

Nuforce Primo 8



The California-based firm NuForce is probably best known within the high-end community for its innovative and very high-performance preamplifier and power amplifier designs. Over the years, though, NuForce has branched out to explore other product categories, eventually offering digital source components and DACs, upper-tier home theatre electronics, budget-priced earphones and desktop speakers, and even a range of desktop audio and personal audio electronics. In short, the NuForce team, which is headed by Jason Lim and Casey Ng, is nothing if not versatile.

Recognising that growing numbers of music lovers are choosing earphone and headphone-based personal audio rigs as their hi-fi systems of choice, NuForce has decided that the time is right to release a new premium-priced and ultra high-performance universal-fit earphone called the Primo 8 (priced at \$499 in the US, with UK pricing yet to be announced). From the outset, both Lim and Ng envisioned the Primo 8 as a groundbreaking design that, they hoped, would redefine the state of the earphone-making art.

Clearly, NuForce is not alone in recognising the importance of offering a serious high-end earphone capable of pleasing even the most demanding of listeners. Other, well established firms – including AKG, Final Audio Design, Sennheiser, Shure, Ultimate Ears, Westone, and others – have drawn similar conclusions and accordingly have released top-tier, flagship earphones of their own. Two questions that arise, then, are these: first, does the world really need yet another top-tier earphone, and second, does NuForce's Primo 8 have what it takes to prevail in a worldwide market segment

already densely populated by a number of strong, well-respected competitors? By way of tackling those questions, let's review the highlights of NuForce's ambitious new Primo 8 design.

The Primo 8 is a three-way universal-fit earphone based on a driver array comprising a quartet of balanced armature-type drivers (consisting of one high-frequency driver, one midrange driver, and a pair of bass drivers). While quad driver-equipped earphones are relatively uncommon, at least a few competitors offer superficially similar designs; examples would include Westone's W40 and Ultimate Ears' flagship UE900 earphones.

What sets the Primo 8 apart and makes it truly unique, however, is its claim to be the world's first – and thus far only – earphone to use a proprietary linear-phase crossover network said to give the earphone perfectly phase-coherent response from the bottom to the top of its operating range. As NuForce puts it, the aim of the Primo 8 is to, “replicate the sound quality of reference-class, multi-driver, high-end speakers in your ears,” which is a tall order for this or any other earphone to fill.

What is more, NuForce's efforts did not stop with the design of the Primo 8 earphone proper. Recognising that transducers can only sound as good as the signal cables with which they are fed, NuForce also developed a distinctive, proprietary, hybrid silver/copper-conductor-equipped signal cable specifically for the Primo 8. In a conversation on this subject, Casey Ng mentioned that NuForce lavished every bit as much care and attention on the design of the cables as it did on the earphones, themselves.

User comfort was also a very high priority, so that despite the complicated driver arrays contained within, the Primo 8s feature relatively compact, oblong earpiece finished in a tasteful shade of matte metallic blue. Significantly, the earpiece housings feature tiny, snap-fit cable connectors that enable NuForce to provide detachable, user replaceable signal cables. Moreover, the snap-fit connectors allow the cables to swivel for greater wearer comfort. The signal cables also incorporate rubber-clad ear hooks that help bear the weight of the earpieces while keeping the earphones properly positioned within the wearers' ear canals. As a further comfort-minded touch, NuForce supplies the Primo 8 with an elaborate array of ear tips (including eight pairs of silicone tips in sizes S, M, L, and XL, plus two pairs of Comply-brand foam tips in sizes M and L). Topping things off, the Primo 8 comes with a useful set of accessories including the aforementioned ear tips, a 130cm signal cable with microphone (a mic-free cable is offered as an option), a 3.5mm to 6.5mm adapter, an airline adapter, a cleaning tool, a microfibre cleaning cloth, and a leather carrying pouch.

Obviously, the Primo 8 appears to be 'dressed for success,' but how does it actually sound in practice? The answer, in a nutshell, is that it sounds pretty darned great – sometimes breathtakingly so – as I will explain in this review.

