

The NuPrime IDA-8 Integrated Digital Amplifier NZ\$1750 including GST

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If an amplifier ever had high expectations to live up to, **the NuPrime IDA-8** has been put squarely in the hot seat. It has been less than 12 months since NuPrime launched their first product - the [IDA-16](#). Next the even better [DAC-10 digital to analogue convertor and preamp](#). Then the storming [ST-10](#) power amplifier which we are only just getting to grips with (short take - the DAC-10 and ST10 together are seriously awesome). NuPrime haven't been backwards in the build up to the IDA-8 launch and have come perilously close to hype.



"NuPrime's new Class A+D hybrid amplification technologies deliver the substance and warmth of Class A amplification and the efficiency and speed of Class D technology in a milieu of unmeasurable noise. The IDA-8's spacious, transparent, dynamic and luxuriously textured soundstage has to be heard to be believed."

So now we have the IDA-8 in our hands and have managed to log up a few days of listening. And we have to agree, it is a special product.

To keep things in context it's only two years since we published our review on the [NuForce DDA-100](#) which set a benchmark for how good a sub NZ\$1000 minimalist amplifier could sound - and to date we've heard nothing better for the price. Only recently [the Quad Vena](#) bested the little NuForce - as it should have, being at a higher price and having the weight of over 50 years in leading edge amplifier design behind it.

What the Vena brought to the party - over and above a richer more full bodied sound - were more useful connection options. By its very nature the DDA-100 was an exclusively digital device and I've always admired the purity of vision and lack of compromise that went into it. But this does place some limits on the systems the DDA-100 is suitable for.

The NuPrime IDA-8 is aiming at both a more demanding user, and people who just want to be able to connect a greater choice of components - both source and speakers.

While the DDA-100 is an obvious point of comparison, the reality is that although this and the NuPrime IDA-8 share a similar footprint, they are completely different designs and there is not one single aspect of the DDA-100s performance that the IDA-8 doesn't comprehensively better.

We could also look to draw comparisons with NuPrime's flagship integrated amplifier - [the IDA-16](#). For systems with larger speakers and the requirement to fill larger rooms, this is still by far the better option. But even then there are a few other factors to take into consideration which we'll come to later.

From the very first listen, the IDA-8 elicits a big 'wow'. For those that know me you'll appreciate I can be a bit of a cynic and our home system is very much biased toward the analogue. So the initial recommendation of the IDA-8 is not given lightly.

It's the immediate impression of enhanced clarity coming out of the little NuPrime that is most striking. We intentionally first connected an iPhone via bluetooth - in theory this is the least 'hifi' way to do things but its going to be how many people first hear how the IDA-8 can perform. This is via an included dongle which makes some sense to us and we're seeing very fast evolution with all wifi formats. To be able to easily change or upgrade this is more sensible than building in. And you'd need an external aerial regardless.

From the outset, no matter which input you choose you'll be hearing considerably more music than ever before - vocals are much clearer, every instrument is defined. With so much going on you might expect the IDA-8 to sound busy but there is a broad soundstage to spread everything round. But this is really only the start.

All NuPrime products have a very real warm up period from new. This is measured in days and (if we get a chance) weeks. The IDA-8 improves greatly and unlike the fully digital products like the DDA-100, this warm up (which I prefer to the terms break or burn in) is quite predictable and almost linear.

Direct Contact

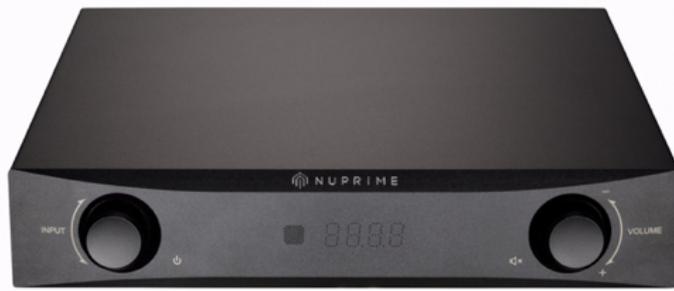
John Ransley and Carolyn Guytonbeck are the principals behind Totally Wired. It's our own business and we take pride in building something worthwhile.

