with distortion in the same ballpark. And yet my 9 SE V1 pair was utterly quiet and clean. Be that as it may, in the course of time, the Ref 9 V2 has revealed itself as at least the equal of the Ref 9 SE V1.

Memory’s a dodgy business, especially audio memory. With respect to reliable perceptions, an A-B procedure — removing one pair amps, installing another while trying to remember how the test disc sounded — is asking a lot. Having tried to retain as faithful a recollection as possible of the Ref 9 SE, I can certainly recommend the less expensive Ref 9 V2 as an exemplar of those qualities I cherish. Indeed, I wonder whether I’ll hear a difference for the



better when I install the Ref 9 SE's V2 version.

I've come this far before their arrival. While I'm waiting, I've also been wondering how long linear designs, with their brick and millstone transformers, can withstand this kind of Lilliputian competition. The NuForce pair operates in elegant company: Wilson WATT / Puppy 8 speakers, an Integris CDP, Nordost cabling, Aurum's mod of Cardas Golden Reference power cords for the CDP and amps, FIM 880 outlets and dedicated power lines, among other effective embellishments and tweaks. If these amps were out of their depth, I'd hear it. (I describe the system in greater detail at the end of my report.)

Enter, Special Edition

From the NuForce manual: The Ref 9 SE V2 "adds refinement and delicacy to the already excellent-sounding Ref 9 V2. The tonal balance remains unaltered, *and when used in less than the most revealing and transparent systems, the [SE's] advantages may not be fully realized.*" My italics. In other words, don't spend the extra bucks if your thoroughbred Arabians will be pulling a surrey with a fringe on top. Once again, with even more feeling, the less expensive Ref 9 V2 is one hell of a performer.

The Big However: if your system's up to snuff — a .44 Magnum resolver — Nuforce asks you to listen for "sweeter highs without any compromise in frequency extension," and a "smoother and more palpable midrange, while preserving [the Ref 9 V2's] natural harmonic structure. The result is a more natural and relaxed presentation. The bass remains a huge strength of the amp. The Ref 9 SE V2 has the same tightness and texture of the standard Ref 9 V2, but with a little more weight."

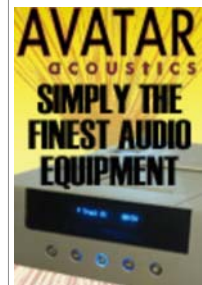
"The stage is more coherent and deeper."

"[The] sound in general is more neutral, more liquid...."

Does this square with perceptions? The first thing I noticed long before the recommended 75-hour burn-in is the SE's speed and dynamic range. Transients were especially brisk. Farther along, I understood that what I was hearing in the way of difference had to do with a lot more than velocity. I was awash in the best resolution this system has ever produced. To remain with best-ever, I was also hearing sweeter and more extended highs. The WATT / Puppy 8's tweeter is said to be superior to that of its predecessor. In this regard, the 9 SE V2 complements a superb speaker system. In revealing the W / P 8's remarkable top end, the new amp reveals its own. (Pricewise, the amp and speaker occupy different strata. If extravagant tickets drive your purchases, the 9 SE V2 is not for you. I'm reminded of Oscar Wilde's line about the man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.)

Do the manual's claims regarding a deeper, more coherent soundstage, superior neutrality, midrange liquidity and palpability translate to my listening room? Let me put it this way: Attempting to decide whether the 9 V2 outperforms the 9 SE V1 proved a challenge. I think, perhaps, yes, the 9 V2 carried the day. In deciding whether the 9 SE V2 contributes to the best sound this system has ever produced is no challenge whatever. I'm particularly impressed by what's happened to an already good soundstage. Enhanced dimensionality and palpability, which, together, pull one into the music, are perhaps the Ref 9 SE V2's outstanding strengths.

Jason Lim is willing to say this much about the new board:



"Several enhancements are responsible for improvements in sonic quality. By studying the thermal image of our V1 amplifier, we've been able to optimize the location of several heat-generating components for faster and more even heat dissipation. Also, heat is now conducted to the amp's top cover rather than the bottom, as was the case with V1.

"The differential feedback loop from the speaker now floats at the power supply's midpoint. V2 further optimizes the bias point, thus improving the op amp's performance. The result is an increase in power output.

"Judicious component placement and shorter signal paths also contribute to V2's superiority over V1. RF emission and noise have been significantly reduced. With respect to our technology's uniqueness, we've been issued four patents with two more pending. Not bad for a small company!"

