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REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

GRADIENT HELSINKI
NAIM UNITISERVE
NAIM NDX
MAGICO Q1
LAMPIZATOR DAC
AURELIA CERICAS
AUDIO-TECHNICA AT-OC9MLII
ORTOFON RONDO BLUE
DYNAVECTOR KARAT 17D3
ZU AUDIO DENON DL103
NAIM NAC552 DC PS
UNITY AUDIO THE ROCK
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RED WINE AUDIO S10 BLACK LIGHTNING
ELIPSON PLANET L
NOVO SPA-II
BLACK RHODIUM TWIST
CHORD SARUM DIGITAL
ATLAS ASIMI
ATLAS MAVROS
MEICORD CAT6
AUDIOQUEST FOREST ETHERNET
DNM HFTN

GRADIENT HELSINKI

A speaker with unique directivity and presentation

NAÏVE NETWORKING

A sceptic gets to grips with network audio

MINIATURE EXCELLENCE

Magico Q1 – probably the most advanced miniature speaker around

FOUR AFFORDABLE CARTRIDGES

Mid-price moving-coils, from Audio-Technica, Dynavector, Ortofon and Zu Audio

THE VALVE DAC

Mixing up the old and the new

WHITHER DIGITAL?

Meridian's Bob Stuart describes the past, present and future of digital audio

MUSIC & MUCH MORE



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Consumer Choice' has become a totem of our times, a powerful symbol that is invariably regarded as a worthwhile 'good' in itself and rarely questioned. I can understand how this has happened, as there was very little 'consumer choice' back when I was a child.

Quite honestly, it's all too easy to forget what Britain's post-WWII austerity was like. Back around 1950, as I recall, my parents had to put their name down in a queue to be allowed to purchase a fridge, and actually ended up with a gas-powered one! (Based on the expansion principle, this did have the advantage of simplicity, with no moving parts to go wrong.)

As is so often the case with humanity, we now seem to be undergoing a period of over-reaction, leaving us perplexed and puzzled by an ever increasing glut of often spurious and unnecessary choice. Pop into the local supermarket for, say, a can of beans, and one is confronted by half a dozen rival brands. Do you know the difference between them? More significantly, do you actually care? By the same token, buying a train ticket today seems to resemble participating in the National Lottery.

Much the same can be said of the broadcast media. A decade ago, I would watch *The Last Night of the Proms* on the telly while putting the sound from my FM tuner through the hi-fi system, all in perfect synchronisation. Today I can get my radio from FM, DAB, the internet, Freeview, Freesat and Sky, and my TV feed from all but the first two. Trouble is, only the FM radio is 'live'; all the rest are time-delayed for one reason or another, so it's no longer possible for me to synchronise my 'best sound quality' source (a Magnum Dynalab *MD106T* FM tuner) with any of the available TV pictures.

It must therefore be something of a moot point whether this proliferation of TV and radio platforms is really progress. In fact I think the BBC itself may be finding the complications difficult, as at one point I searched several platforms for two of the four 'park' options, without finding them at all.

(In fact I have found one advantage of the multi-platform situation, though it has no bearing on hi-fi and is only really relevant to cricket fans working from home. Using a split-screen TV I can listen to *Test Match Special* on Freeview, while Sky's satellite-delivered pictures are delayed by a couple of seconds, meaning I can work while keeping one ear on *TMS*, then look up and catch the action when anything interesting happens. I also helps avoid Sky's irritating ad breaks.)

The argument about too much choice could equally well apply to high end hi-fi, where the number of brands is expanding far more rapidly than the availability of distributors. As one who makes a living reviewing new hi-fi components, I shouldn't complain, and by and large I welcome the extra diversity that seems to result, especially when this involves mining the forgotten lessons from the past.

My own hi-fi education really started in the 1970s, by which time valves had been virtually forgotten. The fact that this issue features valve-equipped DACs, pre-amps and phono stages is a testament to the virtues of diversity.

Paul Messenger
Editor

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Back to vinyl bliss



Rafael Todes tries this compact active speaker on page 40



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Chris Bryant tries four affordable MC cartridges on page 26

Naïve Networking

PAUL MESSENGER DOESN'T MUCH LIKE COMPUTERS, SO HE APPROACHES A NAIM NETWORK SYSTEM WITH A MIXTURE OF NAIVETY, SCEPTICISM AND TREPIDATION



Although no ‘early adopter’, I did first start using a computer as an audio source some six years ago, but have to add that my enthusiasm has yet to be aroused. The sound quality is decent enough, and the convenience is mostly very impressive, but there are snags too, and ultimately I’ve never really acquired the habit of using my laptop as a music source (perhaps because it’s in constant use for work).

