

Equipment Report



NuPrime Evolution One Monoblock Amplifier

Improving the Breed

Neil Gader

Let's play word association. Ready? The word is monoblock. Most of us immediately draw a mental picture of a hernia-inducing slab of electronics girded by jagged aluminum heat sinks that, when turned on, runs hot enough to scramble a frittata on its top plate. Traditionally, monoblocks represent the purest expression of an audiophile's pursuit of clean and massive power, one discrete channel at a time. However, NuPrime has turned the cliché on its head with its Evolution One mono amps. Massive becomes slim-line, hot turns cool, and heavy becomes feather-light—each of these little numbers tipping the scales at a manageable nineteen pounds, yet outputting a very monoblock-like 240W each. So what gives? Class D is what gives. Often misunderstood and inaccurately derided as “digital” amplification (it isn't), Class D generally has never gotten the love it deserves. However, the performance of the Evolution One largely undercuts those preconceptions and redefines what it means to be a top-tier monoblock amp in 2019.

NuPrime's Evolution One is a solid-state Class D (switching amplifier) monoblock design that outputs 240W into 8 ohms and 330W into 4 ohms. The low-profile (2.25" tall) aluminum chassis is clean with softly angled edges. The front panel is simplicity itself with an all-but-invisible flush-mounted standby button and a soft-lit power-indicator light. The back panel is outfitted for both balanced and unbalanced interconnects, and a small selector toggle accompanies the inputs. Top-notch speaker terminals accept bananas or spades and cinch down firmly. Finally, there's an IEC connector for the power cord and a power on/off rocker. The amps are available in black or black with silver accents. Overall, this amp is a very well-constructed package.

During the development of Evolution One, NuPrime says

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high-speed computing simulations were critical to achieving the very high input impedance numbers and the low phase delay that their engineering team were pursuing. The simulations resulted in Evolution One's all-new input stage and its whopping one megohm input impedance. This figure allows the preamplifier to see a much easier load, and thus generate less harmonic distortion and phase delay. Evolution One also incorporates NuPrime's 700kHz, high-speed, Class D module for greater resolution and a wide 50kHz bandwidth. Further, the low-profile linear power supply has been enhanced to deliver cleaner and more stable power with a lower noise floor. The

well-ordered interior includes high-quality copper strips (rather than the usual cables) to connect the power supply to the amplifier's circuitry, maximizing power delivery. The amp's damping factor is a notably high 400, and the firm bass control I heard listening to the Evolution One bears this out.

I'm not sure what I was expecting sonically when I lit up the Evolution One for the first time. My previous encounters with Class D have been decidedly mixed bags, although the gain strategy has seemed to be steadily moving in a positive direction over the last few years. Those who recall early Class D remember a couple of key issues. Broadly speaking, first-gen Class D tended to have a somewhat dry, airless top end, extended but overly taut bass, and a dimensionally underwhelming soundstage. The NuPrime largely places these memories where they belong—in the rear-view mirror. Firstly,

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Specs & Pricing

Power output: 240W into 8 ohms; 330W into 4 ohms

Frequency response: 0Hz to 50kHz (-3dB)

Dimensions: 16.9" x 2.25" x 14.7"

Weight: 19.5 lbs. each

Price: \$7990/pr.

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NuPrime's monoblocks are blessedly quiet at idle—critical for low-level resolution. After months of listening I could only conclude that any noise coming through the system was the result of the preamp or phonostage but never attributable to the Evolution One.

In tonal balance, neutrality was the overarching theme. The lack of colorations gave Evolution One an almost chameleon-like personality. The amps became a kind of cipher that morphed into whatever source signal was being fed into it. Driven by either the Pass Labs XP-12 preamp or the Aesthetix Mimas preamp section or straight from the dCS Bartók streaming DAC (review forthcoming), the Evolution One consistently mirrored the incoming source. In the case of the Bartók, it was the dCS player's sense of dogged resolution and harmonic ripeness. For the Aesthetix it was its sensual glimmer, velvet-like warmth,

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and outstanding ambient and dimensional properties. Music reproduction through Evolution One attained a smooth, reassuring fluidity—a mellower, looser character rather than an aggressive and unyielding one. The placid nature of the NuPrime was revealed time and again as I listened to tracks from Jennifer Warnes' long-awaited LP *Another Time, Another Place* [Impex]. Understated yet exquisitely crafted, this album is generously accented with delicate low-level and acoustic details from accordion, dobro, slide guitar, and stand-up bass, and of course Warnes' seemingly ageless and expressive voice. It became a con-

stant refrain throughout my listening sessions that the Evolution One allowed music to unspool effortlessly without electronic affectation.

