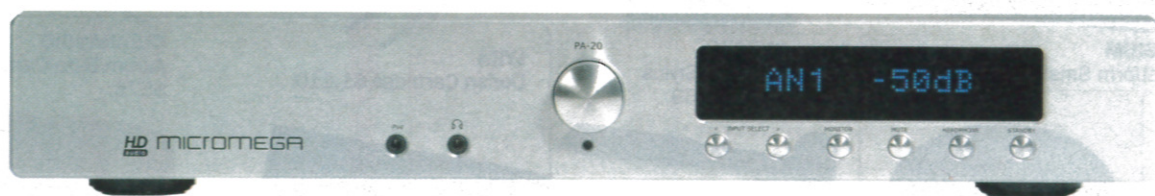


# EQUIPMENT REPORT

## Micromega PA-20 Preamp and PW-400 Amplifier

Welcome Back

Neil Gader



There is no greater feel-good story in audio than a company that, having fallen on hard times, manages to pull itself up by its boot straps, reorganize, and re-enter the competitive marketplace. Micromega is one such company. A little background. Since the 1980s, Paris-based Micromega was a highly regarded and innovative player in the high end. For example, in 1987 Micromega launched the CDF-1 Hitech, the industry's first top-loading CD player. This was followed a year later by the first CD player with a separate transport and D/A converter from a high-end company. Subsequent years saw creative introductions in digital applications of audio and video products for both hi-fi and home theater. Flagging finances caused Micromega to abandon the North American market for a few years, but it has been rejuvenated by new owner and CEO Didier Hamdi, a former world champion motorcycle racer turned entrepreneur (go figure). Micromega has since struck a deal with Audio Plus Services, a leading North American importer/distributor of premium audio, video, and home-theater products, and will be sold through the Audio Plus network of specialty dealers.

Still manufactured in France, Micromega's new HD Audio lineup is completely redesigned and engineered and comprises a full panoply of models for both two-channel audio as well as home cinema. Micromega is also dedicating considerable time and research to the ongoing shift to music servers. The upcoming AirStream, an Apple-licensed wireless DAC, is designed to integrate with an iTunes-equipped PC or Mac over a WiFi 802.11 home network. AirStream will also be compatible with any high-resolution streaming content whenever iTunes makes that option available.

However, in the two-channel universe the PA-20 solid-state line-level preamp and PW-400 amplifier will be key two-channel players for Micromega. They feature low-profile aluminum chassis with clean, elegant styling. Ready to do battle in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the PA-20 preamp sports front-panel analog inputs for both headphones and portable music players. There's a PRO ON selector that serves as a bypass for a processor. And there's even

a subwoofer output for running in 2.1-channel mode. Micromega offers an optional iDock docking station, which when connected to the RS232/DB9 rear-panel connector, will charge the iPod and take full command via the remote control. Finally in a nod to the home-theater crowd, inputs are nameable and the display is large and readable from a respectable distance.

The PW-400 amplifier trumpets 400 watts per channel of power from its Class D modules. That's an earful, but this rating is also into 4 ohms rather than the customary 8 ohms—the real-world 8-ohm figure is undoubtedly less. Rated power notwithstanding, the amp has dual transformers, a huge one for the power supply, and a separate one for the input board and the display. It has dual pairs of speaker posts for biwiring and is also capable of being bridged. And then there are those interior LED running lamps—in pairs, red for standby and red/blue when powered on. An allusion to the national colors of France, *n'est-ce pas?* The preamp and amp also have a STANDBY link I/O to synchronize power-on/off—a feature that can be daisy-chained if you're running multiple amps.

There are a couple of ergonomic speed bumps. In order to select XLR or single-ended operation you need to flip the amp over and shift the small slider switches near the rear footers to the preferred mode of operation. Someone obviously missed the memo suggesting that a rear-panel toggle would be more appropriate in an amp of this price range. Also in the yea/boo department, the amp can be bridged (yea!). However you'll need to flip the amp over to reach the appropriate bridge jumpers (boo). Also in a time where mechanical and airborne resonances are routinely addressed by robust, seamless casework I thought the wrap-around panels at the rear of each component should have been better implemented. And, the degree of flex from the top plate was in my view a detail not commensurate with the performance.