Last word

The Reference 9 V2 is a great amp by any measure (and I'll bet it measures like a dream). In Jason Lim's opinion, the Reference 8.5, with which I've had no experience, is a true 'phile item at a most attractive price. I cannot confirm. However, as impressed as I am by the Ref 9 V2, I'm in love with the Ref 9 SE V2. I don't see how amplification can get much better than this. Different, certainly, which is why so much zealous partisanship informs perfectionist audio. If you've a hi-rez system and value verisimilitude, the Reference 9 SE V2 belongs on your short list.

As a clincher to all the above, I've recently installed Nordost's Tyr speaker cables in preparation for a review which will include Tyr interconnects. The Tyr speaker cable, one notch down from the company's top line, Valhalla, has an MSLP of \$5400 for the two-meter pair I'm using. Tyr provides another opportunity to repeat a point: the Ref 9 SE V2 will not be challenged, gainsaid or outdone. Body, resolution, transparency, micro- and macro-dynamic capability have all been enhanced. *And* the amps cost less than the cables.

The MSLPs for the Reference V2 line: 8.5, \$2500 / pair; 9, \$3500 / pair; 9 SE, \$5000 / pair. (The amps are available singly at half these prices.) The 9 SE comes with a five-year warranty, the 8.5 and 9 with three-year warranties.

V2 upgrades for the Ref 9 V1 and Ref 9 SE V1 are available at the difference in price between the old and new units. Because the Ref 8.5's V2 version is rated at 200 watts per channel as compared with the V1's 100W per, the upgrade comes to \$400. For particulars, www.nuforce.com.

Postscript

Haven't you been short-changed? I refer to an absence: the litany of discs and revealing moments within that help the reviewer to arrive at conclusions. And that, dear friends, is a mercy to you. In order to judge a review component's capabilities (and as a matter of taste), I play "acoustic" recordings, i.e., recordings of music performed in simultaneity within a single, coherent space. So long as the recording aspires to sound as we know it in life, those aspects that identify the Ref 9 V2 and Ref 9 SE V2 as extraordinary sustain themselves from disc to disc, however different one production is from the next.

The system: Wilson WATT / Puppy 8 speakers; Aurum Acoustics' Integris CDP player-preamp (www.AurumAcoustics.com); Nordost Valhalla balanced interconnects, Nordost Valkyrja speaker cables (discontinued), as well as the



Tyr speaker cables mentioned above; three Aurum Acoustics mods of Cardas Golden Reference power cords; four FIM 880 duplex outlets on four dedicated power lines; a Richard Gray's Power Company 1200S line conditioner occupying the duplex that feeds the Integris CDP (a story there, for later). The CDP sits on a quartet of EquaRack Multi-Mount Footers atop a 17-1/2 x 12-1/2-inch Golden Sound DH pad (a new product); and under the amps, quartets of VibraPod / VibraCone combos.

Disc treatment: In Random Noise 3, I cover a trio of effective devices from Acoustic Revive: the RD-3 Disc Demagnetizer, the RIO-5 II Negative Ion Generator, and the RGC-24 Grounding Conditioner. They remain at Sound Central as part of the Upward-and-Onward Suite. For information, go to the Japanese company's American distributor at www.LotusGroupUSA.com.

Recommended recording



chicago approach

guillermo gregorio | pandelis karayorgis | nate mcbride

Just one. (I spent most of my time with the amps.) Walt Mundkowsky, a LaFolia.com colleague, put me on to a Guillermo Gregorio release on a label I had not heard of. The Chicago-based reed player, whose music I got to know on a succession of superb hatART releases, has long been a favorite. *Chicago Approach*, Nuscope CD 1019

(www.nuscoperec.com), features Gregorio, clarinet; Pandelis Karayorgis at a Steinway D piano; and Nate McBride's double-bass. In the ensembles in which Gregorio participates as leader, art music meets cool jazz. *Fortes* occur

as rare events, and atonality flirts throughout. The disc's fifteen numbers (nine trio collaborations, two by Karayorgis, two by Gregorio) have been appropriately recorded (Mary Gaffney, engineer; Alan Bise / Acoustic Digital, mixing and mastering). The sound is warm and intimate, exactly what the music requires. The players are with you in the room. I'll be returning to Russell Summers' Nuscope label soon. A delightful discovery. Thank you, Walt!

Mike Silverton



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