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On the theme of warm, it is notable that the IDA-8 has a genuine Class A preamp stage - there is a large toroidal transformer which accounts for the unexpected weight of this amplifier. And unlike many other NuPrime and Nuforce products, the IDA-8 does get physically warm. Only a little more than normal room temperature (and this is in the middle of a ripper Dunedin winter) so we aren't talking about burning excess watts of power - but in the context of a preamplifier stage, you don't need that much. This also makes the IDA-8 completely distinct from the design of the IDA-16.

After several days use, the character of the IDA-8 is far more balanced - the bass in particular becomes much deeper. Everything is smoother and sweeter. The initial onslaught of detail opens right out and becomes less edge-of-the-seat and more immersive.

For the first time, NuPrime (and Nuforce never did this) describe the power amp section of the amplifier as Class D. As far as we can see, it's still the same switching analogue amplifier topology they have built their reputation on. Unlike some other models in the past, the IDA-8 is well packed with componentry - we've had a look inside and it's obvious that this amplifier is designed from the ground up with no modules derived from other models. Download the manual [here](#) which gives a run-down on how they do what they do.

The power rating of the IDA-8 is 100 watts per channel into 8 ohms. It does produce a remarkable amount of sound from such a small box, but it's not up with NuPrime's ST10 power amplifier or IDA-16 in terms of control and driving ability. But here's the trick...

Firstly, on most music and with most speakers, the IDA-8 can be run up to its maximum volume level (99) and still maintain its composure. Try this with virtually any other amp and you'll be lucky to get away without damage if you're fast enough at turning it down again. In fact with some lower than average output devices (my present phono stage as an example) I don't think the IDA-8 is getting to full rated power. The difference in sound between lossy compressed MP3s and lossless files is also made very obvious and it doesn't feel like you can max out with these even if you wanted to. There is some intentional limiting in the design that is steering you towards thinking about the amp in terms of quality rather than quantity.

But I don't think it's the preamp side of things - the large transformer for the preamp section and reference to the higher than usual output on the dedicated subwoofer sockets suggest that there is no lack of urge in this part. So, and this is only a wild guess on my part, it is possible the power amp section is treated as a finite resource. This makes sense if you look at the price territory the IDA-8 sits in. There may be some similarly priced amps that go louder, but absolutely none that have anything like the fidelity and resolving power. And NuPrime have made sure that its never going to be their amplifier that takes the blame for damaging speakers.



Call this compromise, but it is a sensible choice. For most people, and with most speakers, the IDA-8 will be just fine and more than enough. If you feel you have esoteric or demanding speakers in a large room, get the IDA-16 or even better DAC-10/ST10 combination - chances are both options still cost less than your speakers so are hardly expensive. Don't get me wrong, the IDA-8 can really tramp along and with any reasonably efficient speakers, large or small you'll get more than enough volume. I assume there is some form of protection built in like the NuForce DDA-100 but to date I've not managed to trigger this despite my best and most noisy efforts.

There is an obvious route for people who like what the IDA-8 does (and how little it costs) to fill big rooms. The provision of dedicated high output subwoofer terminals is a clear sign of what to do - rather than getting a pair of big speakers, select a smaller speaker and add a powered subwoofer - there are some fantastic combinations out there these days that are highly musical. For instance all the [Monitor Audio](#) ranges from the [Bronze](#) through to Platinum all have matched subwoofers. And for speakers that don't, the specialist companies such as JL Labs are doing a brilliant job. The powered sub neatly sidesteps any limitations with the IDA-8 and in fact benefits greatly from the higher and more dynamic output that it feeds the sub.

And this is our big take-away - the IDA-8 with a well sorted sub-sat system is directly comparable to NuPrime's storming IDA-16 with a large pair of floor standing speakers - both systems are on what we see as an even pegging in terms of sound quality, both will fill large rooms and deliver rock solid bass. There are slight differences in flavour which relate to the different preamp topologies and DAC setups but they are more alike than different. The key NuPrime qualities are there in both.

The IDA-8 with smaller speakers is a brilliant balance of performance and economy that cant be beaten.

