



NUFORCE ICON HDP £345.

If you were to go back in time about twenty years then you would notice a few facilities that were fitted to the majority of amplifiers that are now a rarity, such as phono stages and headphone sockets. As readers know we regularly feature outboard phono stages to cater for those who wish to spin the sacred black stuff. Those who wish to use headphones are also catered for, with products from Pro-ject and GSP Audio being well known. California based company, NuForce, known for their range of digital amplifiers, also make a range of headphone amps, the newest of which is this, the Icon HDP.

This £345 unit can be used as a freestanding headphone amplifier, a digital-to-analogue converter, or as a preamplifier for two digital sources and one analogue. It is part of the 'desktop' range and can be partnered with the company's own similarly sized 24W Icon amplifier.

The casework occupies a compact 150x113x24mm, is available in either black or silver, and comes with a silicone shoe which allows it to be used in an upright position. The front panel contains two knobs. One controls the volume, and has an off position, the other selects source. Below this is a blue LED to signify power is present, and a 6.3mm jack socket for headphones. (A 3.5mm adapter is supplied).

The back is a little more crowded, with the power socket from the supplied AC adaptor at

the top, followed by the pair of gold plated RCA phono sockets for the analogue input, and another for the coaxial digital input. Below this is a 3.5mm socket, which doubles as an optical input, and the USB socket. This works at 44.1kHz/16 bit with USB 1.0 and 1.1, and goes up to 96kHz/24bit when fed with USB 2.0. At the bottom are the two RCA sockets for the analogue output.

I used it as a preamp, feeding, in turn, the two Quad 303s and the Leak Stereo 20 in my upstairs system. Analogue signal came from the Sondek/Musicmaker III feeding the recently reviewed Luxman E200 phono stage, whilst my Njoe Tjoeb 4000 CD player, digibox, DVD player and MacBook provided digital audio.

SOUND QUALITY

I normally use a Cambridge Audio DACMagic 3 for the above named digital sources. This automatically upsamples all signals to 24bit/192kHz so proved a hard act to follow. However, despite the lack of upsampling, the NuForce HDP proved a very competent performer with a well displayed, firmly defined soundstage which sat neatly between the speakers. Compared to the generally mediocre sound that emanates from most digital AV equipment and computer soundcards, the sound from the NuForce was superb. Stereo placement improved dramatically allowing me to visualise performers as individuals rather than a noise-making morass of sound.

The higher frequencies had a slightly firmer and darker edge to them than I would normally prefer, but some may well find this extra sense

of definition preferable. Feeding the rather laid back sounding Leak Stereo 20 certainly perked up the high frequency performance, without detracting from the fullness in the mid and lower registers. Bass was very fast, although not the weightiest that I have heard through either amp. Fed with analogue signals from the Luxman and the high frequency definition remained so I assumed it to be a characteristic of the preamp stage rather than the DAC.

The headphone output was equally well handled. My ageing Beyerdynamic HD411s had a slightly higher impedance than I think the output preferred, so volume was ultimately a little restricted, but certainly more than loud enough for normal usage (but unlikely to go so loud as to risk hearing damage). Compared to the Pro-ject Head Amp I found the sound to be a bit more open, but slightly cooler in outlook, with a perception of a bigger more enveloping soundstage.

Overall then, this is a very well specified, well made and interesting product. It packs a lot of very usable features into a small space and will win many friends due to its combination of practicality and performance. To my ears the DACMagic 3 just had the edge in performance with its 24bit/192kHz output, but is purely a DAC. The HDP is an affordable and easy way to get the benefits of an outboard DAC, the convenience of private listening through headphones, and a very acceptable preamplifier all in one compact unit. **TB**

[Contact: 08450 525259,
www.hiaudio.co.uk]



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