



## NuForce P8 Preamplifier

Chris Martens

A splendid introduction to the world of high-end separates

FOR OBVIOUS REASONS, MANY AUDIOPHILE-IN-THE-MAKING BEGIN their quests for great sound with modestly priced integrated amplifiers or receivers. However, as they gain experience and develop a passion for more revealing sound, there often comes a time to take the plunge into the world of separate components. When that happy moment arrives, listeners naturally seek out the best entry-level (or near-entry-level) preamplifiers they can find. Over the years, I've been blessed with the opportunity to live with some excellent affordable preamps, but two in particular stand out in my mind. The first is the award-winning Rogue Audio Metis, a tube-powered unit that I reviewed in Issue 160. The second is the solid-state NuForce P8, which is the subject of this review. Both the Metis and P8 are sonic overachievers that offer different but complementary interpretations of the absolute sound. I'll first recount the sound of the Rogue Audio Metis as a means of setting the stage for discussion of the NuForce P8.

The Metis, like many good vacuum-tube-powered preamps, offers almost magical harmonic richness and rightness in the midrange. However, unlike tube designs that sound rolled-off or softly focused at the frequency extremes, the Metis exhibits evenly balanced frequency response and nearly the level of control you might expect from a good solid-state preamp. But if the Metis is a tube preamp with some solid state-like qualities, then the NuForce P8 is its complementary opposite—a solid-state preamp that offers certain tube-like virtues.

The P8's sonic signature centers around traditional solid-state clarity, definition, tonal balance, and control, but with a twist. Unlike solid-state designs marred by a cold, sterile, or hyper-analytical sound, the P8 instead exhibits an extremely subtle and engaging touch of warmth, which affects the preamp's presentation from top to bottom, but is most noticeable through the bass and lower midrange. As the P8 breaks in, this quality of warmth evolves, imparting some of the refined harmonic complexity associated with tube preamplifiers. At the same time, the P8 maintains the sort of sharp focus and taut control that are the hallmarks of good solid-state designs. I should also mention that the P8 proved as quiet as the proverbial tomb (though nowhere near as, er, dead-sounding), offering a noticeably lower noise floor than the Metis.

Not only does the P8 sound good; it is also a joy to use. If, like me, you find that setting exactly the right volume level is one of the keys to achieving great sound, then you'll love the P8. The preamp

# Start Me Up

NuForce P8 Preamplifier



## Specs & Pricing

**NUFORCE (NPHYSICS)**  
356 South Abbott Avenue  
Milpitas, California 95035  
(408) 426-4165  
nuforce.com

**Type:** Solid-state stereo preamplifier  
**Inputs:** Four stereo analog audio inputs (three RCA, one mini-jack)  
**Outputs:** Two stereo analog outputs (one balanced XLR, one single-ended RCA), headphone output (mini-jack)  
**Dimensions:** 8.5" x 1.75" x 16.5"  
**Weight:** 6 lbs.  
**Price:** \$1195

### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Wilson-Benesch Full Circle analog system; Linn Sondek LP-12 turntable and Ittok LVII tonearm; Benz Micro ACE L phono cartridge; Musical Surroundings Phenomena and Sutherland Ph3D phono stages; Musical Fidelity Tri Vista SACD and kW SACD players; NuForce Reference 9 Special Edition and Kharna MP150 monoblock power amplifiers; Audio Research D330.2 stereo power amplifier; Epos EL5303, NHT Classic Three, Paradigm Reference Signature S8, and Mirage OMD-28 loudspeakers; Furutech Alpha Reference interconnect and speaker cables; RPG and Auralex room acoustic treatments

supports precise volume adjustments via—picture this—a digitally-controlled, analog resistor-based volume control that offers settings ranging from -70dB to +30dB in .5dB increments! There are so many settings possible that the P8's remote control offers "jump ahead" controls that let you fast-forward to 25%, 50%, or 75% of maximum volume.

In practice, the P8 is most in its element when playing material that incorporates rich layers of inner details just begging to be revealed, and when fed recordings that offer precise, accurate imaging and soundstaging cues. For example, I put on Christine Collister's *Love...* [Rega, LP] to sample the artist's thoughtful cover of the classic Joni Mitchell song "Amelia," and there discovered a small treasure trove of musical riches. The song opens with Collister singing alone at center stage, her solo voice joined only by a faint wash of wind noises appropriate to the song's aerial theme. What first struck me was the textural depth and focused sound of Collister's voice, which offered an eye-opening contrast to the higher but thinner and more diffuse sound of Mitchell's voice from the original recording. Where Mitchell's voice soared up and away like the spirit of the departed Amelia Earhart, Collister's voice has a beguiling, earthbound richness that the P8 captured beautifully, adding an intriguing new dimension to the song. Even the wind effects worked well, probably because the

transparent P8 let me hear how artful the producer had added them to the mix.

As the song unfolded, things became even more interesting as backing vocalists join Collister at

stage, with a few voices

entering initially

and then a full

chorus arrayed in

broad semi-circles

behind her. What

I didn't anticipate

was the P8's ability to

reproduce the voices of

the backing vocalists with

essentially the same precise focus

and spatial localization I had observed of

Collister's voice. With the chorus present

the width and depth of the soundstage

became apparent, so the entire back wall

of my listening room was filled with

voices supporting Collister on stage. At

its best, this little preamp thoroughly

explores discs, effortlessly delineating

complicated, interwoven timbral, textural

and spatial details.

Good though the P8 is, comparison

with tube preamplifiers such as the Metis

reveal areas where it might be improved.

First, the P8's highs tend to sound

slightly dry and two-dimensional relative

to the sweeter, more three-dimensional

treble response good tube units achieve.

Second, the P8 never fully captures the

vivid, vibrant tonal colors that tubes, at

their best, can reproduce. In fact, those

tonal colors may even be a form of

coloration, but if so it's a coloration that

brings listening sessions alive.

Which preamp sounds more musical?

The answer depends on your priorities.

The Metis is arguably more magical and

involving in the midrange and treble

region, and it provides an onboard mid-

phonism. On the other hand, the

P8 is quieter, more flexible, and more

revealing of subtle inner details, and

it offers greater definition, broader

frequency response, and unequivocally

superior bass. Both preamps compete

effectively with models twice their

price, and either would make a splendid

introduction to the world of high-end

separates. Either way, know that the Metis

and P8 both serve music well. **TAS**