



Power play

Integrated amps might be popular, but **David Vivian** wonders if the small desktop power amp could be the next big thing

Just as graduating from a small, unobtrusive bookshelf speaker to a hulking great floorstander is considered a rite of passage for aspiring audio fans, so chopping in your integrated amplifier for two boxes that separate the delicate, easily corrupted work of the preamp from the brutish exertions of its power-hungry partner and granting them their own power supplies is deemed an equally desirable change of gear on the path to audio nirvana.

This is the hi-fi code, by and large, but the point at which people tend to think seriously about investing in a pre-power combo has shifted significantly towards the higher end of things. Partly it's because integrated amps as a breed have improved, ventured into ever-pricier segments and even created their own superheroes. Add to which the general trend towards integration, meaning fewer components for a given result and seductive shrinkage.

With an increasing number of products packing a DAC, headphone amp and a degree of preamp functionality into portable casework

that can also do the desktop/hi-fi rack thing when required, perhaps what the new audio world order really needs is a neat, small, affordable high-quality power amp to partner a dinky, do-it-all front end for those precious relaxing-at-home moments.

In the starkly simple and modestly sized shape of the STA200, that's what we have. Should we be surprised the Californian brand is pitching to drive this nascent trend? Probably not, as it has considerable form.

Detail sounds true and natural and meshes into the larger sonic picture

Brimming with confidence and enthusiasm, NuForce was something akin to a force of nature when it set up shop in 2005, vowing to "Thrill the ear, delight the eye and please the pocket". Selling direct to the consumer, it was one of the earliest advocates for Class D amplification, which featured heavily in its lineup of desktop audio components. Perhaps

inevitably, in attempting to prosecute so many then innovative ideas so quickly, that early fire nearly blew itself out. But not quite. When Optoma (the projector company) decided to buy NuForce and make it the audio arm of its business in 2014, it also acquired a lot of the original talent still locked into its "Small is beautiful" vision, building desktop-compatible components for critical ears.

The new Class A-B STA200 power amp is part of this brief and, so far, its highest-quality expression. Like the even smaller (smaller because it's Class D) STA120, it can be teamed with the company's DAC80 (£499, which essentially is a DAC that can support digital files up to 24-bit/192kHz with a digital volume control, four inputs (one optical, two coaxial and an asynchronous USB) and a single pair of RCA analogue outputs for hooking up with the power amp. Alternatively, there's the company's more versatile WDC200 wireless DAC (£395), or indeed any conventional preamp or functionally able DAC of your choosing.

The STA200 sees NuForce stepping outside its usual comfort zone on two fronts. First, it's a Class A-B design and – as this is billed as its 'reference' power amp – a tacit acknowledgement that when it comes to sonic excellence, Class D, for all its cool-running efficiency and compactness, still isn't quite there as a standalone proposition. Secondly, most of the important bits under the hood have been designed not by NuForce but Swiss high-end manufacturer Goldmund, perhaps most crucially the mechanical 'star-grounding' principle lifted from Goldmund's own mega-hertz bandwidth amplifiers. A dual mono topology has been used throughout to minimise crosstalk, contributing to

Ignore the nondescript chassis, this is a power amp of some distinction

which, the oversized, hand-wound toroidal transformer has separate taps for the left and right channels. The purist approach is followed through with twin rectifiers and separate PSUs all the way through to the output stages. Power is rated at 2x 80W into an 8ohm speaker load.

Optoma and NuForce are mostly responsible for the exceptionally neat, uber-minimal acoustically damped full-metal chassis. The casing is made from anodised aluminium with a fetching pearl-white scratch-resistant finish. Round the back, taking up the available space either side of the small heatsink array, are two RCA inputs, an IEC power socket and a pair of good-quality loudspeaker terminals. There's just one button and that's it on the otherwise featureless front panel. It switches the STA200 on and, to denote said status, a blissfully tiny red LED just to the left of it lights up. The unit feels reassuringly heavy for its size, nicely put together and is well finished. Aesthetically, hi-fi kit doesn't come more neutral than this.

Sound quality

The only other power amp I have to hand is my resident ATC P1 (HFC 397), which is roughly twice as powerful and comfortably more than twice the price of the STA200 and, therefore, hardly a fair comparison. But, as a firm believer in giving any product the opportunity for a spot of giant killing, that's never stopped me before and nor will it now.