One snag seems to be down to the very different timescales that operate in the hi-fi and computer industries. Although hi-fi components do undergo frequent and regular cosmetic changes and upgrades, establishing a new format that’s incompatible with its predecessors only occurs every 20 years or so. Computers, on the other hand, are always changing, and regularly seem to disregard any notions of retro-compatibility – as any computer user will have discovered (doubtless alongside considerable irritation and inconvenience).

(Although I’m tending to lose count, I think I’m on my eighth *Mac* now, after some 22 years. In my experience, technological ‘advance’ seems to require a computer to be changed at roughly three year intervals – a planned obsolescence situation that has doubtless considerably assisted Apple’s growth and prosperity. As for the issue of retro-compatibility, my current *MacBook Pro* can only access the reviews that I wrote since 1996, and still struggles a bit with the older stuff. My *iTunes* computer music store, which only goes back six years, seems to have survived numerous updates, and now at least supports full WAV file recording of CDs, if not some high res downloads.)

Hitherto I’ve simply been using the *iTunes* software that came pre-loaded into my fourth (or was it my fifth?) *Mac* for computer audio recording and replay. I’ve treated it and its music replay capabilities rather as I might have used a 1970s cassette deck, partly because of peer pressure – *iTunes* seems to be regarded with some scorn by hardcore computer hi-fi aficionados.

A year after I started to use *iTunes*, I started streaming the signal wirelessly from the computer to an @tunes SB+. This was essentially a modified Logitech (nee Slim Devices) *Squeezebox 3*, packaged to look like a proper hi-fi component and with much enhanced outboard power supply arrangements.

This operated very satisfactorily for a year or two, satisfying my somewhat limited expectations. However, the fact that I now had two separate and different user-interfaces to contend with became a mite confusing, and it wasn’t long before Logitech introduced numerous variations on the *Squeezebox* theme.

However, a much more serious problem surfaced when I changed my computer. I (deliberately) purchased an apparently ‘identical’ computer, and the retailer/installer reckoned it would only take him a few minutes to the new model. Several hours later he was still there, long after the working day had ended, having had to download a new operating system, and entirely failing to get my SB+ *Squeezebox* working. It was therefore back to *iTunes* and a USB hard-wired connection for the next few months, until a friendly visiting computer adept took pity and (after quite a struggle) managed to download the relevant *Squeezebox* software.

My third *MacBook Pro* arrived early this year. This example required me to operate new software for both Word and Mail, a traumatic learning experience in itself, so I made no attempt to load or use the SB+. Frankly, the short-termism of the computer industry seems to be incompatible with the 40+ year longtermism of my music collection. I know from recent personal experience that it is indeed possible to get excellent sound quality from a computer, but suspect it’s still necessary to have some affinity with and enthusiasm for the wretched things in order to keep them working and carry on getting the best results.

Totally Persuasive

The solid and utterly persuasive reason for embracing computer audio in some form or another is that it dramatically improves access to one’s (digital) music collection, through a substantially improved ‘user interface’.

There are many different routes into computer music, which is a major reason why it can be confusing, especially for those who consider computers a foreign land. It’s certainly possible to achieve those substantial ergonomic and convenience advantages alongside fine sound quality when using a conventional desk- or lap-top computer. However, simply using one’s regular home computer will not give best results, and in my experience some computer enthusiasm and expertise is an absolutely essential ingredient.

Attaching a Network

The alternative is to embrace the ‘network attached’ systems that come from brands like Naim and Linn. This might seem to be the more costly approach but it does seem to make good sense for anyone who takes the long view of a record collection and/or finds computers inherently scary.

Given my past history and a decidedly Naim-oriented system, it was inevitable that I would

approach Naim Audio to help me try out one of the new computer network systems that are rapidly making our CD players redundant.

That said, installing such a system is a lot more complicated than merely plonking down a CD player and connecting it to an amplifier, so I was glad that Naim PR person and computer aficionado Stephen N Harris was prepared to come and undertake the quite extensive installation procedures. These involved building up a network which would be separate from, but ride piggy-back on, my normal computer-to-internet connection (which is also apparently known as a 'network' in the jargon).

Harris arrived with two Naim components – a £2,150 *UnitiServe* (a server) and a £3,050 *NDX* (a streamer) – plus various cables and a couple of accessory items. I was expected to supply an *iPad* (and/or *iPhone*) in order to download the Naim 'Apps' that provide the cataloguing and control functions.

