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AFFORDABLE M-C CARTRIDGES

Chris Bryant tries out four relatively inexpensive m-c cartridges

NAIM'S LITTLE DAC

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ULTIMATE FACT

Martin Colloms' unvarnished review of PMC's Fact.12 loudspeaker

40 YEARS YOUNG

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VALVE INTEGRATION

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THE Rs HAVE IT

Apollo-R, Saturn-R and Elicit-R: Rega's latest budget electronics investigated

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE: NAIM DAC-V1, PMC FACT.12, JPLAY, JCAT, LINN 40TH ANNIVERSARY SONDEK LP12, AUDIO RESEARCH VSi75, AUDIO-TECHNICA AT-F7, GOLDRING LEGACY SERIES, GOLDRING ELITE, ORTOFON QUINTET RED, AUDIO MUSIC R-S, REGA APOLLO-R, REGA SATURN-R, REGA ELICIT-R, NAIM NAIT, MUSICAL FIDELITY V90-HPA, MUSICAL FIDELITY V90-LPS



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When reading Martin Colloms' piece on reviewing techniques (pp30-33) I started to realise just how personal such a process can be. I'm not criticising Martin's methodology, which has a rigour and thoroughness that I rather envy (up to a point anyway), but the fact that it varies considerably from my own approach does interest me, and I daresay readers too.

My own tactic when confronting a new component is less formal and certainly a lot more casual. Rather than undertaking specific listening sessions in a system that has been carefully set up in order to maximise its performance, I'll merely insert the item into my regular system and use it as and when circumstances dictate or the mood takes me.

Both approaches are probably equally valid, but they are also essentially antithetical. As I see it, MC is applying his conscious mind to focus on the performance of the component in question, whereas I try to let my subconscious make the important decisions about what I think about a product, only reverting to my conscious when actually writing up the review.

It has always been my personal maxim that the reviewer (of hi-fi equipment or anything else for that matter) is only as good as his/her last review. The fact that both MC and myself have survived for so long would seem to validate both approaches, which I actually find quite intriguing.

Vinyl Longevity

According to Wikipedia's entry for 'LP Record', Columbia introduced the first examples way back in 1948. That's actually before I was born, and I've just started drawing my old age pension. In the modern world that's one heck of an achievement, and means that I'm able to play any discs manufactured in my lifetime.

Would that the same was likely to hold true for our computer systems, which seem to require updating on such a regular basis that I've simply lost my faith in their likely longevity. As far as I can tell the music files I've made will still replay, but they only go back a few years, and I was quite shocked to discover that my current *MacBook Pro* doesn't seem to like opening *Word* files created before 1996. Have I lost six year's work? More than likely (given my level of computer disinterest and illiteracy).

Then there was a nearby lightning strike a few months back. Such events and their consequences are very unpredictable I can accept, and I still can't explain why I still managed to send and receive e-mail and access the internet while the server system simply failed. To get it back I had to replace my modem and something that Apple calls an *AirPort Express*, but there was no problem with any of my other hi-fi components. (To be fair, a Sutton-based friend suffered much more seriously after a lightning strike, and even had to replace his *Troika* cartridge, so maybe I got off lightly.)

Computer audio in its various forms is certainly by far the most convenient way to access and play music today, but I seriously doubt whether it will still be possible to play the files we create today 20 (never mind 50) years hence.

Paul Messenger
Editor

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Naim's Little DAC

NAIM'S COMPACT DAC-V1 MIGHT BE AIMED AT COMPUTER USERS BUT MAKES PLENTY OF SENSE AS A DIGITAL PRE-AMP TOO

PAUL MESSENGER

Should one take DACs seriously enough to invest a heap of money in one (or more)? I regularly use several to convert the digital audio outputs of my TV, laptop and a Naim *UnitiServe* into analogue signals for my *NAC552* pre-amp, but I don't consider them as important as my core vinyl, FM and CD sources. I therefore normally use relatively inexpensive DACs, though the *UnitiServe* probably deserves something better.

Naim's original *DAC* was reviewed in *HIFICRITIC* by Malcolm Steward (*Vol3 No4*) and Martin Colloms (*Vol4 No1*), and is a full width device with a plethora of mostly S/PDIF digital inputs, power supply upgrade potential, and a £2,210 pricetag. Much more recently, Naim introduced this £1,250 *DAC-V1*. This also has a decent selection of inputs, including an asynchronous USB that's particularly oriented towards computer sources, but does lack the power supply upgradeability.

However, because it's a half-width component it's also a fine cosmetic match for the Naim *UnitiServe* that I bought after reviewing it in *HIFICRITIC Vol6 No3*. True, one incentive was the amount of time spent loading it with my entire CD collection, but there's no gainsaying its wonderful convenience, and it has usefully also reminded me of many CDs I'd forgotten I owned!

Alongside its task as a network server, the *UnitiServe* only outputs digital audio, so some sort of DAC is necessary. During the original review I used a Naim *NDX* 'Network Player', which incorporates a DAC and did a decent enough job. But it's also a rather costly item, so I happily returned the *NDX* while purchasing the *UnitiServe*, planning to use it with a simpler, less costly DAC. It has since operated happily alongside a relatively inexpensive Rega *DAC*, but when Naim introduced its own half-width model I felt obliged to try it.

The *DAC-V1* is a classic Naim-black standalone unit with a built-in power supply and there's certainly no shortage of features and facilities. Pride of place goes to an asynchronous high speed USB type B input, which makes this DAC particularly well suited to operating alongside a computer source, with the capability of handling hi-res files up to 24-bit/384kHz.

