

# TONEAudio.

## The Peachtree Nova



When Peachtree Audio brought out their Decco amplifier/DAC combination two years ago it was an amazing product for \$800. It featured a 50wpc integrated amplifier with a tube in the input stage to add a little bit of warmth to its basic 16/44 DAC smoothing out some of the digital grunge. It featured a slot on the back for a SONOS controller and a decent headphone amp on the front panel. Anyone wanting a basic system only needed to add a digital source, some inexpensive speakers and voila! Instant HiFi. The sound quality was excellent for the price point but if you moved up on the speaker food chain, you could hear the limitations of the Decco pretty quickly.

The guys from Peachtree didn't let the initial success go to their heads with their sophomore effort the NOVA. At first glance it looks almost identical to the Decco, but it has been improved in every way. This is a serious piece of HiFi gear, folks.

The amplifier's power has been upped to 80 watts per channel and they kept the tube in the preamplifier, offering you the option to switch it out of the circuit, running the amplifier all solid-state. It uses a single 6922 and for the life of me I wouldn't know why you would want to do remove it from the signal path, because it still adds a welcome touch of warmth and body. If you swap that 6922 for a vintage NOS Mullard, the NOVA takes another big step in the musicality department and one exotic tube won't break the bank. But the switch it is a very cool convenience feature, if you just happen to blow a tube late one evening and don't have a spare you can just push the button on the remote and you are back in business. A very nice touch.

The outer case of the NOVA is available in a gloss black, rosewood or cherry finish. Our review sample came in cherry and was very attractive. When powered up, the NOVA's power button glows red until warmup, then becoming blue, with whatever input you've selected pulsing with a blue glow until the signal is playing. The buttons have a damped feel to them, but the volume control feels somewhat benign. Of course none of this will matter if you use the handy remote control, and at this price level, I'd rather see a manufacturer scrimp in the feel department to maximize the sonic capabilities and that's exactly what has happened in the NOVA.

### **Very versatile, plenty of inputs**

The NOVA has three sets of analog inputs, with one of them switchable as a HT pass through, a pair of RCA S/PDIF digital inputs, a pair of Toslink digital inputs and a USB input. There is a fixed level output and a variable output, which allows you to use a powered subwoofer with the NOVA or just use it as a preamplifier, feeding a different power amplifier. There is one pair of speaker outputs, with the standard Chinese plastic coated binding posts. I'm not a fan of these but on a \$1,200 integrated I can certainly live with them.

The slot for a Sonos still exists and I can't think of a better match for a Sonos system than the NOVA. This has to be the most painless way to ingrate a music server into a 2-channel system. The front panel features a standard ¼-inch headphone jack and offers first class sound. I had the opportunity to use the new Sennheiser HD 800's and was very impressed with the NOVA's performance on a pair of headphones worth more than the NOVA itself! For the headphone listeners in the audience, I had no problems driving my Grado GS1000's, Sennheiser 650's and AKG K701's; the NOVA's headphone amplifier is very versatile.



However, the NOVA's digital versatility was what impressed me the most. Using the budget Pioneer 563 and a Marantz Pearl K1 CD players as transports, I also had the Wadia 170i and a Mac Book Pro connected to the NOVA to give it a thorough workout.

The NOVA has taken the biggest step up from the Decco in the DAC department, now featuring the ESS 9006 chips from SabreDAC, the company that supplies McIntosh with the 9008 chips used in their MCD 500. Those expecting the performance of the Mac for \$5,000 less will be disappointed, but if you are looking for a very musical DAC with an integrated amplifier thrown in, you will be pleasantly surprised.

Thanks to the analog inputs, I spun some records as well, adding the Cambridge Audio 640P and my modded Technics SL-1200 to the mix, again proving what an excellent all around achiever the NOVA is. Thanks to this flexibility, the NOVA should be able to cover any future expansion plans you have for your system.

## The Sound

I started my listening sessions with the NOVA with my recently acquired set of Spica TC-50's because they offer incredible performance for the dollar (If you can find an unmolested pair) and possess a degree of resolution that you'd be hard to match with today's budget mini monitors under \$1,500 a pair.