The Naim network operates as an extension to my own home network. A single cable was run from a spare socket on my own router to a Naim-badged Apple *AirPort Express*, which provides the Wi-Fi connection to (and from) my *iPad*. This then fed a powered Netgear switch that links to the *UnitiServe* and *NDX*, and subsequently a Western Digital hard drive that I added to back up the *UnitiServe's* drive.

The Server

Described as a 'compact hard disk player/server', the *UnitiServe* is really the heart of the system. Its primary function is to 'rip' your CD collection to its hard drive, but it can also replay music in digital (S/PDIF) form from its drive via the *n-Serve* App. Note that a separate external DAC of some kind is required here. Furthermore, a *UnitiServe* may also be used to support up to six DAC-equipped streamers simultaneously, allowing operation throughout a dwelling.

It took a couple of weeks to transfer ('rip') much of my CD collection – some 500 albums at any rate – to the *UnitiServe*. This is a pretty tedious procedure, it must be said, which I guess is why it's apparently possible to pay a third party to do it. However, in the interests of investigative journalism I elected to do it myself.

Two significant lessons were learned. First, although it only took 5 – 10 minutes to rip most CDs, some took as long as 25 minutes, and did so with considerable mechanical noise, which could be very irritating. (Presumably these were the poorly manufactured discs, though they seemed to be randomly spread through my collection, and perhaps accounted for 10 per cent.) The second and more important lesson is that it's absolutely essential to take a rigorously systematic approach to the ripping. If

this is not done, some or other essential album will be overlooked, and possibly get lost forever.

A major reason for connecting the Naim network via the home network is to enable the *UnitiServe* to use each disc's metadata and automatically consult an internet database to provide information on the album. The *n-Serve* software then sorts this all out and presents it in various ways on the *iPad*. This is usually quite effective, though it does throw up some peculiarities too – goodness only why or how Massive Attack's *Mezzanine* had found itself filed under 'Classical' when I selected 'Genres'. Such aberrations aside, at least it's usually (though not always) possible to edit the entries if one has the time, the patience and the inclination. I should add that I'd have liked to have been able to create a 'Favourites' Genre, into which I could have put my 'most played' rips.

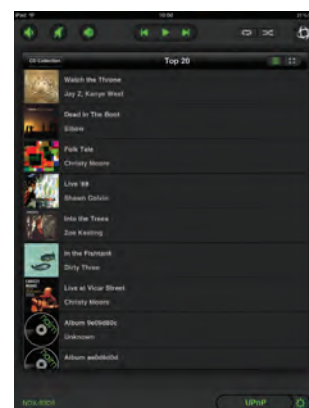
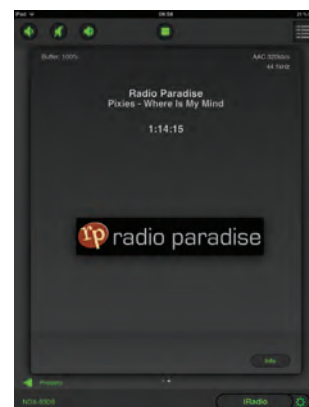
Once loaded (and hopefully backed up, though that's another story that also requires some computer familiarity and expertise), the *UnitiServe* can output an S/PDIF digital signal to an external DAC, and play one's CD collection under the control of *n-Serve* on the *iPad*. As delivered, the *UnitiServe* is powered from an inexpensive switch-mode in-line supply. While this certainly does the job, functionally speaking, it is said that worthwhile improvements are possible if one changes this for a more costly linear supply that some other brands have made available. I can't comment, as I didn't have the time to pursue this option.

Streaming

Given that a *UnitiServe* or similar is needed to rip (and optionally replay) one's CDs means that a streamer is not strictly necessary for a normal stereo system. It can be argued that the money would perhaps be better spent on a high quality standalone DAC, such as Naim's own *DAC* (or the costly *MSB* that MC has purchased).

That said, adding a streamer such as the *NDX* does add significantly to the roster of available features, while the *NDX* also incorporates a good quality DAC. Furthermore it has a built in power supply, albeit of rather modest pretensions, and this may be upgraded, in classic Naim fashion, by a whole collection of external power supplies. These start with the *XP5 XS* from around £1,600 and go up to the costly *555PS* (now £5,725, incorporating the Discrete Regulator modules). I didn't bother with the in-built and less costly supplies, as a pre-DR version of a *555PS* normally powers a *CDS3* here, but was switched to the *NDX* for the duration of this review.

