



AMPS/RECEIVERS

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

PEACHTREE AUDIO

nova¹⁵⁰



Peachtree recently entered what it called, unofficially, ‘Peachtree 2.0’. Coming as the company reached its tenth year, this rebooting is part philosophy, part action — Peachtree is giving new emphasis to real hi-fi dealers over internet sales, it has hired a new engineering team and, perhaps most remarkably, it is now assembling and building its products in Canada, rather than China. Cheers all round.

This is all the more remarkable given that Peachtree was, from the start, a thoroughly modern affair. Its first product in 2007 was the Decco amplifier, claimed as the world’s first amp with a USB input to play straight from computer. (How times have changed — today we look askance at any amplifier that *doesn’t* have a USB input.) Over its decade of existence, Peachtree has witnessed the general rush to convenience products, but also the full-scale change in the way we consume music, even for those audio-centric

listeners sticking with full quality hi-fi using a proper amplifier and speakers. Computers and smart devices are now key sources, either replacing or adding to CD and vinyl. Peachtree Audio 2.0 aims squarely at these consumers, and the first 2.0 fruit plucked was this nova¹⁵⁰ amplifier.

EQUIPMENT

Pictures of the nova¹⁵⁰ can make it look quite compact. Not so — it’s substantial, a little less than rack-width at 14 inches, and nearly 7kg in weight. It has air vents on top, so don’t be stacking stuff on its lovely gloss finish (our review unit was black; the pictured ‘gloss ebony mocha’ adds the joy of wood grain). The curves, the aluminum front plate with its press buttons and knob, these follow previous designs, but things have changed inside. Peachtree started out delivering Class-AB amplifiers, and had a penchant for a visible valve stage, supposedly to “smooth over rough

recordings”. But now Peachtree has switched to Class-D, using B&O’s ICEpower modules, so there’s more wattage quoted, but also higher preamp signal-to-noise, an impressive 111dB. Shoving in a valve stage would just crush that. Peachtree tells fans of its valve circuit not to despair, however — there are plans for an add-on valve buffer to insert into the nova’s ‘loop’ stage.

‘Loop’ stage? Yes — so there are five digital inputs, two being optical, one coaxial, one USB-A slot, and one USB-B for your computer. One of the opticals is the increasingly common mini-Toslink. There are two analogue RCA pairs, one of which can be switched to be a moving magnet turntable input (there’s a terminal for the grounding cable), the other of which can be used in home theatre bypass mode, which bypasses the volume control and throws everything out at full level. That way you can have the Peachtree powering front cinema speakers under the control



“Separation and staging? The dual vocal parts on the 24/96 of Bowie’s *Blackstar* sounded not overlaid but one before the other, the low one forward, the falsetto behind and even vertically higher... Quite the show.”

of an AV receiver, the volume controlled from there, while still doing duties later as a high-quality two-channel amp.

To switch between either of these input modes, all you do is hold that input button for five seconds. Indeed holding any input button for five seconds takes the volume control out of circuit, lest you should prefer to use a level control built into that source. (As noted, on the first analogue input, this long press instead switches between line-level and turntable level.) This simple

software control method freaks us out, to be honest — if you (or it) went into the other mode by mistake while music was playing, it might signal a farewell to your speakers (and possibly your ears) as everything slams through at full pelt.

There’s other stuff, a preamp output should you wish to upgrade beyond the Peachtree’s power, a 12V trigger output, and an IR control input. You press the current input button ten times to disable the front IR receiver and activate the rear IR input, or vice versa.

The last sockets are two pairs of RCAs labelled ‘Loop input’ and ‘Loop output’. So these will operate like the tape loops of old, but Peachtree also suggests they could be used for inserting room correction equipment, or that planned “proper stereo tube buffer”, which will slot into this loop. *If* you wanted. We’re not sure why you would.

