

Ampsandsound Nautilus

Top of the mountain

\$9,200
ampsandsound.com

The ampsandsound Nautilus adds to our set of data points when it comes to mega headphone amplifiers. Having spent considerable time with the V16 from Octave, the big two-box unit from Woo Audio and the 750-U from Luxman, they all provide top sound; each with a completely different approach. Our only complaint with the Luxman is the cost for a single use box. Its dual-function nature makes the ampsandsound piece shine (like the Octave and the Woo) brightest. It can be used as a single input integrated amplifier with a pair of high-efficiency speakers.

Selfishly speaking, this is super cool for several reasons. First, and perhaps most obvious, its easier to justify an \$9,200 purchase if you can use it for two things. Second, and perhaps most important, it sounds fantastic, and is worth the asking price, even if you only use it as an 8-watt SET amp, or a headphone amp.

Remember, Wavac and Audio Note amps cost five times as much. So, don't look at it as an expensive headphone amp, think of it as getting an amplifier that's as good as or better than a \$90,000 Audio Note amp for a tenth of the price, that can also be used as a headphone amplifier.

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The dance starts with incredible sound, incredible value, and off the chart great build quality. The Nautilus is built the “way they used to build em,” all point-to-point wiring. If they still make headphones and you can still get vacuum tubes in 75 years, I’ll bet heavily this amplifier will still be an object of desire in someone’s listening space. Whatever that might look like.

So much fun, we're not sure where to begin

While we were waiting for a pair of vintage Altec 14s from our friends at Gig Harbor Audio, listening begins with our Harbeth C7ES3-XDs. A pair of 86db/1-watt two-way monitors that you might not think a likely pairing with 8 watts per channel. However, this robust amplifier does a great job with the Harbeths in a 13 x 18 room. If you don't need ear splitting spl's, the 8 watts per channel the Nautilus provides is more than enough to be musically engaging.

Then, the Altecs arrive and they end up being more fun than I should be able to have. With every other amplifier tried (see the Old School column) these speakers sound awful. Yet, moving the Nautilus in is pure bliss. Where things sounded constricted and densely packed before, now there's tons of air and space. The Altec's even offer up some decent bass extension with the Nautilus, something they struggle with, using a number of other amplifiers.

Moving on to the very efficient Zu Dirty Weekend speakers (96dB/1-Watt sensitivity) is an even bigger treat. Combining modern day speaker technology with an amplifier capable of this much low-level detail retrieval is nothing short of stunning. Tracking through The Crash Test Dummies, "Superman's Song" has so much delicacy, between the strings and lead singer Brad Roberts ultra-quirky vocals, feels like a completely new recording. The decay in the piano, and Ellen Reid's backing vocals are distinct, now occupying their own distinct space, yet just creep into the mix so subtly, you don't know she's there until she is. The Nautilus unfolds a recording, deftly rendering it for your enjoyment, and provides a ton of depth, texture, and tonal contrast.

The only parallel I can draw with this amplifier is going from an off the rack suit, to an Armani suit, to either a bespoke suit, or a great suit that has been altered to your bod by a master tailor. At first glance, they all look like black suits on the rack, but as you go deeper and deeper, the details make all the

difference, and the experience is all the richer for it. The longer you listen to the Nautilus, the more you are drawn into the experience, and the more time you want to spend in its grip. Under its spell.

The engineering behind the fun

In case you missed it at the beginning, the Nautilus is a class-A, single-ended amplifier with zero feedback. It arrived with a pair of KT88 tubes (one for each channel) but the Ampsandound website says that it can use "6L6GC through KT90 tubes, with KT120 and KT150 not supported."

Zero short cuts are taken in the execution of this deceptively simple design. Everywhere you look, the parts are of the highest quality, including the critical output transformers, and the rigidity of the chassis. Doing it right takes time. That's what you're paying for here. You can go buy an inexpensive tube amp and it will sound pretty good, but it won't come close to what the Nautilus offers. It is a masterpiece. This is a piece of gear like a Leica camera, or an Eames Lounge chair (a real one, not a \$600 Amazon fake) that you not only will hand down to someone in your family, but will have people fighting over who's gonna get it. In a day when you buy appliances that croak three days after the warranty period is up, it's really cool to see something with this much thought and care put into it.

But what about headphones?

Selfishly, I wanted this amplifier in for review, to listen to it as an integrated amplifier. Ampsandound principal Justin Weber calls the Nautilus their "flagship personal audio tubed integrated amplifier." The front panel has individual taps/output jacks for 8, 16-, 32-, 100- and 300-ohm headphones. It produces between 5 and 8 Watts per channel into any of these outputs, but the incredible quiet that the Nautilus serves up will grab you right away. I will catch you off guard, trust me.