The £3,050 *NDX* is the middle model of three 'network players'. It's a full feature device that will normally connect *via* UPnP protocol to the network via Ethernet. For best results this should be wired into the network (Belkin *CAT6* cable was supplied), though a





The System

Amplification: Naim *NAC552*, *NAP500*, Thrax *Dionysos*, Howes *PX4* monoblocks. CD players: Naim *CDS3/PS555*, CEC *TL3N/DA3N*. DACs: CEC *DA3N*, Metrum *NOS Mini DAC*. Vinyl: Rega/ Linn *LP12* hybrid/*Rubikon*/ TP *Khan*/Rega *RB1000*/ Soundsmith *SG* cartridge. Speakers: PMC *IB2i*, B&W *800 Diamond*. Cables from: The Chord Company, Kondo, Naim, Vertere, Vertex AQ

Wi-Fi option is also available. Wired Ethernet operation is likely to be the main operating mode, but several alternative digital inputs are also available, allowing convenient use of CD drives, memory sticks and *iPods*, and the *NDX* also provides full access to internet radio. Furthermore, a digital output socket is fitted for using an external DAC. A version including an FM/DAB radio module is also available, but this was not fitted to our sample. *NDX* may be driven via the *n-Stream* App on *iPad/iPhone/iPod Touch*, or by using the supplied system remote control.

The unit has a small display window that helps one navigate through the *NDX*'s extensive feature roster, though this is very small and therefore difficult to read from any distance. This display might be unnecessary when replaying rips and downloads on the server under *iPad* control, but it's essential if trying to use the internet radio service, and for changing the input and output settings of the unit.

I think I managed to figure out how the internet radio feature works, albeit with a bit of fiddling, and suspect I might even grow to love it in time. In fact it works rather well, in sound quality terms, so that's a worthwhile bonus. The *NDX* comes pre-loaded with a dozen or so 'Naim's Choice' internet stations, which is a handy starting point, and I didn't find it too difficult to store my own favourites on the pre-sets, though the whole procedure does require a bit of practice. The almost unlimited number of available internet radio stations sounds all very lovely in theory, but in truth I actually find such a plethora of choice something of a handicap, as the four stations I regularly use seem quite sufficient.

Access All Discs

I do, generally and on balance, prefer the sound of 'raw' CDs to the ripped versions, at any rate under the limited conditions I've tried. But there's no denying that moving to server-based audio has major ergonomic advantages. Indeed, I've actually found the ability to

access every disc in my collection at a few touches of the finger tips quite extraordinarily liberating.

Instead of picking from amongst the couple of dozen CDs that are hanging around near the player, I get to pick a disc – or just a track – from the 500 or so that I own, many of which haven't been played in years. Ripping the discs did remind me of CDs I'd forgotten, but once they were in the server I found myself re-exploring music that I'd 'lost' some time during the previous quarter century.

Although both give access to the material on the server, the two Naim *n-Serve* and *n-Stream* software packages do have their differences. For example, I was a mite frustrated that *n-Stream* didn't permit scanning within tracks, a feature which was available via *n-Serve*. On the other hand I very much liked the detailed 'liner note' booklets that seemed to be part of the streamer software.

Performance

Because I consider that it's of secondary importance to the ergonomics, I've deliberately underplayed the sound quality aspects of this system. Essentially it does seem as though you get what you pay for. The system does sound rather good, especially the *NDX/PS555* combo, which sounds particularly fine through the midband, helping to make lyrics very explicit and easy to make out. At the same time the *CDS3/PS555* combo seemed to supply a little greater authority and immediacy (though to be fair it's a more costly combo, so we're not really comparing like with like).

Although it couldn't quite match it with the ancillaries available, the *UnitiServe* didn't fall far short of the *NDX*, though its performance did seem somewhat DAC-dependent – best results were obtained *via* a CEC *DA3N*, which looks like a very competitive proposition.

The only hiatus occurred when my area suffered a couple of brief power cuts. These are rare events, but did screw up the network at the time. A quick e-mail exchange with SNH was enough to establish the correct switch-on protocols, and the network was soon back and working as before.

It might be a touch ironic, but having spent some weeks with a Naim network system, I now understand why Linn gave up making CD players. I still rate vinyl as my favourite source from a sound quality perspective, but CD works pretty well and definitely has a convenience advantage. And although I do marginally prefer CD to network audio, the additional convenience is a complete no-brainer. This network equipment is a delight to use; my only reservation is that a degree of computer expertise or backup may occasionally be required.



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