

## Peachtree amp500

After unpacking the amp500 I first set it up in my den for a full break-in. It spent a couple of hundred hours driving several pairs of speakers at mostly low and moderate volume. I wanted to ensure that the Peachtree had every opportunity to perform at its best. I really didn't do any listening during this period, except for a few minutes here or there when I changed speakers out or stopped in the room to tweak volume. Every time I got a couple of minutes with it, I was impressed. Usually, I had to force myself to break away and NOT listen while the amp continued to break in.

Having just had the opportunity to demo Peachtree's impressive nova500 integrated amplifier I felt like I was probably in for more of the same. After all, the amp500 is another Peachtree design. A Class D amp based on the latest ICE chip-set. The nova500 is an outstanding high-power integrated amp and it surprised me throughout my listening experience. I expected to hear pretty much the same things with the amp500. Yet, right off the bat I could tell that there was something special about the amp500. Something different. This is not just a nova500 without the preamp circuitry. Something magical was happening and it was something that made my time with the amp500 truly rewarding and very intriguing.

After listening to the first song on my playlist I knew I was listening to something different. Of course, with the amp500 I was forced to employ my own preamp so it's entirely possible that some of the differences in sound (from the nova500) are from using a different preamp. Since I have several preamps available, I decided to focus most of my critical listening with the Parasound Line Stage, an excellent if aging John Curl design. I usually pair the Parasound with a Mark Levinson No. 27 power amplifier and I decided that comparing that combination with the Parasound/Peachtree might be useful. I also decided to do some listening with my PS Audio PCA 2 preamp, a very good if often underestimated unit. Both preamps served well with the Parasound having a slightly warmer sound and the PS Audio presenting an open, slightly airier sound.

I chose to begin my critical listening in my 2-channel room with the amp500 driving Aerial 6Ts, a reasonable challenge even for very good amplifiers. My sources were an EAT C# turntable with SoundSmith Zephyr MIMC Star connected via a Sutherland Engineering Insight phono preamp and a Bluesound Node playing through a Chord Qutest DAC.

When listening to a new piece of gear I tend to leverage my long-term "demo" playlist which is a mix of artists and genres from the last 60 or so years. There's hard rock, bluegrass, classical jazz, light jazz or what some call easy listening, classic rock, southern fried rock and more. There are acoustic and amplified instruments and a fair number of quality vocals. I chose the tracks in the list for the quality of their performance, recording and engineering but also because they represent pieces that will challenge reproduction and to highlight both shortcomings as well as highlights of the assembled components.

As with the nova500 one of my first observations was that the amp500 has power. Lots and lots of power. I was used to the Mark Levinson (which is no slouch when it comes to driving speakers) but the Peachtree quickly reminded me that it's a different animal. Beast might be a better word. The Aerial 6T speakers are a bit of a challenge to drive given a 3-4 ohm load. They tend to perform very well with big, powerful solid-state amplifiers known for being able provide lots of musical "muscle." Names like Levinson, Krell, Bryston, etc. come to mind. They tend to come with high price tags as well as 70 or more pounds of copper, steel and aluminum. The amp500 handled the 6Ts without so much as breathing hard. No matter what I threw at my system, the amp500 consistently delivered every bit of juice that my speakers wanted, and I always had the feeling that the reserve was plenty deep. The amp500 never broke a sweat.

Coming off the review of the nova500, I wasn't too surprised about the power that the amp500 displayed. It's all about the sound and at its price, I have to admit I had some doubts that the amp500 could deliver everything that I wanted and expected. Aside from the obvious and immediate observation that this amp delivers on power was a shocking appreciation of just how good the piano on my first demo track sounded. I hadn't even taken a seat in my listening chair and I was stopped in my tracks. There in front of me, in my very moderate listening room, was a large concert grand piano. I was literally stunned because I'd never experienced something quite like this before. Good piano tracks can be an excellent test of reproduction. But this was the first time I'd really heard (and visualized) a cohesive musical image of a concert grand piano in my listening room. Quite the start to my critical listening.