If you've been around the HiFi world for a long time, you might remember when the NAD 3020 integrated amplifier hit the scene. For about 200 dollars, it was amazing in its ability to offer serious high quality sound for such a low priced amplifier and held its own with separates costing a lot more. Perhaps the (highly overused, these days) phrase "giant killer" came from reviewers listening to that famous little integrated. The NOVA does well to hold up this



tradition.

To round out the review, I used a number of monitors from KEF, Snell, ProAc and Harbeth to investigate the amplifiers' performance with more upscale speakers before the NOVA ended up in my living room system, paired with the ZU Essence speakers. The Zu's are a little unfair because they have a sensitivity of almost 100db, so most anything can push them to way more than adequate levels, but they are an excellent reference because they are so detailed and offer great midrange tonality. If an amplifier is going to fall down, the Zu's are merciless at revealing its shortcomings. Again, I was highly impressed with the combination and pairing the NOVA with the Zu's provided incredible dynamic range. The NOVA is much cleaner sounding throughout the range than its predecessor and the extra power goes a long way to make it compatible with a much wider range of speakers.

The NOVA worked particularly well with ERA's D5 mini monitors (also available from Signal Path International) and at \$995 a pair, makes a pretty unbeatable combination. There's no way you can get close to this level of sound quality at a mass market shop for \$2,000. Watch for an upcoming review of the D5's.

After extensive listening, all of the NOVA's sins are those of omission. It could certainly use more refinement in the highs and control in the lows. But then it would cost \$4,000. The difference between the NOVA and the higher priced gear is in the fine details. When listening to solo piano or violin recordings, the extreme highs became somewhat brittle and the level of tonal richness that you would expect with higher priced gear was absent.

Also, overall soundstage shrunk compared to the MCD 500 or the Marantz Pearl. This was expected though, as these players are \$6,000 and \$3,000 respectively.

When comparing the NOVA with an inexpensive transport to a number of CD players in the \$800-\$1,200 range, it was consistently as good or better. The minute you switch to Pearl Jam or Yello, your worries will disappear.

### **Well worth the pricetag**

And remember, you are getting a preamplifier, headphone amplifier, power amplifier and DAC for \$1,200! I dare you to come even remotely close for twice this amount of money with separate



components.

While the NOVA was an exceptional performer no matter which way I used it, I think the killer application is as the hub of a computer based playback system, because the NOVA's USB implementation is excellent. I enjoyed this amplifier the most when playing uncompressed WAV files from my Mac Book Pro. With the low price G4 Mac Minis are fetching on eBay, you could build a complete music system that you could control from your iPhone for peanuts. A Squeezebox would also be an excellent choice.

Playing within its abilities, the NOVA will never cease to amaze you.

## **The NOVA is an outstanding value**

The Peachtree NOVA offers so much performance and versatility for \$1,195 that it is more than worthy of one of our Exceptional Value awards for 2009.

Whether you are an audiophile on a budget, need a great second system or are sending your kids off to college; anywhere you need high performance audio without a stack of components, the NOVA is the best suggestion I can make. I've never used the word best in TONEAudio's history, but this is the best budget HiFi component I've ever had the pleasure of using. - *Jeff Dorgay*

## **The Peachtree Audio NOVA**

MSRP: \$1,295

### **Manufacturers Information**

Signal Path International  
704-391-9337  
[www.signalpathint.com](http://www.signalpathint.com)

### **Peripherals**

**Digital Sources** Pioneer 563, Marantz Pearl K1 CD player, McIntosh MCD 500 CD player, MacBook Pro, Squeezebox, QSonix music server, Wadia 170i

**Analog Source** Sound HiFi Technics SL-1200, Cambridge Audio 640P, Sumiko Blackbird

**Speakers** Zu Audio Essence, Harbeth Monitor 40.1, ERA D5, Spica TC50

**Cables** Audience AU24 S/PDIF digital cable, Zu Libtec Speaker cables, ED 422 interconnects

**Accessories** Shunyata Hydra 2 power conditioner, Shunyata Venom power cord