

## Charles Umberger reviews the Peachtree Audio GaN 1

I've become accustomed to being surprised with the innovative components produced by the good folks at Peachtree Audio. Thirteen years ago, I purchased their original Decco when it debuted and was wowed with this very cool desktop integrated amp with a built-in DAC and a pair of their Design 5 speakers. More recently I had the pleasure of testing their Nova500 which demonstrated tremendous leaps in performance over previous Class D designs. Right on the heels of the Nova500 were the preDAC and GaN400. I was gob smacked by this affordable combo which punches well above its class and is worthy of serious consideration by any serious audiophile. In fact, the GaN400 is nothing short of revolutionary. It is everything Class D dreamt of being, and then some. Looking back on Peachtree's beginnings it's rather amazing to see the trail that they have blazed, constantly innovating and improving and always delivering great value. Most recently they announced the GaN 1 power amplifier.

The GaN 1 stands out for several reasons. Number one is that it requires no preamp and no DAC. It provides a simpler, cleaner signal path than traditional DAC, preamp, power amp setups. It accepts a single coaxial digital input from a source such as a streamer with variable output. The cabinet is a departure from the beautiful gloss black or gloss ebony wooden cabinets Peachtree uses for all of their other amplifiers. Those beautiful, deep glossy cabinets deserve to be displayed and admired. The GaN 1 is housed in a slightly smaller simple gray aluminum enclosure. The name Peachtree is embossed in the front panel. There's also a light and a power button and that's it. The rear panel has a single coax input, a pair of high-quality speaker binding posts a power switch and a socket to connect a standard 3 conductor power cable. That's it. Nothing else because nothing else is needed.

The GaN 1 is designed for a single digital audio source, ideally a music streamer, though a CD player with variable output would work as well. It's a seriously good stereo amplifier with a very clean signal path and a focus *entirely on performance*. My guess is that Peachtree designed the GaN 1 for a high quality second system (think home office, den, home gym, etc.) An audio lover who wants a system dedicated to their space might choose the GaN 1 with a pair of quality bookshelf speakers and a good streamer. The streamer and amp could easily be placed in a cabinet, out of sight/out of the way, and the system could be controlled entirely from a smart phone. It's a beautiful marriage of simplicity and performance. As soon as I heard about it I asked to join Peachtree's GaN 1 beta program.

I have to admit that as I unpacked the GaN 1 I was a little surprised. It's smaller than the Nova line of integrated amps, though it feels like maybe it's a bit heavier. The metal cabinet is simple, even plain. There's no fancy display and no lacquered wood finish. The look is purely utilitarian. I was anxious to try out the GaN 1 so I decided my den system was the first/best place to try. That system was comprised of a very good John Curl-designed Parasound preamp and a monstrous 200-watt Classe amplifier driving a pair of Vandersteen 2 Ce Signature II speakers. Before making the switch, I refreshed my memory by listening to the existing setup for about 30 minutes. It sounded every bit as good as I remembered and really left me wanting nothing more.

Then I set up the GaN 1 and connected it to the Vandy's with some Transparent speaker cables. I added a Bluesound Node as the front-end/source. Before powering on the GaN 1 I made certain to enter the Bluesound menu and set the output from fixed to variable so that it could

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serve as volume control/preamp. If you neglect to make this change you will send maximum volume through your system and risk damaging the amp and especially the speakers. After double checking that the Bluesound was set to variable output and with the volume relatively low, I then queued up my demo play list and hit play.

Initially, I planned to set the volume to a moderate level and then leave to allow the system to warm-up for a half hour or so. The music began and, in an instant, I was utterly transfixed by what I heard. Absolutely no warm-up was needed. There are lots of adjectives thrown around in audio reviews. Words like “amazing” and “incredible.” They don’t even begin to serve in this situation. The sound was nothing short of astonishing! The GaN 1, straight out of the box, made my Vandersteens BETTER! For a few moments I stood there spellbound, soaking in the kind of performance I’d never heard from the Vandersteens. The GaN 1 delivered the rare sort of reproduction that rivaled the best systems I’d ever heard. I marveled again at how this little amplifier had made my Vandersteen speakers better. At least, that’s how it seemed. I’ve been listening to Vandersteens since shortly after the Model 2 debuted and I’ve never heard them sound this good.