Over the next couple of hours, I worked my way through my demo play list consistently impressed with what I heard. And, often, what I didn't hear. Just as with the nova500, the amp500 is extremely quiet. If anything, the amp500 is *quieter*. It has a deeper, blacker backdrop with a lack of noise that is disarmingly pure. Every time I powered on the amp500 I found myself double-checking for the power light. If I didn't know better, I might have thought that Peachtree had patented some "noise suckers" to remove all sounds EXCEPT for the music. As a result, every track that came through was refreshingly clean and pure. Tracks that I'd heard before I was hearing again with a *new appreciation*. It was as if *the recordings themselves had gotten a good wash*. Distortion and noise that had smeared (even slightly) some recordings were gone. I was hearing things *more clearly, more purely than before*. Subtle is not a word you often hear associated with monster amplifiers, but it applies here. The amp500 has as much power as you will ever need, but it's amazingly revealing of the subtle sounds that can mean the difference between great playback and true high fidelity. More importantly, the amp500 does this without a hint of harsh, analytical nature that other "detailed sounding" amplifiers tend to convey.

I was no longer hearing vague blurs in the music (often very faint) which were apparently manifestations of noise and distortion sneaking into the music. A fantastic example of this showed up in The Nitty Gritty Dirtband's Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Music Forms a New Circle. Instruments (and vocals) which had often before 'blurred' together were suddenly clearer, more distinct and more immediate. As if I had opened and walked through a door into a room where the music was actually playing, versus hearing it through the door. "Keep on the

Sunny Side” transported Mother Maybelle Carter and her autoharp right into my room. For just a few minutes Mother Maybelle was alive again, playing and singing with an amazing supporting cast. I could hear the subtlety not just in her singing but in everything she did as she sat and played. Her breathing, her focus, her energy. I ended up listening to several other tracks from that recording continually impressed at just how present and immediate this 50-year-old recording suddenly sounded.

Music is full of these subtleties but presenting them with the detail and accuracy we hear live is something very special. The amp500 is very refreshing in its ability to present the full subtleties of sound without introducing an inkling of being overly analytical. Though detailed, it is pleasant to listen to. If the amp500 were human I would say it sounded relaxed, confident. And it does so not just in the context of reproducing individual sounds but in creating the framework of the entire sound picture.

The amp500 takes each recording and somehow builds a soundstage that, at times, seems to circumvent physics. Sometimes the soundstage seemed bigger than my listening room. Other times it seemed to shrink my room and create an illusory sense of closeness, intimacy. No matter the scenario, the amp500 created a sense of space that matched perfectly the picture created by the live performance. Sometimes that space was a large hall with a live audience. Sometimes it was tight, intimate studio. The amp500 found a way to build each soundstage to expectations, track after track. And somehow, imaging never got lost. If anything, focus increased and image was tighter and more vivid. Visualizing each performer in place was never easier or more certain.

As I worked my way through various additional tracks, I continued to be impressed with the amp500. Power, check. Quiet, check. Dynamics, check. Soundstage (dead on), check. Imaging (very focused and clean), check. Everything we all look for in a good power amp was showing up beautifully. There are a lot of amps on the market that can check off most or all of these things to one degree or another. It’s a much bigger challenge to tick all of these boxes and to do so confidently. Track after track, the amp500 performed like a swiss watch, never missing a tick. The thing is, you can’t buy a great swiss watch for \$2,000. And it’s not particularly easy to pick up a good stereo amplifier for that figure. Certainly, I don’t know of a single amp in this price range that consistently delivers so many good things. ***Send the amp500 to the head of the class.***

What happens when we push the amp500 up to compare to the next class of amplifiers? Before we go there, let’s acknowledge that this is a lot to ask. There’s a HUGE difference between the market for under \$2000 and amps in the next tier. I demand and expect much more from an amplifier as prices rise to the mid thousands. It has to do EVERYTHING checked off in the previous paragraph and something much more important. Power, dynamics, soundstage, etc. don’t mean a lot if the amplifier isn’t *musical* at its core. “Musical” is a little vague so let me try to explain what I mean.

Sound has certain characteristics whether it's produced by shattering glass or by the voice of a female vocalist. It has to flow, to be linear. It is continuous like a stream of water. One of the early criticisms of digital recording was that it lacked this natural flow. The data was "perfect." The 0s and 1s were all there but the sound just wasn't right. I remember the first few years of CDs. We were amazed by dynamics and signal to noise ratio of the format. But there was something not quite right with music from CDs. It didn't sound natural to our ears the way LPs and tape did. Fortunately, digital recording and playback has improved dramatically. But just as early CDs struggled to present a "musical" sound, some components lack that natural, musical, flowing sound.

As I mentioned in my review of the nova500, class D amplifiers have a reputation for lacking musicality. They tend to sound "hard" rather than musical. Though my concerns with regard to the nova500 were quickly alleviated, I came to the amp500 with some of those same concerns and pre-conceptions. Would it look good on paper but lack the musical output to actually make it enjoyable to listen to?