HeadphoneArts

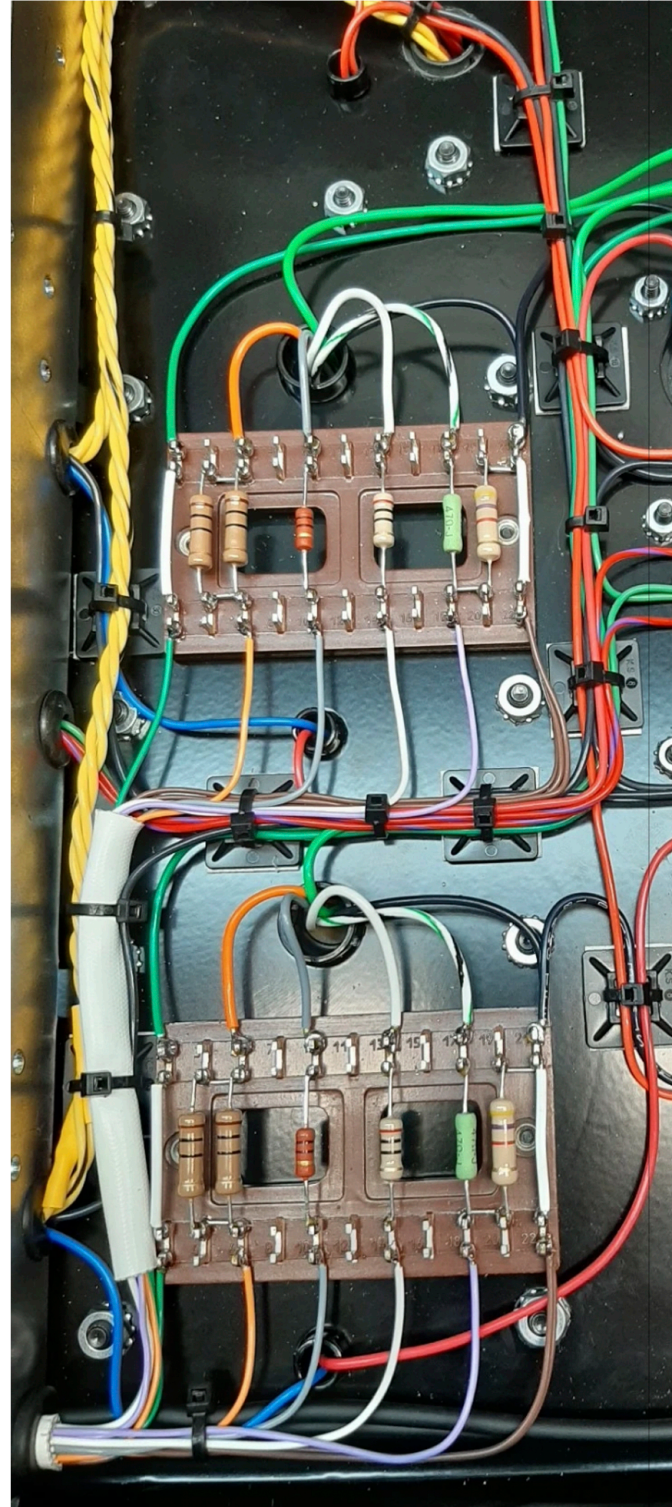
Another reason this amplifier is so dynamic, as if it gets a lot louder than an 8-Watt per channel amplifier, regardless of whether you are using headphones or speakers.

With a handful of phones' at my disposal, from my ancient Koss Pro 4AAs all the way up to the Stellia and Utopia phones from Focal, (with some Audeze, Dan Clark, Grado, LHA, and Sennheisers thrown in for good measure) this was one the most engaging headphone experiences I've had along with the other three amps mentioned at the beginning of this review. So, I'll put the Nautilus in my all-time, top four.

Everything mentioned about speaker presentation applies to headphone listening. Because headphones can be more resolving than some speakers, and with the drivers are so close to your head, the potential for high-resolution listening is exciting.

Ampsandsound claims on their website that there are no limitations in terms of headphones, and there certainly weren't with our lineup. Much like a big power amplifier really taking hold of a giant pair of floor-standing speakers, the Nautilus does this with headphones in a similar way. Ever remember going into a hifi show room where companies with modest speakers were using big, high-powered amps to drive them? And how you never thought those inexpensive speakers could sound so good? The Nautilus does the same thing, exerting so much control over the drivers, your current phones will reveal more music than you thought they were capable of. Even my 50-year old Pro 4AAs sound incredible with this amplifier.

The Nautilus excels at perspective as well as control. Some premium headphone amplifiers present the music in such a massive way, it almost feels like either you're taking hallucinogenic drugs (fun, but tiring after a while) or really overblown. The Nautilus delivers a big soundstage, but more in a listening to a big pair of speakers in a big room way. They go further at making the headphones disappear than anything I've yet experienced. The better your source and recordings, the more of this effect will be clear.



It's important to mention here, that for all of the listening sessions, the dCS Vivaldi One was used for digital music, and the Rega P10 with Apheta 3 and Pass XS Phono were used for analog music. Both were connected to the Nautilus with a single pair of Cardas Clear interconnects, and Cardas Clear speaker cable was used for all the speakers, to keep evaluation as consistent as possible.

Decisions, decisions

The toughest part of all this is whether to buy an Ampsandsound Nautilus as an incredible 8Wpc SET amp and start investing in efficient speakers, or to buy it as a premium headphone amplifier, and maybe add speakers later. Of course you can use it for both functions, but I have a sneaking feeling no matter what your initial intentions are, you will end up modifying your listening habits to use it as both. A simple flip of a switch allows you to go from phones to speakers, so you won't have to waste time manually re-configuring things.

If you're a specs/measurements geek, you probably won't embrace this amplifier as warmly as I have, and you know why. Honestly, I didn't write this review to convert anyone.

However, I think if you approach the Nautilus as an SET lover, wanting to reach the top of the mountain, or a confessed tube lover that is SET curious, this amp will win you over with its sheer musicality

Best of all, this amplifier arrives in a bright orange finish, which is stunningly close to the Inka Orange on my 76 BMW 2002. A favorite to be sure. A happy color. The Nautilus is a happy amplifier – it certainly makes me happy. Looking at the Ampsandsound website, you'll notice that there are a number of different color choices available.

Custom colors are also available, but must be cleared with Ampsandsound. Expect a bit longer wait, just because of the extra work required.

At nearly \$10,000, this is not a casual purchase, and I won't treat it as such. But, you can buy a lot of mediocre things repeatedly, or you can buy something amazing once. If the latter is how you approach things, the Nautilus will be the end of your journey. Very highly recommended.

