

Novafidelity HA500H



M3CD player, I spun up *Jam Tonight* by Freddie Jackson. The tube stage immediately impressed by making his vocals sound more human, while the synth bass line had much more of a 'walk' to it. It all hung together and moved along more fluidly.

Same thing with Bruce Springsteen's *Racing in the Streets*: his vocals were much more alive and expressive, piano had more body and dynamics and the emotional impact of the track came across better using the valve circuit.

While the Musical Fidelity was hooked up, it seemed appropriate to compare its built-in DAC with that of the HA500H. Playing Larry Carlton's *Sleepwalk* track, his guitar was better voiced and notes more sharply defined on the HA500H's DAC, while the bass line was fuller, tighter and more tuneful. The Fender Rhodes piano had more bite and sparkle and all in all the track flowed better.

On Ben Sidran's *Sunny Side of the Street*, vocals were more natural on the Novafidelity's DAC, the bass line was tighter and more tuneful, drums were sharper and snappier and the whole track hung together and moved better.

So if you are using a CD around this price level (£1700), you may find it is better to use the HA500H's built-in DAC. However, when using an Audio Note CD4.1 player (around £9k), I found it was better to use its own DAC.

And so we turn to the HA500H as a headphone amplifier. Balanced, of course, performed best and so I used balanced XLR-terminated leads on both Focal phones and the Audeze LCD-X. Before getting down to business, I quickly listened to the difference between the high and low impedance settings on the HA500H and, despite the fact that none of the phones I was using had a high impedance, that seemed to be the setting I preferred.

No matter what I played, or which of the three headphones I used, the HA500H impressed me greatly. Its sound was well balanced, dynamic, detailed, coherent and musical and never did anything to detract from the music.

It conveyed the intricacies of Earl Klugh's guitar play beautifully, handled the weird percussive elements (knee slaps, typewriter) and celeste on Buddy Holly's *Everyday* superbly, captured the richness, virtuosity and verve of my favourite sax players, and simply made the music flow in a coherent and compelling way. The Focal Arche held up well against it, but for me the Novafidelity simply brought the music to life more.

The HA500H works well as a headphone amp and DAC and I highly recommend it.

HIFICRITIC
HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Novafidelity HA500H

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| Price | £2199 |
| Frequency response | 10Hz – 80kHz ±0.5dB (balanced) |
| THD | <0.001% (-100dB) 20Hz – 20kHz |
| Dynamic range | 130dB |
| Signal-to-noise ratio | >-111dB (balanced); >-106dB (unbalanced) |
| Nominal output | |
| High | 4Vrms Low: 2Vrms |
| Recommended headphone impedance | 16ohms – 600ohms |
| Dimensions | 85 x 333 x 270mm (HxWxD) |
| Weight | 6.9kg |

Made by Novatron in Korea, the Novafidelity line is sold in the rest of the world as Cocktail Audio. The company is known for its range of network audio products, but the HA500H is its first dedicated headphone amplifier/DAC/preamp.

And there is plenty of interest here. First off is the fact that it is a hybrid design and can be operated in either valve (ECC82) or solid-state modes. It also uses a pair of the well-respected ESS Sabre ES9018K2M DAC chips and so one could reasonably expect good things of its in this department.

The HA500H also separates out the digital and analogue circuitry and features a custom toroidal transformer for the power supply. The DAC itself can handle both PCM sources (up to 384kHz/32bit) and DSD 256, and also supports MQA encoded streams.

It offers a variety of inputs: analogue balanced (XLR) and unbalanced, digital via SPDIF (phono) and optical as well as XLR (AES/EBU), plus a USB-B input to connect a computer or separate streamer, as well as HDMI (I²S). Balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (phono) output are provided, and these can be set either to fixed or variable, so that the unit can also be used as a preamp to drive a separate amplifier or active loudspeaker.

The HA500H is also Bluetooth compatible and I used it with good results from an Apple MacBook Pro and when playing tracks from Tidal (CD quality and MQA) via an SOTM sMS200 Neo dedicated streamer, although I preferred wired connections for my more critical listening.

With so many facets to it, it is difficult to know where to start, but I was intrigued to compare the valve and transistor stages. Using a Musical Fidelity