

YOUR A/V GUY

Nuforce Icon amplifier rocks, no matter the speakers

By Kevin Hunt | Special to the Chicago Tribune
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As digital music drifts farther down the audio chain into cell phones, here comes a freaky little desktop amplifier called the Nuforce Icon that'll stop the MP3 generation in its tracks.

The Icon, no bigger than [Madonna's](#) little black book (the paperback version), suggests what music in the home might become if we don't devolve into a nation of [iPhone](#) or iPod or iTouch speaker-dock addicts. At its best, this device summons something far greater than dock-quality music.

The lowly 12-watt Icon is not out of its league, away from the desktop, paired with \$3,000 speakers in a full-blown sound system. I know, because I tried it.

Maybe it shouldn't have been such a shock. The Icon is the first product for the masses from Nuforce of Milpitas, Calif., which helped turn a different kind of amplifier—highly efficient, cool-running featherweights built on a microchip—into a high-end phenomenon. Now Nuforce adds the Icon to a collection of amplifiers that tops off with the Reference 9 SE V2.

The Icon, only a single pound fully dressed in its anodized-aluminum chassis, has a lot more going for it than snob appeal. It's a first-class multitasker.

For those with music libraries on a computer, the Icon's USB connection converts digital music (Mac or Windows) into an analog signal that's passed along to your speakers.

As the centerpiece of a desktop audio system, the Icon connects to an iPod or DVD player the traditional, analog way. The Icon's a headphone amplifier too. Or a pre-amplifier. Or an amplifier in a standard stereo system, no computer or iPod attached. Just add speakers. The Icon won't fool anyone, either. Its Apple-like design has two knobs, a volume control and input selector, with a slip-on, silicone stand.

Nuforce's technology descends from switching amplifiers, also known as Class D amplifiers, popularized several years ago by the unlikely success of the Sonic Impact T-Amp (no longer made), which produced remarkable sound, and 10 watts of power, for the price of a DVD. Such amplifiers are often called digital amplifiers, even though the output is controlled by an analog signal.

Nuforce calls its products "analog switching amplifiers." By any terminology, lightweight Class D switching amps sound smooth and sweet, almost like old vacuum-tube equipment. That's why high-enders like Nuforce so much.

They'll like the Icon too. But I like it because it sounds so good in so many ways. I spent a week in a [Maine](#) cottage rental with the Icon, a pair of Nuforce's S-1 speakers, a Macbook and an external hard drive holding more than 7,000 songs in CD-quality digital files. The entire setup took up less room than a cooler on the drive up.

Back at home, I listened to CDs on a PlayStation 3 linked to the Icon, then tried my Nano through the Icon's mini-jack while listening to PSB bookshelf speakers. Then, at night, out came the headphones. And, yes, I even connected the Icon-Nano duo to a pair of Gallo Reference speakers—which now go for \$3,000.

In every setting, with every speaker, the Icon behaved like an amplifier more powerful than 12 watts and much more refined than the everyday amplifier.

I detected only two missteps: Nuforce got too cute with the speakers. These are extremely well-made bookshelf models, but Nuforce built an equalization network just for the S-1 into the Icon that requires Cat-5 computer cables, not standard speaker cables.

So the Icon has snap-in, Ethernet-type connectors that will baffle consumers. It's not worth it. The speakers, which image spectacularly but have no bottom end, don't quite succeed like the Icon.

Nuforce supplies cables with the appropriate RJ-45 connector at one end and banana connectors for standard speakers at the other. But that means you're stuck with only one type, and only 1 meter, of cable.

The Icon, when turned on, also sends a slight pop through your speakers. Neither complaint will stop me from calling the Icon one of the year's hottest new products. It doesn't matter if you match it with hot-rod or bargain-basement speakers.

This little Icon sings.