

WHAT HI-FI?

SOUND AND VISION

November 2021 ₹150

INDIA'S No.1 HOME ENTERTAINMENT MAGAZINE

HEART AND SOUL OF HI-FI

Speakers and amplifiers: the lifeblood of a great system

17th Anniversary SPECIAL EDITION



OUR PICK OF THE BEST EVERYDAY SPEAKERS

REVIEWED



BenQ V7050i Laser TV is ready to impress cinephiles



McIntosh MHA-200



Kokutan: Audio Technica goes big!

ISSN 2250-2246
9 772250 224000

McIntosh MHA-200 | Headphone Amplifier | ₹2,99,00

Tube up your tunes

FOR Paints a big canvas, front panel connectivity, aesthetics and engineering

AGAINST Cheap feeling knobs, volume control erratic

Up Buying a headphone amplifier is sort of like buying an Air fryer. You won't need one until you realise how much garbage you've been putting in your system. So wake up and consider the MHA-200 from the house of McIntosh, the official guardians of valve amplification technology. Or at least, the one brand that has made tubes as mainstream as they will ever get. But, they've also continued to modernize the package and blend it with their Unity Coupled Circuit transformers which are known to be hand wound in their own facilities. The MHA-200 admittedly looks a lot larger in pictures than it actually is in real life. It comes with a safety cage protecting the valves (and wandering hands), but most purists will choose to bathe in the mesmerizing green glow from the 12AT7 and 12BH7A dual triode vacuum tubes. The former amplify the incoming signal while the pair of latter provide the grunt to drive your choice of headphones. The lopsided weight (and look) comes from the pair of massive output transformers and a power transformer. Unless you're an engineer having worked on amplifier circuits, what exactly is achieved by the 'Unity Coupled Circuit' is hard to explain or even fit in this review, but it's goal is to ease the load presented to the amplifier by any impedance rating so the output always matches to the headphone. Or the speaker in case you're the lucky owner of a McIntosh power amplifier in your home audio system. It's commendable that they've shrunk this tech for a compact package such as this without giving up on their core technology. The only thing missing here is an on-board DAC and the blue VU meters that we all associate McIntosh with. Maybe in a future model?

The glow also signifies operating status and the iconic exterior uses all the hallmarks of McIntosh home-audio amps, like the chrome fascia and the raised metallic McIntosh logo down the side that is an instant conversation starter, even if you have the cage on to hide the tubes. The controls are basic, with an impedance selector that lets you choose from ranges 32 - 100, 100 - 250, 250 - 600, and 600 - 1000 Ohms, while keeping an identical power output of 500mW for all!

Balanced and unbalanced inputs at the back are mated to a stereo or dedicated left/right balanced output at

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the front, making it convenient to just plug and play without having to resort to feeling ports at the back. You have the option of 3-pin balanced XLR for individual L/R channels or a 4-pin XLR for balanced stereo apart from the bog standard quarter inch headphone jack. Around the back, connections include balanced and unbalanced inputs and a power control trigger if you have other McIntosh gear in the mix. Capable of driving practically any headphone in the world, the MHA-200 has an impedance selector to match your choice of headphones, or at least get the closest. Having tried it with a bunch of high-end headphones, one thing was certain - it makes every type of headphone bloom with its incredible power. 500mW to be precise and it's enough to bring out the best from planar, electrostatics or dynamic headphones from any brand you can think of.

For the purists, it's probably a good thing that McIntosh has given tone controls a miss in a bid to keep the circuit path free from any form of distortion and the resulting sound is big, powerful and meaty but without sacrificing on the nuance or microdynamics in delicate recordings. If you're using a source with a variable volume control, it's recommended that you keep the MHA-200 volume knob at its centre detent and use the source to control the gain. The only complaint here is the flimsy feel of the volume and impedance rating knobs, which seem more chi-fi than hi-fi. Also, the calibration of the potentiometer is peculiar since it makes large gains in volume even with the slightest twist past the centre position. Of course, the polished stainless steel casework and vintage logo along the side firmly establishes its street cred and makes for a fantastic bedside or coffee table conversation starter.

Sonically, it's hard to "hear" the tubes over a solid state design, especially with a wide range of headphones but play a track by Hans Theesink and the differences between the body of his voice are instantly decipherable from a Hi-Fi Man to a Focal to a Meze Audio to an Audio Technica. This is where you realise how much of a difference a good amp makes if you really are a can



fan and have a collection of them that you use for different purposes. Or if each of them is optimised for a different genre of music. Vamp by Trentemoller for instance sounded muddled and on the Hi-Fi Man Arya but the Focal Stellia managed to clean up the low-end a fair bit and similarly, going from one track to another, and headphone to headphone, the MHA-200 just keeps revealing the true nature of every headphone, without adding anything of its own. And it does so with power and punch but without sacrificing on the subtlety or microdynamics. It allows the soundstage to breathe and come to life in an almost three dimensional way inside your head. Plug out your headphones and use them directly via a laptop or smartphone and it's almost like downgrading to cheaper headphones where the sparkle is missing and the body has vanished.

The MHA-200 charges a premium like all products wearing this revered badge do and whether it's worth it or not depends on your propensity to spend on personal audio and level of commitment. It's no different than luxury home-audio and certainly, if you have the right pair of headphones there's no reason why you wouldn't want the best. And the McIntosh MHA-200 definitely is one of the best headphone amplifiers we have heard!

WHAT HI-FI? Says

VERDICT Sound that matches the visual gravitas and takes you into a different journey of musical nirvana.

TECH SPECS

Power 500mW **Impedance** 32 - 1000ohms compatibility **Connectivity** Balanced and unbalanced input, Stereo balanced and L/R output, 1/4in **Weight** 5.5kgs



Both balanced and unbalanced ports are present