Now - with any amplifier you own or are considering - try this.... press 'pause' on the source and turn it up. Way up. Full. What do you hear? Hiss, buzz, whoosh? Not with the NuPrime. When they talk about low noise, they really mean it - this is the quietest amplifier we have ever had the pleasure of listening to. Low level noise obscures detail and once you get rid of it there is clarity that that is a revelation. Tracks that previously stopped dead actually have sound and content that continues on for some time - the 'sound' of the space music is recorded in is suddenly apparent. For the first time ever I've been able to turn a system right up when connected to my turntable and there is absolute silence.



On connections, everything works first time. Optical, coax digital, USB, analogue and Bluetooth via the extension port (it looks like USB but may not be quite standard. Unlike the higher end DAC options, the IDA-8 is also happy with Apple Airport Express (there appears to be an issue with the better Sabre DACs and the jitter performance Airport Express - but in every case, simply changing to Apple TV solves the problem and maintains all the functionality - note that Airport Express outputs at 44kHz but Apple TV runs at the higher rate of 48kHz so there may well be good reason to use the latter - we're planning to do a serious comparison of the performance of both with the IDA-8)

The exceptionally low noise floor means you'll form a greater appreciation of the part cables play in a system. Good grounding and shielding is critical to low noise performance and also to information transfer. The [new KLEI interconnects and speaker cables](#) are cutting edge in this regard and are a natural match with the IDA-8. With coax digital, analogue interconnect and speaker cable options, we'd make these our first and best recommendation - the natural and warm timbre of these cables is complimentary to the IDA-8s character.

Going back to an ordinary amplifier is a huge come down after the IDA-8. They sound flat and dull even if you push things along. The IDA-8 is all detail, sparkle and life by comparison. Given we've only had a week with the NuPrime as I write this, there will be more to come. We know from past experience that high end products such as this can take a good month or more of use to reach their full potential. I'm intrigued to see if it's appropriate to connect the IDA-8 to power amplifiers, to try it with more speakers and music types, to explore high resolution options, cable matching and more.

That isn't going to change what we've found - ***simply that the NuPrime IDA-8 is easily the best sounding amplifier we've ever heard under NZ\$2000 by a wide margin.*** The DAC and preamp sections are exceptional in terms of resolution and musicality. There is plenty of power with 100 watts on board and the sound quality will more than counter any reservations anyone might have about Class D. The performance via the analogue input is completely transparent - if you are lucky enough to have a well sorted analogue front end you'll really appreciate this.

The NuPrime IDA-8 is a completely modern product combining high resolution digital with easy access and use. It's fun with plenty of power. It's also a product you'll grow into - in our world the IDA-8 is well beyond entry level. This is an amplifier that wants you to match it with equally serious speakers, to take care with connections and setup of sources, because when you get it right, you'll really hear it. In terms of digital there are very few products of any description that can match it without spending considerably more.

What we see as a system has changed dramatically in the last few years. If we were starting afresh, an iPhone would be the primary and possibly only source - not only can you use it as source, but it's also the connection to streaming services and allows you to access any other computer in the house. The IDA-8 slots directly into this environment. A system is now effectively two items - amplifier and speakers. The previous conventional wisdom of spending roughly one third on each part - source, amplification and speakers is upended. With the IDA-8 you get far more than with a conventional analogue amplifier and it will do much more in terms of making your speakers sound great. So you can also entertain the idea of going further with speakers than you may have otherwise considered. On one hand the IDA-8 will make some of the new value for money models sound great. Yet if you want to explore more esoteric options, you'll find the IDA-8 is actually a seriously high end device capable of stunning results.

Wireless is easy but a lot of people still would like to play their discs are there are good reasons to do this. With the IDA-8 you aren't constrained to looking at a dedicated CD player - a far smarter option is one of the new [Oppo BlueRay players](#) - the 103D or 105D are excellent transports that will play all varieties of disc - CD, DVD, BlueRay and SACD. Because the mechanical tolerances involved in BlueRay playback are so much tighter than CD, it follows that the data stream coming out of the Oppo when playing a standard CD is a lot better than that of a conventional player. Likewise the

number of CD players that even start to approach the quality levels that the IDA-8s DAC produces is vanishingly small. The IDA-8 will make just about every CD player sound much better, but if you are looking at a new unit, check out the high performance option of an Oppo plus a quality Digital interlink such as the new KLEI models.

NuPrime have done exactly what they set out to do with the IDA-8. This is simply the market leading product. We know you'll be thrilled with what you hear.



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