No need to use ATC's matching CA-2 preamp to load the odds even more heavily in the British power amp's favour, so in the spirit of minimalism and even-handedness, my Chord Hugo (HFC 386) in DAC/preamp mode gets the job of driving the STA200 and P1, taking its orders from a Cyrus CDxt Signature CD transport (HFC 386) via a Nordost Blue Heaven digital interconnect. The rest of the

wiring loom is taken up a notch with Nordost Red Dawn. For initial listening the NuForce gets an easy ride with the Edwards Audio SP2 two-way floorstander (HFC 393), which is pretty efficient and has the knack of extracting a musical performance from most amps. Later I substitute ATC's three-way SCM 40 (HFC 389) which is much tougher to drive and ruthlessly revealing.

First impressions with the Edwards SP2 in situ are of clarity, exuberance and power that suggest the small amp has the compass to deal with the whole gamut of genres. There's warmth and colour and tactility to the sound possibly leaning towards a slightly hyped presence, but it's thoroughly engaging all the same.

It should have no trouble filling a large room with high-quality sound

Snappy timing and a taut, agile bass performance quickly stand out with the gloriously laid-back sax and keyboard-led fusion of *Get Up* from Jeff Lorber's latest album *Step It Up* – his most enjoyable work in years, despite the predictably formulaic structure and arrangements. There isn't quite the air and openness I'm used to with the P1, but images are tightly focused and extend convincingly beyond the confines of the SP2's cabinets, giving a fine sense of breadth and depth.

Good, too, is the way detail sounds true and natural and meshes unobtrusively into the larger sonic picture. Ambience is nicely conveyed and supplies the requisite atmospheric backdrop to Kate Bush at her most ethereal during the *An Endless Sky Of Honey* half of *Aerial*. Biffy Clyro at their most raucous is a

little less successful. Here the P1 power amp keeps a tighter grip on proceedings, with a palpably more powerful bass performance and greater dynamic expression, and this becomes more apparent when I switch to the large ATC floorstander. That said, the NuForce amp doesn't smudge edges or blur textures, presenting performers and their acoustic environment as a coherent whole with the full spectrum of tonal colours and beautifully resolved instrumental timbres. It isn't as ruthlessly revealing as the more muscular and expensive ATC power amp, but for the most part it is a lovely thing to listen to that should keep on delivering for the long term. And as long as you don't over stretch its speaker-driving capabilities, it will have no trouble filling a large room with high-quality sounds.

Conclusion

It may be small and plain, but beneath that nondescript wrapper, the STA200 is a power amp of some distinction with solid musical instincts and a slightly rose-tinted presentation that, nevertheless, consistently rewards and is easy to live with. In a downscaled audio world, here's an upgrade well worth auditioning ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
NuForce STA200

ORIGIN
USA/Taiwan

TYPE
Power amplifier

WEIGHT
6kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
355 x 87 x 224mm

FEATURES

- Quoted power output: 2x 80W
- Dual mono Class AB design
- Incorporates Goldmund star-grounding

DISTRIBUTOR
NuNu Distribution

TELEPHONE
0203 5442338

WEBSITE
nunudistribution.co.uk

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

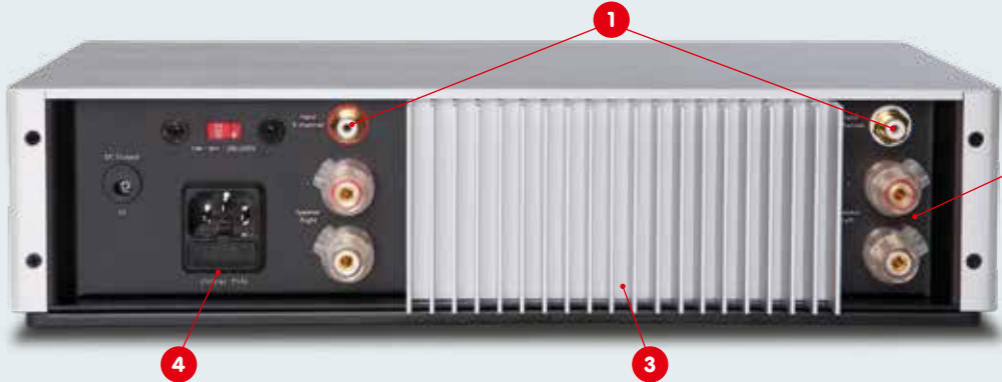
OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Build and finish; compact size; beguiling sound quality

DISLIKE: Some lack of neutrality

WE SAY: Teamed with a talented source and DAC/preamp, this is desktop hi-fi at its best

CONNECTIONS



- 1 RCA phono inputs
- 2 4mm speaker binding posts
- 3 Heat sink
- 4 Three-pin IEC mains input