Naim's Software Update

MARTIN COLLOMS DISCOVERS THAT NAIM'S STREAMER SOFTWARE UPDATE SOUNDS RATHER BETTER AS WELL AS IMPROVING FUNCTIONALITY

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Like other manufacturers of servers and streamers, Naim is subject to continuing customer demand to maintain compatibility with the constantly changing world of computer audio. This seems to involve inexorably expanding format and provider options, to the point where Naim simply cannot cover all the possibilities, so this major software update concentrates on providing DSD 5.6, Spotify, and the latest BBC format (HLS, HD iRadio). (The previous BBC format was discontinued, leaving Naim's internet radio facility without these channels.)

Writing the new code for the upgrade was not a trivial task, especially since sound quality had to be maintained. Initial work got the systems and new features going but the full standard demanded was not at first met.

The project was particularly awkward for the *NDS*, as it has limited space for program code, so the code writing had to be particularly economical. However, economical code often sounds better, as fewer instructions fly around the digital audio signal processor.

A new code compiler had been in use, but this still led to some shortfall in performance. The engineers reinstalled the old compiler, in case there was an association with performance, so the code came to be rewritten for the older compiler. After finally uploading to the reference *NDS*, and with some further code tweaking, it was felt that the required standard had been met.

Primarily intended to improve functionality without impairing the already established sound quality, all this work was not specifically oriented towards improving the sound. However, the project has involved much effort by Naim's software team and the development listening panels, and early rumours suggested that the sound quality might actually be a little better, and in all operating modes, in addition to the greater functionality.

To use all the facilities you also need to update the Naim control App, but I'm glad that I had left this part for later. Had I done this at the time I would have been cursing, as I did later on while learning this new and differently presented user interface.

Nevertheless I had the opportunity critically to assess the before and after software update performance for my *NDS*, using the exacting and highly analytical Naim *Statement* amplification and Magico *S5* loudspeakers.

Even after a short *NDS* warm up (maybe 15 minutes), an improvement was plain to hear. The change is certainly not earthshattering, but was nevertheless considered subtly satisfying. There was more of a spring in the *NDS*' step, and the faintly 'mechanical' quality oft associated with streamer replay (including to a small degree the *NDS*) seemed reduced. The sound presentation was more focused and immediate in character, and more like the best real time CD replay. Intriguingly, vocals showed greater expression and intonation, and also had better swing and more convincing rhythmic delivery, all of which was subtly satisfying.

HD replay was also improved and the ability to play standard format DSD (SACD) was most welcome, particularly where the original recording had not been re mastered or otherwise manipulated. (Now that particular section of my music library could be played without invoking another DAC.)

While the installation procedure might be considered a bit of a bother, Naim dealers will of course do it for customers. Carrying out a no cost upgrade with added facilities and better sound is certainly well worthwhile, as I think it rates around 5-8% higher on sound quality scoring. It's therefore a no brainer.

The Naim App