

The nova500 puts the fun back into listening and it brings with it a single box solution for your electronics and more power than you've ever had!!

I've had the nova500 in my system now for several days and just wanted to note some of my thoughts so far. Quick thoughts off the top?? This piece is amazing!! Tons and tons of power. It's one of the few integrated amps I've ever heard with such openness and space! And the background is completely black. No noise. Nothing but silence. This really allows the music to shine. Almost all amps have at least a little background noise. There is NONE here. Did I mention power? I've rotated several pairs of speakers through and was both surprised and impressed at how well the nova500 meshes with and handles each of them. Power is NEVER a concern. The nova500 is the Clark Kent of integrated amps!! Good looking, respectable, does everything right, but not even a HINT of the power hidden in this good looking but smallish package. No matter what load I threw at it, it sailed through easily.

Before we get into the listening too far, let's talk about some of the other cool factors for the nova500. For one, it's a whole system in a single box. Preamp, power amp, DAC, phono stage and (coming soon) networked streamer. Not bad. It's a lot of bang for a reasonable buck. Don't have a standalone 2-channel system? No problem, the nova500 features a Home Theater Bypass input. Drop it into your surround sound system and switch back and forth from stomping dinosaurs and 11 speakers to a 3 piece jazz combo playing on your main Left and Right speakers! Most of us cannot afford to do a high end theater and a nice 2 channel system. The Nova lets us live in both worlds. It's got a simple, well-designed remote control. Want to use your programmable 5 pound, touch-sensitive, macro enabled, theater remote with color touch screen? No problem. Or, just keep the stock remote handy. It's all you need. Ahh, the simplicity. The front display is simple, clean and informative. The back is clean, well labeled and well stocked with input choices. There are two analog inputs. And there are a selection of digital inputs including optical, coaxial and USB. There's a loop out/in option (think equalizer or other sound processor) available as well as regular preamp out. Also included are high quality speaker binding posts which will accommodate spades, banana plugs, pins or bare wire. About the only thing I didn't see was a subwoofer output.

Now for some real-world listening. First up I connected Polk LSi 15s, a semi-vintage speaker which is a challenge to drive. The Polks present a 4 ohm load and 88db sensitivity. With some amps the Polks seem loose and sloppy, especially in the bass. I had tried several big solid state amps on these speakers and most just could not tame them. The nova500 proved to provide plenty of power and also firmed up the rather loose nature of the Polks. Bass remained deep but became much tighter and faster--much more musical. The difference was staggering. Mids, remained the strong point but the sense of pacing and cohesiveness was improved. Everything gelled. The highs were open and airy with plenty of detail but never fatiguing. The best I'd ever heard these speakers sound. Frankly, the nova500 changed my perception of these speakers (for the better) but also confirmed what a challenge they are to drive.

Next up were some decidedly mid-market Paradigm towers. The Paradigm are solid performers and do well with both music and theater. If they have a fault it's that they can be a bit on the bright side. I was concerned that matched with a Class D amp, this might be an issue. Most Class D amps I've heard have an edge to them and come across hard. Just moments in to my listening my fears were alleviated. Again, there was plenty of detail and air, but, thankfully none of the hard/shrill sound I had feared. The sound-stage was large and well-defined. Bass was present but not overwhelming. Pacing was right on the money. And, again, even after a couple of hours of listening, not a hint of fatigue. The nova500 is "more/better" amp than a pair of \$1200 speakers need but that's not a problem. Someone who is building their system could certainly move to this amp now, and continue to enjoy their current speakers while they wait to upgrade.