Transients were naturalistic (more on this later), and there's was no indication of etch or grain in the upper octaves. The monoblocks were not laid-back in the sense of having dialed-in frequency dips, though I wouldn't describe the Evolution Ones as being completely devoid of character. But what character they had was reduced to such a low level that I was just as likely to hear what the preamp or volume-controlled source or even a pair of interconnects was doing before I heard the amp itself.

Key to the Evolution One's performance was the finesse it exemplified reproducing inner detail. That could be Brubeck's touch on the piano keys, Ringo's brushes playing off the skin of a snare, even the tick of a flat-pick on Chris Thile's bluegrass mandolin—pretty much any pattern of single notes played by an individual or a section of players. A great amplifier needs more than just a low noise floor, it also has to have the responsiveness and speed to reproduce the ever-changing gradations of energy emanating from each instrument or combo. These are not elements that we necessarily isolate in our minds, but the transient and microdynamic surprises are what spark our ears to attention. Such attributes define the "live" experience for this listener.

Images were so unwaveringly stable that they could have been applied with crazy glue. This was lucidly illustrated as I listened to Diana Krall's "No Moon at All." I was captured by the precision with which the simple arrangement was balanced fore and aft and side to side—acoustic bass to the left, Krall's vocal forward in the center, and piano further back on the deep right. When I listened to the backing brass ensemble on Holly Cole's "The Briar and the Rose," the thought that kept crossing my mind was how tangibly the space and air between images were being realized. Over the years these players have often sounded unfocused and smeared—literally on top of one another. With the NuPrime, they found their individual spaces and were much more highly resolved in timbre. A good part of this impression is likely owed to the NuPrime's channel separation—a hallmark of monoblocks—and its mix of discrete and isolated power supplies and circuitry. But to be fair, some of credit also accrues to the dCS Bartók (but more on that in a forthcoming issue).

The Evo One may look as though it's been on a diet, but dynamic muscle and low-frequency energy haven't suffered a bit. Bass response was predictably strong—predictably in the sense that bottom-octave control and grip have generally been strengths of Class D designs. But the Evolution One goes beyond the traditional Class D playbook by not only producing the expected low-end extension and slam, but by also focusing on the





textural elements and what I call the “bloom factor” that define kettle drums and kick drums, or the darker resonances and air displacement from a section of bass fiddles, or the blasts from a tuba. In producing realistic venue scale, the NuPrime wasn’t as terrifyingly ominous or visceral as a pair of big MBLs or Pass Labs; nonetheless, it summoned up intimations of the real thing.

During my listening evaluation I found no significant areas for criticism, but that’s not to say the NuPrime fully aced all tests. Though its soundstage was wide and dimensional, I still felt that, during Vaughan-Williams *The Wasps* Overture, orchestral layering and depth could have been better reproduced compared with recent references I’ve encountered. At times I felt that the Evolution One was almost too mellow and that its transient behavior could have been a bit crisper off the line.

This was true, for example, during the exchange between fiddle, cello, and acoustic bass on Yo Yo Ma’s *Appalachian Journey*. I expected just a trace more low-level spark. Also, the speakers (ATC, PSB, Dali) that I employed were moderately efficient so I cannot speak with authority about how the Evolution would fare with a speaker that has impedance dips in the lower octaves. (That might be a conversation worth having with NuPrime or the retail dealer.) Nonetheless, in the time that I spent with these monoblocks I never felt they were gasping for “air” or short on power. They maintained an unflappable bearing throughout my evaluation.

Today I see no sonically valid reasons to raise an eyebrow at Class D amplification. In short, it’s high time that audiophiles park their biases at the door. In its Evolution One, NuPrime, in grand fashion and with musicality to burn, has laid to rest the argument that Class D is somehow intrinsically inferior to traditional Class A/AB. Every amp, regardless of letters of the alphabet, needs to be judged on its musical merits, not its topology. That’s always been what the high end is about. My recommendation couldn’t be more enthusiastic. Evolution really does improve the breed.

NuPrime CDP-9 CD Player/DAC

Well deserving of mention is the CDP-9 CD player/DAC that NuPrime generously sent along with the monoblocks. With its volume control, USB DAC, and legion of digital I/Os, the CDP-9 could handily make for a complete “system solution” for users who don’t require a row of analog inputs or a traditional lineage preamplifier. Compact in the extreme, the CDP-9 is still equipped with enough digital inputs for USB, optical, coaxial, and AES. The high-performance DAC includes a selectable sampling-rate converter, and the sampling rate of any digital input, including CD playback, can be converted up or down between PCM and DSD, from 44.1kHz to 768kHz or DSD64 to DSD512. The CDP-9 proved to be a fine performer with the monoblocks, but since my focus was on the Evolution Ones I was better able to take their fullest measure by employing my own reference system components. I’ll have more to say about the CDP-9 in a future issue. Price: \$1695. **tas**



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