The unit may also operate as a digital-source pre-amp, switching between six inputs and

handling (analogue) volume *via* a neat little remote control handset or the front panel controls. To my surprise the handset even controls track-skip on my computer, while the front also includes a good quality headphone outlet via a 6.3mm socket, and a comprehensive green display. Alongside the USB, the rear panel has five S/PDIF inputs – one BNC, two phonos and two opticals. A matching half-width £650 Naim *NAP100* power amp is intended to partner this *DAC-V1*.

Technically speaking it shares several features with the more costly *DAC*, such as a custom-programmed SHARC processor that buffers the incoming data and performs digital filtering and re-clocking, prior to feeding the Burr Brown DAC. Particular care has gone into avoiding the *DAC-V1*'s sound quality being compromised by the computer's USB output.

Sound Quality

Having always regarded my laptop primarily as a work tool, and having purchased and loaded the *UnitiServe*, I've paid very little attention to delivering music *via* USB from my computer over the last couple of years. I can't therefore comment on the alternative music playing softwares, but can confirm that the *DAC-V1* sounds very good indeed, and was comfortably superior to the Rega *DAC*. It makes the connection without drama, and handled a 24-bit/192kHz file with considerable aplomb,

It works equally well when using using a BNC-to-BNC S/PDIF connection from the *UnitiServe* – indeed it was difficult to distinguish between the two sources. When using 44.1kHz Red Book material, the performance of the *DAC-V1/UnitiServe* combo actually got very close to the much more costly *CDS3/PS555* CD player. It just lacked a little tension, incisiveness and poise, presumably because it lacks the latter's larger and more elaborate power supplies.

Conclusions

This *DAC-V1* certainly does an outstanding job of decoding computer music files from a USB socket, but it's also rather more than that, as it behaves like a simple digital pre-amp, remotely adjusting volume and switching between six digital inputs. The combination of flexibility, simplicity and superior performance at a realistic price is persuasive enough for a Best Buy rating.

HIFICRITIC
BEST BUY



Manufacturer's Specification

Inputs	1x USB (asynchronous, high speed, Type B) 5x S/PDIF (1xBNC, 2xRCA, 2xTOSLINK)
Dimensions (HxWxD)	87x207x314mm
Weight	4.3kg
Price	£1,250

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Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO AND MUSIC JOURNAL

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Martin Colloms, Publisher

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Those with long memories will recall that way back in the early 1970s, when both companies were young and small, Linn Products and Naim Audio forged a powerful complementary alliance, the former contributing record player and speakers either side of the latter's electronics. Both were very successful, but rapid growth led to a rather acrimonious split in the mid-1980s, as each developed components that competed with the other. Substantial differences in the sound character or flavour of systems demonstrated by the two companies became increasingly obvious. Owners of Linn/Naim systems such as yrs trly were faced with choosing between the two rival alternatives, and (for good or ill) I elected to stick with Naim's electronics.

However, listening to Linn's latest 40th Anniversary LP12 Sondek 'full monte' record player (pp16-17) took me right back to the time of the schism, reminding me very strongly of the classic characteristic Linn sound that I'd heard back then.

In the mid-1980s, both companies were setting standards for vinyl replay that were way ahead of the international norm, just as both continue to set class leading agendas to this day. The Naim component timbre was slightly warmer, richer and more romantic, whereas the Linn sound seemed to be cooler, brighter and drier.

The new Linn record player certainly provided loads of musical information from a wide selection of discs, while the adjectives and phrases that invariably came to mind were cool, calm and under tight control. I wondered to what extent that was down to the turntable, and how much was the responsibility of the electronics – specifically the *Urika* phono stage and/or its high frequency (switch-mode) power supply.

Much as I dislike (and try to avoid) stereotyping, I can't avoid making the observation that 'cool and clean if clinical' does seem to sum up some of the experiences that I hear when listening to electronics equipped with switch-mode (as distinct from linear) supplies, so I decided to try and pin this down.

Happily I had the necessary bits and pieces on hand to bypass the *Urika* phono stage and substitute a Naim *StageLine* (with a borrowed *SuperCap* supply). The changeover was no trivial task, as I discovered, but the end results amply confirmed my suspicion that much of the 'character' of the sound was being determined by the phono stage electronics. The exceptional vinyl replay was audible via both routes, but the contributions of the phono stage electronics had a powerful effect upon the overall timbre. The contrast in sonic character between Linn and Naim systems might well be down to personal preference, but the difference still clearly exists, and mixing the two is still arguably better avoided.

Vertere Update

Some issues back I discussed the excellent cables that Roksan co-founder Touraj Moghaddam is designing and building in his Chiswick office suite under the new Vertere brand. I regularly use Pulse interconnects now, but I'd found his speaker cables good but not exceptional. However, he hadn't realised that the Naim *NAP500* power amp I normally use had a balanced output configuration rather than the normal single-ended arrangement.

He therefore brought down some cables that had been specifically designed for amplifiers with balanced outputs, and these simply blew me away. Sometimes one feels the need to check a system change by going back to what was being used previously; sometimes an improvement is sufficiently obvious that such a procedure is unnecessary. Just as I'd found when changing from PMC's *IB2is* to *IB2SEs* a few months back, so it was with these special '*Pulse X for balanced*' speaker cables. I just wish I could figure out what he'd done and why they worked so well...