The third pair of speakers were ERA Design 4 (and Design 5) bookshelf speakers. I'm going to share a bit more about these speakers because they are such a surprising performer and are not well known. For their size they are fairly heavy and the cabinets are dense and very quiet. You may recall that they were among the first products sold by Peachtree back in the day of their original decco. Though they are rather diminutive, they have excellent bass extension and the ability to play much bigger than their size suggests. They are also far better speakers than their retail price would suggest (something I have come to expect from Peachtree). Designed by Michael Kelly and built in China, they represent a very pleasing blend of great engineering with affordable manufacturing. And, in fact, might be all someone would want or need in a home office, den or bedroom system. That said, they aren't your typical super efficient/sensitive bookshelf speaker. They are nominally rated at 6 ohms but likely drop lower at various points. They are spec'd at 84db sensitivity! In other words, you are going to need some power and current to get the most from these little guys. I've driven them with BIG tube amps, vintage receivers, small integrated amps, monster solid state amps and a few class D amps. With the right amp behind them, they can fill the room with satisfying, pleasurable music. In short, they can play much bigger than their size.

Bass on the Design 4s only extends to 50-60 hz or so, but it's fast, tight and musical (about all you can ask of a 4" woofer). The midrange. What is there to say but "ahhhhh". These little speakers get the midrange right. The D4s are musical, fun and play well beyond their size when properly fed. The nova500 drove these as well as any amp I've heard. Massive soundstage with excellent three-dimensionality. Smooth mids, airy highs, tight bass down to the 60 hz range. The combination of the nova500 and the Design 4s is fast, musical, fun, surprising. And, again, plenty of power even in a medium to large room. My listening room is pretty good sized and is open on the back (as many dens are these days). The 500 supplied everything the D4s needed and had plenty of capacity left over. The soundstage was absolutely room-filling and there was not a hint of strain, ever. Not many integrated amps (even in this price range) can make that claim.

The preceding comments apply equally to the ERA Design 5 speakers as well. The most obvious difference between the two is slightly deeper bass extension with the

larger D5s. If you have a pair of good but hungry bookshelf speakers, the nova500 is more than up to the challenge. The 5s might be a bit more power hungry but the nova500 stepped up again and never broke a sweat.

Next up was a move into my serious 2-channel listening room. My regular system in here is a Mark Levinson No. 27 amplifier matched with a John Curl-designed Parasound preamp. It's fed by a Bluesound Node going through a Chord Qutest DAC and by an EAT C#/SoundSmith Zephyr MIMC Star running through a Sutherland Insight. I've had the Parasound/Levinson system running for several months after alternating for a while with a Primaluna DiaLogue Premium HP. Different sounds but both outstanding systems. I prepared myself mentally for another major change with the Peachtree. My reference speakers are Aerial Acoustics Model 6T. Levinson and Aerial is a wonderful combination, certainly among the best I've heard and certainly the best I've been able to afford in my personal system.

With that said, I have to confess that I had some hesitation about just how good the system would sound with the nova500 in place of John Curl and Mark Levinson. Most audiophiles acknowledge the efficiency of Class D amplifiers but insist that they lack the musical purity of top quality tube or solid state A/B designs. Frankly, Class D amps have a reputation for having a hard sometimes edgy presentation. Compared to quality tube or Class A/B solid state amplifiers, most tend to lack a truly linear, musical sound. Lest I give this issue too much attention, I will simply say that to date, I had not heard a Class D amplifier that I would put into full-time service in my 2-channel system and I expected this to be a short test.

Initially, I connected the Peachtree directly to my Bluesound Node via its analog outputs. I wanted to start with the most basic source before engaging an intermediary DAC or the DAC built in to the nova500. A few sample songs were all it took me to switch back to the letting the Qutest handle D to A conversion. The Bluesound is a fine streamer but the included DAC simply isn't on par with an excellent outboard DAC like the Qutest. With the Qutest back in place and doing its thing, I proceeded with critical listening.

I fired up a diverse playlist on Qobuz, my go-to streaming service. Most of the selections on the list stream in high resolution. Either 24/96 or 24/192. A few are CD resolution at 16/44. My playlist covers a little of this and a little of that. Mostly contemporary music from the 1950s to the present. Some is all acoustic and vocals. Some is hard driving rock. Some is bluegrass. Some is country. Some is jazz. Most of the play list has been chosen for the quality of the music including both the performance and the recording/engineering.