PERFORMANCE

Well, let’s get straight into this — it is always, as a reviewer, mildly disappointing when something clearly improves on your price-comparable reference system. Within seconds of powering up the nova¹⁵⁰ and playing from our computer via USB, we were thinking how damned analytical it sounded (in a good way), how the detail and the edges of everything were simply better defined than they are from our reference. This we must ascribe to the DAC section of the nova¹⁵⁰ outperforming our resident standalone DAC. Peachtree has built around the highly regarded ES9018K2M Sabre³² Reference DAC, capable to 384kHz PCM and double-DSD (5.2MHz). An in-out button on the rear switches between USB 1.0 and 2.0 operation — Windows PCs (still!) — but hopefully changing this year) require a driver installed for



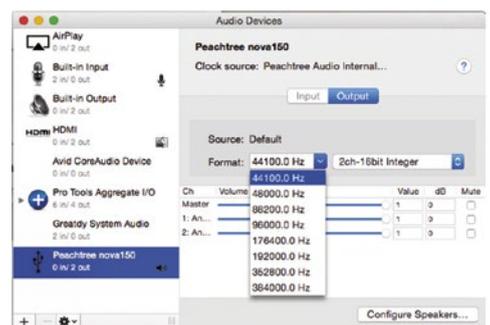
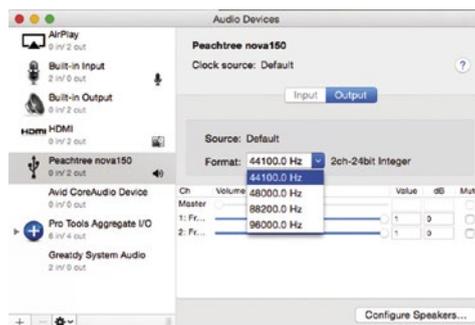
the latter, but will go to 96kHz with the former. Mac users just go with 2.0 all the way to 384kHz (see screenshots below — the manual says 32-bit should be possible; our Mac Mini offered only 16/24-bit). The other digital inputs will go to 24-bit/192kHz.

There is an extra bit of thought behind the USB-A slot at the rear, specifically aimed at iPhone and iPad users. Peachtree has incorporated a circuit to eliminate computer noise from these devices when connected via the normal Lightning-to-USB cable — this DyNEC (Dynamic Noise Elimination Circuit) aims to eliminate any audible power supply and screen noise before handing the digital files over to the Sabre DAC.

While trying to A-B between computer input and iPhone, we discovered that, as for many amps with USB-B inputs, when you switch away from the USB-B input, the nova disappears from your computer’s list of sound devices, and your computer will likely switch to its internal speakers or another default output. Re-select the USB-B input on the Peachtree and it reappears. While

iTunes may instantly pick this up, some other programs won’t — we use an Amarra shell around iTunes (mainly to switch file frequency automatically) and that required a tedious restart each time; ProTools is similarly allergic to having its playback engine suddenly removed. In certain situations it might be an advantage; in others, not so much.

Similarly, and probably for the same sonically valid reasons of isolation, we noticed the USB-A socket will only charge your iPhone *if* you have that input selected. We noticed because our iPhone was dead after an evening listening to vinyl. (Which has a certain karma to it.) But Australian distributor Audio Marketing tells us they expect this to be fixed in a firmware update.



The nova’s DAC is switchable between USB 1.0 to 96kHz (left), or USB 2.0 offering up to 384kHz (and doubleDSD).



Meanwhile we carried on listening. And started turning it up. We love how Peachtree uses the line of input lights on the front panel as a volume indicator, slowly extending rightwards. And upwards, nudging slowly northwards, as is our wont. No reservations here, no pause for power, no apparent limit at all. No change in tonal character with volume, no audible noise-floor whatsoever, other than that on the recordings themselves. Peachtree quotes the nova¹⁵⁰ at 150W per channel (hence the name) into eight ohms, 250W into four ohms, and capable of driving anything down to two ohms. (These figures use the AES17 standards for measurement of digital audio equipment, which allow up to 1% THD+N, high by traditional hi-fi standards.)

