



# NuPrime HPA-9



**N**uPrime is a brand based on a combination of technological innovation, no-nonsense functionality, intelligent features, and – above all – an excellent price/performance ratio.

The marque's range of products is as extensive as it is varied, spanning everything from high-end stereo and home theatre to compact desktop systems, and even personal stereo.

The HPA-9 takes aim at the burgeoning headphone market with a combination of performance and versatility in an attractive, compact package. The horizontally bevelled faceplate has no less than three headphone inputs – a 3,5 mm minijack socket, and a pair of 6,3 mm headphone jacks.

NuPrime says the HPA-9 will drive three headphones simultaneously, which seems like a somewhat unlikely scenario. However, it does make me wonder whether the two 6,3 mm outputs could be combined for balanced operation?

Rotary controllers on the left and right provide source selection and switch-on plus volume adjustment respectively, while an almost invisible slider switch at the bottom edge allows a choice of low or high gain to allow for use with a wide range of headphones, including high-impedance designs.

The rear has a on/off rocker switch adjacent to an IEC power socket, together with two line-level, stereo RCA input sets, and a phono input. The latter can be set up for moving magnet or moving coil cartridges via an internal jumper.

The presence of not one, but two stereo RCA output sets confirms that the HPA-9 can also fulfil pre-amp duties when linked to an off-board power amp such as the NuPrime STA-9, which is ideally suited to this role (and the pre-amp's small footprint).

It may appear sleek and simple from the outside, but the innards lack nothing in complexity. This is a pure Class A, zero-feedback design with an ability to cope with a broad range of headphone impedances – up to 1 kOhm, if NuPrime is to be believed.

Specific features include a single-ended JFET input stage with tube-like characteristics, and an amplification stage fitted with NOS Hitachi transistors. These transistors were chosen for their high current capability, wide bandwidth and low output capacitance.

The non-feedback Class A output stage implemented in the HPA-9 achieves very low levels of linear distortion, NuPrime claims, while a 12-strong array of 2 200 microFarad capacitors, together with auxiliary caps, provides 30 400 microFarad of reserve power – ample to drive even the most challenging headphone loads.

Much of the listening for this review was done with my regular Sennheiser HD800 headphones – an excellent match for the HPA-9, despite being considered fairly difficult to drive at around 300 ohms.

I also used the HiFi MAN HE400S, which seemed marginally more revealing, but colder and more uncompromising, while the Sennheiser Momentums added a little too much warmth and glow to the music.

In overall terms, the HPA-9 delivered a clean, clear and approachable performance. It could be accused of being a little too critical of incoming signal quality, but it certainly was meticulous in its rendering of fine detail.

The amp had the ability to explore and expose every facet of the music, laying bare details and subtleties that were not always that apparent. Its tonal approach was best described as neutral, with no sign of bite or sibilance in the treble region, and a smooth if slightly lean midrange. Low frequencies were presented with compelling impetus and energy, while reaching down low enough to endow the music with a solid, authoritative foundation.

Roger Waters' *The Wall Live* soundtrack (Columbia FLAC) captures the electricity and the spectacle of Pink Floyd's music with almost panoramic, three-dimensional splendour. It also allowed the NuPrime's talent for detail to be believably and enjoyable showcased.

The dialogue between electric guitars on 'One Of My Turns' was precisely presented, and there was an almost revelatory appeal to the way the HPA-9 extracted and presented layers of sound.

The Bernard Haitink/LSO performance of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 7* (LSO Live FLAC) is quite measured and tidily structured, which can make the music sound a little constrained and polite.

The HPA-9 did well to find and extract some sparkle and energy. It was able to express subtle dynamic variances and reveal finer details, which in turn made a



persuasive argument for listening to the entire symphony.

Leonard Cohen's dark and melancholy opus, *You Want It Darker* (Sony LP) is almost disconcertingly intimate, with the late bard's gravelly vocals fluctuating from world-weary to confessional.

The NuPrime treated the music with deference, affording Cohen's vocals loads of space, and capturing the finest slivers of music with painstaking precision.

On 'I'm Leaving The Table', his voice reaches deep down the tonal scale, supported by sparse, but evocative accompaniment: a Duane Eddy-style lead guitar, smooth acoustic rhythm, twinkling strings, and a deep, rumbling bass. The HPA-9 ensured full, glorious, seamless access to the music.

The astonishingly lucid, wide-open recording of Macy Gray's *Stripped* (Chesky FLAC) sounds like it was made for a quality headphone/amp combo like

this. The sound here extended the stage well away from the listener, so that I never felt as if I was being cooped up between two point sources – the soundstage appeared almost infinite, with no sense of boundary or limitation.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time with the NuPrime HPA-9. It's a rare beast in that it eschews the more usual combination of headphone amp and DAC for an all-analogue configuration, and the inclusion of a decent phono stage.

An extremely low noise floor, an inherent lucidity benefiting fine detail retrieval, and a neutral but fluid and incisive delivery were key hallmarks, as well the ability to accommodate a wide variety of headphones.

Most of all, I enjoyed the outright honesty of the HPA-9, which allowed unfettered and enjoyable access to the heart and soul of the music. This is a headphone amp that always overdelivers.

Deon Schoeman

## VITAL STATS

Frequency response .... 0 Hz – 200 kHz  
(-3 dB)

Signal-to-noise ratio ..... >100 dB

Headphone amp output

..... 450 mW @ 32 ohm  
100 mW @ 600 ohm

Inputs ..... 2x line-level stereo RCA  
1x MM/MC phono stage

Outputs ..... 1x 3,5 mm headphone jack  
2x 6,3 mm headphone jacks  
2x stereo RCA

Dimensions (WxHxD)

..... 235 x 55 x 281 mm

Weight ..... 2,5 kg

### Verdict

A purely analogue, pure Class A headphone amp with generous drive and loads of resolution. Makes short work of even tough loads, and delivers its musical wares with an honesty that is riveting.

Price ..... R8 415

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OUR RATING: 83/100