I sat down in my listening chair and fired up my default list and then something funny happened. Within a couple of songs I forgot about critical listening and just enjoyed the music. Within 3 songs I forgot about listening critically and sat back enjoying the music and just letting it rip. It was kinda like being a kid again. Sitting in my room with a Technics turntable, Yamaha amplifier and Infinity speakers. Back then it wasn't about the ultimate high-end gear, it was about enjoying great music. And with all due respect

to 100 pound amplifiers today, it is still about enjoying the music. I started bouncing from my list to other selections from the artists on the list. One Eagles song wasn't enough. Neither was one Steely Dan. Nor one Steve Miller. Same for Norah Jones, Diana Krall and Dean Martin. Don't laugh, neither was one Carpenters song enough. I was just having fun with music and several hours had passed. And, yes, I did realize during my listening what had happened but I was having too much FUN to stop having fun and pick up my pen and notebook again.

What I had anticipated to be a short, scripted demo turned into 3 weeks of letting the Peachtree be the go-to amp in my system. Day in and day out. Holidays, weekends and work days. With family and other guests. And listening just myself. If you take nothing else from my feedback about this amp, listen to this: It made me forget about the system and let me enjoy the music and have pure, old-fashioned, fully-involved-in-the-music fun!! During this time I didn't push the demo and I never forced myself to sit down and do a hard, focused analytical listening session. I just let things go and I can say that I was never disappointed.

After 3 weeks it seemed time for me to get back to the critical listening I had set out to do. Working with my initial demo play list and a number of other selections I spent the better part of several afternoons listening more critically. On occasion I still found myself tapping my foot along with the music or just getting lost for a few minutes letting the music wash over me. But I forced myself to come back to the serious listening I'd set out to do. This included switching to the Peachtree's built-in DAC and giving it a thorough going over both compared to the Bluesound's analog output and also compared to the nearly \$2000 Chord Qutest.

Do I like the built-in DAC better than my Chord Qutest? No. At nearly \$2000 as a standalone DAC, the chord is an outstanding performer and a great value. But I do like the nova500s DAC. It's a huge improvement over stock analog output from a typical CD player or streamer (including the Bluesound). I found it to be a little brighter and livelier than the Qutest but absolutely fun and listenable. Switching between the nova500 and Qutest I felt like the Qutest just had a little richer, fuller sound. THE Qutest was better all around but the Nova's DAC is no slouch and would be as much or more than most people need in a DAC. Again, for someone building a system, the nova500 gets the job done and done well. If you want to upgrade to an external DAC later, you certainly can. But chances are, you will be very happy with the DAC Peachtree has already provided. For someone who wants a great integrated amp and doesn't want to run around looking for a separate DAC, it's the best of both worlds.

I was not able to test the Phono stage on the Nova. My EAT C# turntable is fitted with a low output MC cartridge from SoundSmith. The table is connected to a Sutherland Insight phono preamp. However, I did play the turntable through the Insight and into the nova500 and it sounded as good as I expected.

There's a lot going on with this component. Twelve years after Peachtree shipped their initial Decco integrated amp with built in DAC, the "all-in-one" units seem to be the rage. Not only does the nova500 have top notch preamp and amp on one chassis, it

includes a high quality DAC and a MM Phono stage. This latest generation Sabre 32 bit DAC is quite impressive and the fact that it's included makes it even more impressive. Peachtree also has plans to add wifi networking soon (an upgrade you can make post-purchase) further simplifying things.

What are my conclusions? The first word I want to use in describing this amplifier is "surprising." It's surprising in just how well it does everything you ask it to. Are there weaknesses? Of course. But list of pleasant surprises is long.

First of all, it's quiet. Dead quiet. The background is BLACK. Everything coming out of the speakers is music. If you're used to faint/slight hum or noise with other amps, this might surprise you--there is nothing there. I know, once the music starts you no longer hear the noise most amps put out, but it's still there. This dead quiet blackness is rare. I'm sure that only enhances the sound-stage and imaging, both of which exceed expectations for an all in one, especially at this price point.

