

McIntosh MHA200 headphone amplifier *by Simon Lucas*



If only 'product density' were a reliable measure of performance, this review of the new McIntosh MHA200 valve-driven headphone amplifier would be over by now. After all, it's a mere 146 × 156 × 232mm (h × w × d) and yet tips the scales at a 4.8kg – so as far as 'density' goes, this headphone amp takes some beating. And even if the stylised, tremendously assertive and always magnificent 'McIntosh' logo was removed from the casework of the MHA200 I'm confident it would still weigh in at over 4kg.

Sadly, given the deadline for this review is looming, 'product density' isn't the be-all and end-all where performance is concerned. Instead it's necessary to plug the MHA200 into the mains – which at least gives us plenty of time to discuss the ins and out of this headphone amplifier while those tubes come up to temperature.

In fact, we may as well start with 'ins' and 'outs'. On the rear panel are a choice of inputs: a pair of unbalanced stereo RCA sockets, and a pair of balanced XLR connectors. There's also 'in' and 'out' 3.5mm connections for power/trigger control, and a figure-of-eight socket for mains power. These connections are all mounted in a shiny, reflective metal surface that's undermined no end by a couple of staunchly low-rent stickers – one confirming this is a 230v 50/60Hz device, and the other carrying a serial number. ▶



▶ The front panel, which is arranged as a kind of terrace, is of equally shiny metal. On the upper-left section it's home to a 'load' control, with which you impedance-match the MHA200 with your headphones – it's a four-position switch, with 32, 100, 250 and 600 ohms values available. The McIntosh instruction manual reassuringly suggests "there is no need to be exact".

Next to this control is a small red tell-tale light, which illuminates when the MHA200 is in 'standby' and goes out when it's operational. Next in line is a big 'standby/on' button, and then there's a volume dial. This has a 'unity gain' position, which is indented in the centre of the dial's travel, and that's where you'll leave it if your source machine has a variable output. Not for the first time where McIntosh is concerned, this control has quite a lot more play in it than is ideal and while 'knob feel' is subjective (and sounds a little pervy), this doesn't have the reassuring heft as might befit the MHA200's price tag.

Below here are a range of headphone outputs. There's a left/right pair of three-pin XLR plugs, a single 4-pin XLR Neutrik stereo output and a 6.3mm unbalanced stereo socket.

It's up top, though, where all the action, the visual drama and the aesthetic justification for a £2,795 price tag is to be found. Here's where McIntosh has positioned the four green-glowing vacuum tubes that form part of the power and drive of the MHA200 – a couple of 12AT7 valves are used in the driver stage and two 12BH7s are used in the power stage. McIntosh positions them inside a metal cage, but if you're the sort of responsible adult who can use a headphone amplifier without burning yourself, then the cage is easily removed in order for the valves to be more readily admired.

The less interesting part of the top section of the MHA220 is taken up with transformers and some rather gratuitous diagrams of the two output transformer and single power transformer stages. The McIntosh's output stage is a push/pull pure Class A triode, and the company is at pains to point out that this is the only headphone amplifier you can buy with unity-coupled output transformers and that push/pull configuration. McIntosh is guaranteeing 500mW of power for all loads, from 32 ohms to 600 ohms.

That rather vague volume control aside, nothing here seems flimsy or ill-fitting or in any way suspect – but somehow the perceived value in strictly modern terms isn't quite there. The shiny metal element of the casework, for example, is a single piece that's been folded numerous times to create the base of the MHA200 – but this method means there are proud edges, and visible snips to facilitate the fold. On the other hand, this too is a part of the McIntosh experience, and is reminiscent of classic American cars. Those who love the ▶

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► looks will not care about such things and the MHA200 feels sturdy and (as I said) dense, even if you can’t use it to impress the carhop at the drive-in.

But I’ll tell you this much: hook up your MHA200 to a Cyrus CDi compact disc player or Cambridge Audio Alva TT turntable at one end, and some Bang & Olufsen HX or Rosson RAD-O headphones at the other (which is what I have done for the purposes of this test), and any grizzling about perceived value starts to look (or, more accurately, sound) a bit childish. The MHA200 is a *hell* of a headphone amplifier.

The Ray Charles Story vol. 1 [Atlantic] is a vinyl gift that keeps on giving, and when the McIntosh sinks its teeth in it basically sprouts wings and takes flight. The majority of the recordings on this LP are getting on for 70 years old, and the MHA200 doesn’t try to disguise that fact – instead it gives full and joyful expression to the syncopated rhythms and endlessly characterful vocals. There’s an effortlessness to the McIntosh’s sound that suits this material down to the ground – it just rolls along with well-judged momentum, keeps an extremely close eye on the detail and nuance in Brother Ray’s voice, and smoothly integrates the scant backing elements into the picture at a respectful distance.

A system that consists of the Cyrus player, MHA200, Rosson Audio Design RAD-0 (connected via 4-pin XLR) and a CD copy of Kraftwerk’s *Computerwelt* [Kling Klang] makes the case for the McIntosh in even more unambiguous terms. This set-up simply delivers, in full. The open, silent spaces of the recording are given just as much importance as the sounds, and the remarkable variation in tonality and texture is expressed torrentially. The straight-edged ‘boom-bap’ of the rhythms is described neatly – but, again, the MHA200 has momentum to its presentation that makes even the chilliest, most carefully mechanised rhythm utterly danceable. One can almost hear Afrika Bambaataa scribbling down notes.

Low frequency extension is considerable here, but with little of the heat or sponginess you might associate with valve-orientated equipment. The opposite end of the frequency range is rolled off just fractionally, but there’s no loss of information as a result – just a mild sensation of good taste and decorum. Midrange balance and detail retrieval is as impressive as you’ll hear from any alternative headphone amplifier at any price. And it all hangs together seamlessly – if your headphones are up to it, the MHA200 will impress, entertain and impress again indefinitely.

In a very real way, that ability to impress is a function of McIntosh with many of its products, and the MHA200 is no exception. Yes, you can point the finger at the detailing of the finish or the feel of the remote, but those green-lit valves and the big gothic McIntosh logo will side-step such criticisms ably. There remains a pride of ownership surrounding McIntosh products – even ones without blue-glowing VU meters – and that counts for a lot.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Push-pull pure Class A triode headphone amplifier

Inputs: one stereo single-ended (via RCA jacks); one stereo balanced (via dual 3-pin XLR jacks)

Outputs: one stereo unbalanced headphone output jack (via 6.3mm TRS-type headphone jack); one stereo balanced headphone output jack (via 4-pin XLR Neutrik NC4MX headphone jack); one stereo balanced headphone output (via dual 3-pin XLR headphone jacks)

Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz

Dynamic Range: 1dB (8 ohm load); 1.3dB (4 ohm load)

Power Output: 500mW @ 32, 100, 250 or 600 ohm load

Dimensions (HxWxD): 146 × 156 × 232mm

Weight: 4.8kg

Price: £2,795

Manufacturer: McIntosh Laboratory, Inc.

URL: mcintoshlabs.com

UK Distributor: Fine Sounds UK

URL: finesounds.uk

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That cachet also means any review of the McIntosh MHA200 has to be on its own terms. If you’ve contrived to spend a great deal of money on a system that lacks top-drawer headphone amplification, all you need to do is put a great deal more money McIntosh’s way and you can enjoy as good a headphone experience as is currently available – from a product the density of which turns out to be in proportion to the opulence of its performance. In short, beauty is more than skin deep here. +