Listening to track after track, however, it wasn't soundstage or imaging or dynamics that continued to capture my attention. It was the absolute pleasing musicality of the amp. Stevie Ray Vaughn's guitar sounded as if he were live as I'd heard him years earlier. The Eagles beautiful 4-part harmony, again, dead on to what I've heard live. The Notting Hillbillies "Your Own Sweet Way" was nothing short of ethereal with the tranquil, hypnotic and understated singing of Mark Knopfler and an easygoing, intimate accompaniment of some of the world's finest guitarwork. Absolutely seductive. Knopfler's work has an almost sensual character to it, as if his voice and instruments are wrapped in mink. I felt it. The amp500 served it up as intimately as if I'd been standing in the studio with Mark and company at the time.

Switching gears just a bit, James Taylor Live presented an animated and open theater. The character of the image was much bigger and far less intimate than with the Notting Hillbillies. In "Handy Man," Taylor's relaxed voice colors and shades this cover as no one else could sounding at once like the everyman yet exuding suave seduction while guitar, piano and percussion offered reassuring, melodic accompaniment. I know because I was there in the audience that night, right there in my listening room. The amp500 had no trouble bringing the sound forward and livening things up. It was as true to Taylor's voice *and to the venue* as it had been to Knopfler's understated voice and guitar.

As much as I love the purity of acoustic instruments and wholesome, unaltered voices, there's nothing like the driving sound of mid and late 70s hard rock. When I fired up Joan Jett's "I Love Rock and Roll" her gritty, unpretentious voice echoed up behind the pounding percussion and soaring, hard-core guitar. This track is about as subtle as a cinderblock crashing through your windshield. It is classic, hard rock hammering its message through heavily amplified guitars, deep, rhythmic bass and Jett's raw, tenacious singing. And the amp500 presented every bit of that message with both revealing detail and tremendous slam.

Throughout my listening the amp500 did the job I expected and hoped for and often much more. During my listening I made extensive notes. Sometimes I played a track repeatedly just to ensure I had an accurate picture of what I was hearing (and, as noted above, what I wasn't). All in all, I felt that the amp500 consistently performed well above its class. Rather, it consistently performed well above other power amps in a similar price range. With all due respect to some of the better 2 channel stereo amps in the sub \$2000 range, this isn't a fair fight. So despite its affordable price, the amp500 doesn't belong in the class with other "affordable", "budget" or "bang for the buck" amplifiers. This is an amplifier that can stand on good footing against some very good amplifiers in that next price class. If you're looking for a stereo power amplifier in the \$3000 - \$8000 range, do yourself a favor and add the Peachtree amp500 to your list of candidates.

In addition to the musical performance of the Peachtree, there are some other things worth noting. For one, it tips the scales at around 12 pounds. I think it's 16 pounds in the factory carton. If you don't enjoy hauling around 80-100 blocks of aluminum, copper and steel this will be a refreshing change. As I get older, my appetite for lugging heavy amps around has declined. The amp500 has a petite footprint to match its lighter weight. I'd call it a ¾ sized component. At about 14" wide and deep and about 5" tall, it's an attractive size that will fit neatly in almost any rack. No shoehorn needed. Moreover, this is an unusually attractive amplifier. Like the nova500, it's available in a piano black or gloss ebony, both with a distinctive 'pewter' look face plate. It has a distinguished, finished look that that's about as far from a typical large solid-state amp as you can get. Lastly, this thing runs cool. Even with hours of listening the passive cooling design of the amp500 works beautifully. Placing my hand on top of the unit it was never more than what I'd call pleasantly warm. No fans needed. No massive external heat sinks. And no need to add additional air conditioning to your room.

I am fortunate to be able to sample a lot of different equipment and I've been seriously interested in high fidelity since the late 1970s. Over the years I have owned many different amplifiers and demoed many, many more. My reference amplifiers for the last 20 years or so have all been Mark Levinson. For me, it's very hard to beat their sound. Year in and year out I come back to them as my reference. I've had other amps in and enjoyed them very much as well. My point is, I have high expectations for the equipment I choose to listen to. The Peachtree amp500 *is in very good company when I say it's an amp that I could definitely live with for the long term.*

In a nutshell, the amp500 is one of the first really musical sounding Class D amplifiers I have ever heard. In fact, *I will state outright that it is the very best sounding Class D amp that I have personally heard.* Take that to the bank. Better yet, run out and pick up an amp500 and put a few thousand dollars in the bank. It's that good.

- Charles Umberger, amp500 Owner