We thoroughly enjoyed this output into a high-quality pair of 86dB/W/m German standmounters, and needless to say, it had a ball driving our JBL 4429s with their nominal 6-ohm impedance and friendly 91dB/W/m sensitivity; no wonder we didn't reach any limits.

Weight and dynamics? Yessir, let's crank the Blue Man Group's *Rods and Cones* and enjoy the drums slamming from left and right while the tapping of tubes continues centre-stage.

Separation and staging? The dual vocal parts on the 24/96 of Bowie's *Blackstar* sounded not overlaid but one before the other, the low one forward, the falsetto behind and even vertically higher, with the bass below and those bonkers beats tight as the proverbial gnat's. Quite the show.

Delicacy of touch? The delivery of piano and vocal miking on Diana Krall's *Alone Again Naturally* duet with the Mick Bubble man (24/96) was sublime. We played through the better part of four disc's worth of CD-quality 'Best Audiophile

Voices' from an Aria music server's digital output, and sat spellbound by the sheer loveliness of Alison Krauss, Eva Cassidy and the rest, all held in space above the giant silences of the acoustic spaces perceivable behind the instruments.

This sense of space also brought magic to Keith Jarrett's classic Köln Concert, which encouraged us to play two full sections of it, and even gave sparkle to older mono recordings — setting the tape hiss just audible on Karajan's 1953 recording of the final *Rondo* from Mozart's Horn Concerto in Eb, the orchestral dynamics were thrilling as they burst with bite around the hall-softened horn.

We activated the phono stage (volume right down, just in case!) and settled into Marvin Gaye playing on 180g from a Thorens turntable. Delight — and insight, the Peachtree impressively clarifying the spliced tracks so we noticed the significant increase in bass content at the edit point from *God is Love* into *Mercy Mercy Me*.

The headphone amp is no afterthought either, redesigned for the nova¹⁵⁰, a discrete design rather than a chip solution, good to drive even 300-ohm headphones. It did a superb job with beyerdynamics' 250-ohm DT 1990 PROs.

If there's an obvious omission from what purports to be a modern digital amplifier, it's networking. There's no Ethernet here, no Wi-Fi, no Bluetooth — you can network or stream online stuff from computer, of course, or an iPhone plugged in. But Peachtree also has plans for an internal Wi-Fi module which will stream directly to the nova¹⁵⁰ under app control, including the likes of Spotify Connect and Tidal. It's due later in 2017 and is expected to add about \$400 to the price of a Wi-Fi version of the nova¹⁵⁰. And Peachtree already offers a BT1 Bluetooth receiver.

CONCLUSION

There is also the nova³⁰⁰ available (and a nova⁵⁰⁰ in the wings) should you want still more power for larger spaces or ragingly difficult speakers (or headphones). With our speaker selections, no more was required; we loved the nova¹⁵⁰, its combination of power and precision, its ability to cleverly combine today's digital sources with those analogue originals, delivering maximum musical involvement from them all. ■

Peachtree Audio nova¹⁵⁰ integrated amplifier

- Plenty of high-quality power
- Thoroughly modern input selection
- Fine headphone & phono stages

- No networking (yet)

Price: \$2599

Inputs: 2 x RCA analogue (one switchable to phono), 1 x RCA loop in, 1 x Toslink digital, 1 x miniToslink digital, 1 x coaxial digital, 1 x USB-B, 1 x USB-A (including iOS), IR input

Outputs: 12V trigger, 1 x RCA loop out, 1 x RCA preouts, speaker outputs

Power: 150W (8 ohms, 1kHz, <1% THD+N), 250W (4 ohms, 1kHz, <1% THD+N)

Separation: >120dB preamp, >90dB power amp (1kHz)

DAC: ES9018K2M Sabre32 Reference; 16-32-bit, 44.1-384kHz PCM, 2.8-5.6MHz DSD via USB-B; 16-24-bit 44.1-192kHz via SPDIF

Dimensions: 356 x 110 x 320mm

Weight: 6.8kg

Contact: Audio Marketing

Telephone: 02 9882 3877

Web: www.audiomarketing.com.au