To my ears, the Primo 8s offer three defining sonic characteristics: neutral tonal balance, focus, and coherency. As I submit these descriptors for your consideration, there is one additional point I need to emphasise. The performance of the Primo 8 is so compelling that these earphones not only fare well in comparison with other universal-fit models, but also invite comparisons with expensive full-size headphones and even high-end loudspeakers. In other words, the Primo 8 in many respects

transcends the perceived limits of its own product category, meaning this is no ordinary earphone.

When I say that the Primo 8 offers neutral tonal balance, I mean that it offers smooth, evenly balanced frequency response with excellent extension at both the high and low-frequency extremes of the audio spectrum. This is, first and foremost, an accurate transducer whose primary emphasis is on showing you exactly how your favourite recordings actually sound with as few colourations as possible. Just bear in mind that the Primo 8s will not replace sonic qualities that recording engineers have left out, nor will they compensate for sonic excesses in which the mixing/mastering engineers might have indulged. With this design, what you hear is what you get.

At same time, let's acknowledge that tonal neutrality is one of those qualities we card-carrying audiophiles are supposed to crave, but that some listeners actually do not much appreciate in practice ("Would you like some tasteful euphonic colourations to go with those earphones, sir?"). For this reason, some earphone makers give their products touches of bass lift and/or small dabs of treble roll-off – voicing modifications implemented in the name of making the sound more 'pleasant' or 'accessible'. If you favour (or require) these sorts of gentle, deliberate colourations, then the Primo 8 might not be for you.

I suspect listeners accustomed to earphones that incorporate artificial bass enrichment or trimmed-back highs might not initially know what to make of the Primo 8's unexaggerated and neutral-sounding bass, or of its revealing, wide-bandwidth highs. Realistically, both of these characteristics mean that the Primo 8s can at times expose the flaws in mediocre – and especially imbalanced-sounding – recordings for what they are. However, once you listen carefully and with discernment to these NuForce earphones, you will soon discover they are capable of terrific bass power and extension and also of reproducing the natural warmth and full-bodied tonal colours so characteristic of live music. The trick, though, is that the Primo 8s deliver these favourable sonic qualities only when they are actually present in the music being played.

Personally, I found the Primo 8's tonal neutrality to be its own reward, so that the more I listened through the earphones the better I liked them. For those drawn to musical transducers that are as honest as the day is long, the Primo 8s would make a fine choice.

Next, let's consider Primo 8's uncanny and impressive quality of focus, which in my book is a highly desirable thing. As we listen to various audio products most of us unconsciously file away our memories of the sounds we have heard in a sort of good-better-best rank order file. I can't speak for you, but in my experience today's better high-end universal fit earphones are very good in terms of focus, but top-tier full-size headphones are, as a general rule, better still. The Primo 8, however, proves a dramatic exception to this rule in that its powers of resolution and focus quite seriously invite comparisons to extremely expensive headphones carrying steep, four-figure price tags.

What exactly do I mean by the term 'focus'? I would define it as a component's ability to reproduce even the subtlest and most nuanced of low-level musical details in a convincing way, so that sonic images – much like high-quality photographic images – suddenly snap into place, becoming sharp and clear. More so than any other universal-fit earphones I have heard to date, the Primo 8s exhibit

this quality of focus in spades.

To appreciate what I mean, strap on a pair of Primo 8s and listen to a recording rich in subtle low-level details and that contains plenty of ephemeral spatial cues. A good example might be the song 'Dead Man's Handle' from Steve Strauss' *Just Like Love* [Stockfisch SACD], where veteran producer Gunther Pauler deftly uses the tools of his craft to enhance and expand upon the artist's musical vision. For the most part, Pauler lets us hear and savour the natural acoustics of the recording venue, but at select moments in the track he shifts gears to apply delicate touches of reverb or other types of sound processing to underscore the importance of certain individual lines or phrases. In short, Pauler treats acoustics of the recording space as a plastic medium that he stretches, moulds, and shapes at will to serve the interest of the artist and his songs.