The second big surprise is seemingly unlimited power. I have had the pleasure of playing with some very big, very heavy, very powerful amplifiers over the years. The nova500 never left me feeling want of power. Many well known, work horse amps still left me occasionally wanting just a bit more slam. The nova500 seems like it's got endless power on tap. Maybe there are speakers around that are too much of a challenge but that's got to be rare. And in the ever-growing world of integrated amp/DAC/phono stage units, I can't think of another piece that has the power on tap like this guy.

The third big surprise is just how fun this amp is to sit down and listen to. It's fun, musical, relaxed, open and powerful. It handles demanding speakers with authority and control. Bass is fast, tight and deep. Mids are clear, open and musical. Relaxed. Did I just say that about a Class D amp? Yes. I did. There are a number of more expensive Class A/B integrated amps that could take a note from the Peachtree. The highs are clear and airy but never harsh or glassy. Most of the time it sounded like or even felt like I was listening to a top notch Class A/B solid state amp. I've found that many Class D amps force a shortened listening experience. My ears get tired. I never had that experience with the nova500. No matter what I threw at it, it was FUN to listen to. Maybe this should be the first big surprise!

Equal to the positives in its performance, the nova500 has some nice intangibles going for it as well. The first is that the whole package is under \$3500. That's not pocket change but in a world of integrated amps that can cost \$5000 (and more), this is a nice surprise. Yes, there are cheaper integrated amps out there. Some of them sound pretty good. But there are some integrated amps that are a good bit more expensive which don't come close to the overall package provided by Peachtree. If you're looking for a top notch integrated amp, you should give the nova500 a serious audition. You might just find that it's more than you need and more than you expected. And you might just put a couple of grand back in your wallet.

Every component has strengths and weaknesses and the nova500 is no exception. I've spent most of my feedback on the positives, mostly because they have been so profound and, to some degree, surprising. That said, the nova500 does have its trade-offs. While most Class D amps run "cool", the nova500 runs "warm". It's not hot, but if you place your hand above vent while it's running you will definitely feel some heat coming off of it. I'd say it's probably comparable to warmth you would feel from mid-power solid state amps. This amp is not one you can lock up in a cabinet. It needs proper ventilation!

The Nova is surprising in a number of ways and probably its greatest strength is that it is fun to listen to! That's no small feat. The flip side of that is that while it does a lot of things better than a lot of its competitors, it's not quite going to match top notch Class A or Class A/B output from more traditional amps. Under critical listening I definitely find that my Parasound/Levinson combination produces more refined, more musical output. Sonic detail is better but it's more than that. It's a more linear, better flowing presentation. By itself, the nova500 does a great job. Huge soundstage, plenty of power, etc. But it's simply not as refined as some good Class A and Class A/B solutions available.

I cannot comment on the phono stage on the nova500 except to say this. While it's great to have a built-in phono stage, it is what it is and that's as good as it will ever be. Ditto for the DAC. The included DAC is good. But that's as good as it will ever be. It's great having both included in one package and that is the right/permanent answer for many people. But the only upgrade path for either is to go to an external unit. Not a big deal for most of us, but something to be aware of. The nova500 is a one box solution that's hard to beat but if you want or need to grow, the DAC and phono stage are sunk costs.

And that's it. This is a well thought out piece of gear. Overall, the positives certainly outweigh any concerns.

My last comment about the nova500 is really what's least important to most of us. Appearance. True audiophiles have been known to have some awfully dang ugly equipment. Or at the least we are known for having components with massive cabinets taking up valued space. Not to mention 100 pound amplifiers to trip over and which cause the lights to dim when we fire them up. The nova500 is absolutely the opposite in every respect. It has a smaller footprint than the average preamp. The faceplate is aluminum but with a dignified pewter look to it. Display is limited to a couple of faintly glowing LEDs to show power and input as well as volume. The cabinet is available in a deep gloss black or a deep gloss ebony (like a tiger eye). Both are beautiful but the ebony is drop-dead gorgeous. Compare that to a Cambridge, Anthem, Parasound or whatever (Levinson, Krell) you like. This thing is gorgeous. Hands down it takes the crown for looks (including its petite footprint).

- Charles Umberger, nova500 Owner