Of course, it’s not possible for an amp to make another component *better*. But the GaN 1 sure did make my Vandersteen’s *sound a whole lot better*. I’ve had several very good high-end components in that system over time, and the Parasound/Classe setup was no slouch. But the GaN 1 was better and by a good margin. This was no incremental improvement. It was leaps and bounds better than the Parasound/Classe. Both systems produced a well-defined soundstage. Both had excellent dynamics. Both had solid stereo imaging. Both offered a clean, quiet backdrop. Both offered solid bass, accurate mids and airy highs. Neither system offended the senses, nor did either system have any glaring weakness. And, before I’d ever heard the GaN 1, I would have quickly sung the praises of the Parasound/Classe system. But the Peachtree GaN 1 introduced a level of realism I’d never experienced.

**Warning: Spoiler alert!** I’ve listened to quite a few top-notch systems in 40 some years of enjoying audio. My current setups include McIntosh, Mark Levinson, Chord, EAT and the like. The GaN 1 was a breath of fresh air and is far beyond anything I ever thought Class D could be. Right now, the heavyweights (literally) rule the amplifier world. Monstrous Class A and Class A/B amps which weigh well over 100 lbs. And the very best compete well and some of them best the GaN 1. But this race is no longer the runaway it once was. *This technology is the future of high-end audio*. The fact that Peachtree is offering it right now, and for a mere pittance compared to most high-end amplifiers, makes it a real treat. Peachtree has shown us the future of high-end audio and it’s very exciting! **End of Spoiler.**

Recordings I had heard many times were transformed by the GaN 1. I found them to be much more engaging. Much more intimate. Much more real. Whereas a good system produces a 3-dimensional soundstage that a listener could envision, the GaN 1 gives that soundstage texture, substance and intimacy. Instruments were cleaner, clearer and had better separation. More than simply envisioning the soundstage, I felt I could see AND feel the instruments and performers as the music was created in front of me. The sound was immediate, intimate, and very engaging (forward, but in a positive way). I sat awash in this incredible experience for quite a while. I usually do my critical listening alone but, this time I wished that I’d had a friend

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or two over to listen with me. It was one of those moments that the only thing that could make them better is to have someone there with whom to share the experience.

Over the next several days I spent hours listening to the Bluesound Node, Peachtree GaN 1 and Vandersteen setup. Even after listening for a couple of hours, all I wanted to do was listen more. Eventually, and for comparison's sake, I ran some other setups through the Vandersteens. Good amps. Good preamps. The only thing that really approached the purity of the GaN 1 was a Mark Levinson amp paired with the John Curl preamp. Considering the cost difference (not to mention the size and weight difference) it was hardly a fair fight. This was David vs Goliath, and Goliath had been on steroids.

To be completely fair, the Parasound preamp is an excellent unit and it's a go-to piece for me because of its performance. And, to be fair, Mark Levinson is renowned for their amplifiers. They sound fantastic and they are loaded with power and current. The Parasound/Levinson setup is very, very good. I gave the GaN 1 plenty of listening time. Likewise, the Parasound/Levinson setup. In the end, it's a tough comparison. The Parasound/Levinson is everything an audiophile could love. Frankly, so is the GaN 1. Based upon extensive listening and consideration I concluded that the limiting factor in that comparison was the speakers. It's possible that one system or the other was better than the other but I could not make that call in that situation. If you are familiar with Mark Levinson then you understand just how good the GaN 1 is. This little Peachtree amp is more than capable of driving anyone's secondary system. *It is a fair contender for any amplifier under 5 figures and it is hands-down better than most.*

As audiophile speakers go, the Vandersteens are a little bit of a challenge to drive. You need a fair bit of current and a conservative 100 watts (or more) to bring them to life. Anemic amplifiers need not apply. The GaN 1 handled them beautifully. As I have a number of speakers/systems on hand, I decided to experiment with some more demanding designs. First up was a pair of Aerial Acoustics 6T in my dedicated 2-channel listening room. The Aerials are probably my all-around favorite speaker. They are normally driven by a McIntosh C22 Mark V preamp and a Mark Levinson No. 27 amplifier. The source is either a Bluesound Node running thru a Chord Qutest or an EAT C# turntable running through a Sutherland phono stage. The sound is luxurious.

