



# NU Frontier

**NuForce's brand new P-9 preamplifier promises outstanding measured performance at the price, but does it deliver the sonic goods? David Price decides...**

**T**he story so far – small American-based company starts making odd looking, strangely coloured Class D power amplifiers, promising huge power and superb sound per pound. Is successful. Annoys established brands. The end. Well, it's a bit more complicated than that, but you get the general idea – and I'm sure, much to the chagrin of NuForce's rivals, they're not stopping at power amplifiers...

The P-9 is the company's first serious 'high end' preamplifier - high end in NuForce terms, not Mark Levinson, that is. The princely sum of £2,200 buys you this two-box affair. They call it an "ultimate performance audio preamplifier", but don't hold that against them. The quoted figures are indeed impressive [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE for our take on them], but for me the beginning and end of it is how it sounds in situ in my review system, next to my reference £2,750 MF Audio Passive Magnetic Preamplifier, which casts a wide shadow over this price point!

Debuted at the Manchester Show last January, the P-9 was designed by Demian Martin. It's an interesting

design, based on two separate chassis. The first contains three separate power supplies and microprocessor control logic, the second chassis the analogue volume control input selection relays and sensitive analogue circuit components. As you'd expect, it matches the form factor of the NuForce Ref 9 series power amplifiers.

This is an op-amp based design, with "ultra low noise monolithic dual JFETs, specially selected VMOS FETs and extremely flat hFE bipolar transistors arranged in a dual cascode configuration, shield driven to reduce capacitive loading on the final voltage amp". No capacitors or DC servos are to be found in the signal path. The two boxes are linked up with a computer-style bus lead, and a switched IEC in is to be found on the back panel, along with RCA phono inputs and outputs, plus balanced outs – disappointingly, unlike the MF Audio Passive Preamp, there are no balanced ins.

The P-9 is operationally more sophisticated than the MF Audio – not least because of the sleek finish and light, 'snick-snick' action of the controls. The finish is up to NuForce's traditional high standards, although I

found the black a tad oppressive, and welcome the arrival of the distinctive 'burnt orange' colour of the Ref 9SE power amplifiers. There's a white-on-black backlit display, showing input source selection and volume – no prizes for ergonomics but it does the job. Whereas I criticised the ECS Pre recently for having an absurdly large and imposing display, I am doing precisely the opposite here... As for the remote - it's one of the coolest I've ever seen, and could easily have come out of the nineteen seventies Boothroyd-Stuart stable.

## SOUND QUALITY

In a direct, face-to-face shootout with my reference MF Audio Silver Passive Preamplifier, the NuForce P9 managed to hold its own in many respects, despite being £550 cheaper - it is that good. This isn't to say that the two preamplifiers sound the same, as the differences are marked, and I'm sure they're down to the fundamentally opposing approaches of the two products, and not simply about the execution of each respective type, which is excellent.

Kicking off with Be Bop Deluxe's 'Modern Music' on vinyl, I found the P-9 to be an extremely energetic

sounding device, bristling with detail and throwing out a big, assertive soundstage. Within the recorded acoustic, I could certainly hear the NuForce searching out more treble detail, making the MF sound a tad veiled up top. There was a tangible zing to the hi-hats, which shimmered like the sun on still water. This was further substantiated when I moved to Michael Jackson's 'Rock With You', where the P-9 provided a well illuminated treble with more air apparent - in comparison to the MF Audio hi hats were marginally smoother but less sonorous and easy to follow.



At the opposite end of the frequency scale, the MF also took a bit of stick. It sounded a tad more fulsome, but marginally slower in terms of attack transients compared to the NuForce, which pushed things along with greater speed in the bass. Indeed, the P-9 was wonderfully quick – its silky but incisive treble allied to its lightning low frequencies was a joy to hear. At the frequency extremes, the MF Audio sounded soft and veiled, and even ponderous in the bass sometimes.

This was really going some for a

"at its price point, the NuForce P-9 is dazzlingly capable..."

preamp that costs over five hundred 'notes' less than the class leader, but much as I loved what the P-9 was doing in the bass and treble, its midband proved obviously less dynamic, detailed or dimensional. The NuForce's commendable speed seemed to hurry the midband along, giving the immediate impression that it was the more musical of the two. However, the MF Audio's trump card was dynamics, where it made the P-9 look less distinguished. Make no mistake, as £2,200 preamplifiers go, the NuForce is superb – brilliantly musically articulate – but it just couldn't quite match the might of the MF Audio in this area. The upshot was that, even with the sedate, jazz-pop of Simply Red's 'Playground', the MF Audio sounded just that little bit more dimensional and dynamic across the midband.