Sonically, however, there is nothing lightweight about the Micromegas' musicality. Whether considered as a pair or individually, they perform well, although I believe the preamp holds the overall edge. As I often do, I began my listening





session with one of my favorite symphonic shakedown LPs—the Solti version of Beethoven's Ninth [Decca] is a wonder for its naturalistic orchestral perspective, imaging, and rendering of acoustic space. The PA/PW immediately registered as clean, balanced, and controlled. They were able to easily hold position on soloists and delineate complex choral groupings. Percussion cues, deep in the acoustic space, emerged with transient immediacy and resonant decay intact. Overall, the personality of this tandem is a cooler one, leaning just a shade toward the clinical. It doesn't suggest the weight or colossal soundstage of a Pass Lab or Plinius or one of my mid-priced amp faves, the Cambridge Audio 840W, nor does it have the dark brooding power of an MBL. It truly is its own animal. The midrange is as solid and penetrating as a Klitschko jab, the treble clean but in need of just a little more bloom. Transients are fully up to speed in this price range. Soundstage width is excellent overall with just a slight contraction in depth and a bit of a lower ceiling.

Inner detail, however, is a consistent strong suit of the Micromega pre/amp combination. Norah Jones' "Sinkin' Soon" on *Not Too Late* [Blue Note] is a kitchen-sink arrangement (yes, with pots and pans) of found-sound oddities and clatterings. It's my go-to tune for its splendid low-level information and micro-dynamics. Paired with the new ultra-resolution Magico V2 speakers, the Micromegas had the opportunity to reveal the very specific percussion transients from this track and it didn't disappoint—including a few heretofore undiscovered taps of reverberant information which consistently seemed to travel diagonally from the front-right of the speaker back on an angle to the center rear. I'd never heard that one before, but there it was, deep in the stage but unmistakable.

I finally concluded that the PA-20 and PW-400 were especially good at letting the inherent properties of a system come to the fore without slipping in additives of their own. They introduced only fairly minor subtractions and these were revealed primarily at the frequency extremes. A softening of the lowest bass cues for example, or a mild shading in the treble octaves. During Jen Chapin's "Alone Together" from *reVisions* [Chesky], bass was well controlled but lacked that last bit of extension that gets the floorboards to tingle the soles of your feet. Similarly, there's a moment during Rutter's "Praise Ye The Lord" from *Requiem* [Reference] where at the close the organ wells up as if on its hind legs and lets loose a huge volley from its deepest ranks. It should sound as if some subterranean beast has just swallowed up the hall but the Micromega couldn't quite get its power supply around this one. As the instrument descended, which it does often during this track, the sound seemed to pale and lose reverberant energy—not so played back through the voracious 300Wpc Plinius Hiato.

Specific to the PW-400 is a trait that has been consistent with my own observations of Class D amps. During Judy Collins' "Send In The Clowns" the oboe lacked the vibrant "lift" and air that accompany good acoustic recordings, and the sense of a lowered acoustic "ceiling" that I referred to earlier is largely manifested by the PW-400, not the PA-20. I also felt the amp fell short trying to reproduce the warmer harmonic energy that allows the Turtle Creek Chorale to fully bloom during *Lux Aeterna*, or to cover the symphonic ground of Korngold's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra [DG] with sufficient dynamic octane. Finally, vocal peaks tended to sound drier through this amp and brass and wind instruments didn't retain the full measure of their earthy textures.

In the final analysis my time with the Micromega gear was often enjoyable but resulted in a mixed decision. The PA-20 preamp really captured and riveted my attention and allowed me to lose myself in the pleasure and passion of the music. The amp, solid and workmanlike throughout its midrange, left me wanting a bit more opulence and juice in the treble and greater dynamic fury at the bottom.

Any self-respecting audiophile should be thrilled to welcome Micromega back to the high-end neighborhood. But it's also a tougher and more crowded 'hood than the one Micromega left. Fortunately the company's sonic bona fides are solid and the products currently in the pipeline look exciting. Whether these will hasten a full-on revolution for this French firm, only time will tell. But this is a company on the move and from this reviewer's vantage point its future looks to be a bright one. tas

## SPECS & PRICING

### PA-20

**Inputs:** Four analog RCA (phono, processor bypass, subwoofer, tape loop)

**Outputs:** Single-ended and balanced, subwoofer out

**Dimensions:** 16.9" x 11.8" x 2.75"

**Weight:** 13.2 lbs.

**Price:** \$1995

### PW-400

**Power output:** 400Wpc into 4 ohms

**Input/output:** One pair single-

ended RCA, one pair balanced XLR

**Dimensions:** 16.9" x 11.8" x 2.75"

**Weight:** 28.6 lbs.

**Price:** \$2795

### AUDIO PLUS SERVICES

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