I set the Peachtree GaN1 up in my 2-channel room and connected the Aerial 6Ts via Transparent Audio Music Wave Super cables. I knew that the Aerials might provide more of a load challenge than the Vandys. They are rated at 6-ohms and 86 db sensitivity. The long and short of it is that the GaN 1 handled them beautifully. There was no instance in which I felt the sound was in any way strained. In fact, after an hour of playing at traditional listening levels the GaN 1 seemed like it was loafing. At the end of my listening session the amp was still cool to the touch!! That is something I've never been able to say about an amplifier before. Even most Class D amps get a little warm after a while. I don't plan to replace my McIntosh/Levinson electronics with the GaN 1 but I certainly could. If I were setting up a new 2-channel room without vinyl I could live quite happily with the Peachtree.

At this point in my experimentation with the GaN 1 I decided to get a little crazy. My theater system currently has a pair of Magnepan 3.7i speakers in place. Maggies are very fun to listen

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to and even more fun to look at. But they are well known for needing lots and lots of power and current. And they are also known for needing reinforcement in the low end. The Maggies were connected to a Mark Levinson No. 335 amplifier pushing 250 watts into 8-ohms, 500 watts into 4 ohms and 1000 watts into 2 ohms. And, frankly, it's a good match for speakers as demanding as the 3.7i's. I figured if anything was going to stretch the GaN 1 beyond its limits, the Magnepans were as good of a candidate as I was likely to find. So, I moved the Peachtree into my theater room.

Before I switched over to the GaN 1 I spent some time listening to the Magnepans thru the Levinson with the Bluesound Node as the source/preamp. Since this was my theater, I had spent more time with the Maggies watching movies than listening to music and I wanted a baseline to compare to the GaN 1. The Maggies sounded exactly like I expected. Detailed, clean and fast. Just a tad thin on the low end. Indeed, they benefit substantially from a good quality subwoofer which is in place when they are used as part of my theater. Still, the combination sounded very, very good and shortcomings were sins of omission. After a reasonable period of listening, I felt it was time to make the switch to the GaN 1.

I suspected that the GaN 1 might come up a bit short in driving the big Maggies. The 3.7i panels present a difficult 4-ohm load, a figure which can cause very good amps to struggle. Adding insult to injury, the Magnepans are not very efficient, either. My understanding is that GaN based amplifiers can struggle with difficult loads, to the point of a dramatic shift in sound. I wondered if additional power required to reach normal listening levels might just be too much to ask of the GaN 1.

I fired up the GaN 1 and I was immediately struck by just how great the Magnepans sounded, just as I was with the Peachtree driving the Vandersteens. From the first cut the GaN 1 transformed the Magnepans. All of their virtues were clear and present. Imaging was spot on. Detail and speed were all I could ask for. Soundstage was large and three-dimensional. All things I had heard when driving the Maggies with the big Levinson. But the GaN 1 took things to a new level. Bass frequencies were filled in beautifully. Warmth, richness and depth that was missing earlier was suddenly present with the Peachtree. I've heard the Maggies when driven by massive tube amps. The warmth is present in that case. But not the "feel it in your gut" speed and slam that's required to truly convey bass in a realistic fashion. The GaN 1 delivered that better than I'd ever heard from the Maggies (short of the previously required subwoofer(s)).

The Levinson maintained control of and authority over the Magnepans. That's expected from a 150 lb massive Class A/B solid state amplifier. With extended listening I felt like the GaN 1 simply could not manage the same level of absolute control. And as a result, the Maggies sounded a little less focused at times. That said, in every other sense, the GaN 1 acquitted itself beautifully. Bear in mind that the current 250 wpc Levinson power amplifier retails for over \$20,000. The Peachtree GaN 1 is less than 10% of that price.

In closing, I think it's clear that Peachtree has produced exceptional performance in their efforts with GaN technology. Both the GaN400 and the GaN 1 represent unparalleled bargains in the amplifier world. The GaN 1 is especially such a bargain because of its advantages in simplicity

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and purity of signal path. If you are thinking about putting together a high quality 2-channel audio system, you should give the GaN 1 serious consideration. Frankly, I cannot think of a solution that I would prefer over the GaN 1 for any but the most demanding situations. For a secondary system the GaN 1 simply outclasses the competition, especially when I consider the performance/value equation offered by Peachtree. Assuming a single or limited number of inputs, it's a viable choice for many primary systems as well.