Moving to my favourite DG pressing of Beethoven's

'Pastoral' symphony (Karajan/Berlin Philharmonic), and the NuForce put in a spirited performance, with wonderfully spacious and airy treble, deep and powerful yet taut bass and oodles of detail across the midband, with excellent left-to-right image placement. Switching to the MF Audio, I found things a tad more reserved and less spacious across the treble, and it seemed superficially slower and less rhythmically engaging – yet when the orchestra wound up, suddenly the MF Audio preamplifier was the more dynamic and better scaled, with considerably superior depth perspective. That tremendous 'hear through' midband is what makes the MF Audio so mighty, and the NuForce wasn't even on the same page in this respect.

**CONCLUSION**

A good few days were spent darting between one preamplifier and the other, and in the end I concluded that I preferred the MF Audio on rock, jazz and acoustic music, while the NuForce was ahead on pop and electronica. In absolute terms, it's a less 'transparent' sounding

device than the MF Audio across the midband, and less dynamic too, yet is obviously more animated in the bass and explicit in the treble. In its own right then, at its £2,200 price point, the NuForce P-9 is



**REFERENCE SYSTEM**

- Michell GyroDec/Origin Live Enterprise/vdH The Frog
- Note Products PhoNote phono stage
- MF Audio Passive Magnetic Preamplifier (silver)
- NuForce Reference 9SE monoblock power amplifiers
- World Audio K5881 (modified) valve power amplifier
- Rotel RB-1092 power amplifier
- Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers
- Quad ESL989 loudspeakers
- Black Rhodium interconnects/cables

dazzlingly capable. If you've got around two thousand pounds to spend on a preamplifier, this product recommends itself - it is a class act.

However, surely the question prospective purchasers are asking themselves is whether to save up the extra for the MF Audio? In my system with my tastes, I'd take its wonderful tonal palette, the range of which the NuForce can't quite equal, and the superior midband dynamics which really floated my boat. Had I pair of speakers with a looser bass or less explicit treble than my Yamaha NS1000Ms (the Quad ESL989 being a perfect case in point), I'd opt for the NuForce without a moment's hesitation, with its tighter, tauter lows and more spry and spacious treble. My recommendation then is to try both before you buy. Either way, rest assured that whichever you choose, you're getting a brilliant bit of kit that should stand you in good stead for many years to come.

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

The NuForce P-9 is unusual in being all but bandwidth unlimited. It amplifies d.c., and it also has a d.c. output offset, of 13mV and 20mV. As power amplifiers typically have a gain of up to 30, those that are themselves direct coupled will develop up to 0.6V output offset, which is too high to be acceptable. Many sources output d.c. too, which will be communicated to power amps. So this preamp is for a.c. coupled power amps.

The upper frequency limit is 175kHz, higher than usual for audio preamps. The NuForce P-9 offers a modest x2.3 gain, surprisingly from both its unbalanced and balanced outputs; balanced does not give twice unbalanced. With a power amplifier of 1V input sensitivity this level of gain

gives just over 400mV input sensitivity, enough for modern sources, but low for old cassette decks, tuners and many external phono stages. Noise was almost non-existent at 19uV and output overload high enough at 14V.

The P-9 is an ultra wideband, super low noise preamplifier. Its gain is limited, making it best suited to modern sources, but not external phono stages unless they have high gain. NK

Frequency response	d.c.-175kHz
Separation	92dB
Noise	-95dBV
Distortion	0.001%
d.c. offset	20mV
Gain	x2.3
Overload	6V in/14V out



**VERDICT** High resolution high end preamplifier with a wonderfully engaging sound from head to toe.

**NUFORCE P-9** £2,200  
**HiAudio Distribution**  
 ☎ +44(0)8450 252529  
 www.nuforce.com

**FOR**  
 - atmospheric treble  
 - bass grip and speed  
 - midband detailing  
 - overall musicality

**AGAINST**  
 - nothing at the price