

Naim Statement

JON HONEYBALL SUPPLIES FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF NAIM'S NEW STATEMENT PRE-AMPLIFIER

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The Naim *Statement* pre/power combination has intrigued and teased potential customers since its launch at CES in Las Vegas in January 2014. Dealer demonstrations, like the CES events, have mostly been in less than ideal conditions, often tied up with unknown or unwelcome peripherals, making me worry that a great amplifier was struggling to cut through the limitations of the rest of the system, the room, the building noise or other distractions.

There is, of course, no substitute for slotting something into a known system in a domestic environment. And through the immensely generous support of UHES (one of just two UK Naim *Statement* dealers), I and friends were able to experience the £57,000 *NAC SI* in my own established Naim system for a whole week.

This system is mostly top-end 'Olive' era Naim equipment, using a *NAC52*, active filters and six *NAP135* power amps to drive *DBL* speakers. Inserting a *NAC SI* into such a system is an obvious step up, but it wasn't clear how much the system would limit the performance of the *NAC SI*, and thus bring into question the upgrade process and associated price.

Our loan *NAC SI* was already well run-in, and required only a day to settle down after installation. Indeed, much of the improvement came within the first hour of operation. UHES managed the complex setting up and configuration of the inputs, as you should expect from a dealer-installation of such a device, and a plethora of input and output options and features are available.

To leap straight to the question of performance, the *NAC SI* is one of those extreme rarities with no recognisable fingerprint to its sound at all. It was simply as if it was not there. The usual perceived noise floor, of grunge, distortions, noise, delayed resonances and so forth, fell away by at least 20-30dB, and was the aural equivalent of carefully cleaning your glasses, or a helmet visor.

Fine details were presented effortlessly, and indeed entirely new instrumentation could be heard, where this had previously been lost in 'mud'. It was all too easy to play louder with less strain on both the system and the listener. This was not a "grab you by the arm and pull you along" kind of sound, just simply one where a whole new level of clarity was presented as if this was the obvious norm. A good example was in complex drumming with multiple

cymbals – the clarity of the *NAC SI* allowed one to hear and place each instrument precisely, with no cloying fog of confusion.

My *DBL* system already times very well, but now timing and rhythm achieved new heights, with micro differences between each note on a well recorded piano standing as clear as if the Bosendorfer was in the room. The reality test (a comparison to my own Steinway grand in the next room) was passed effortlessly.

What was quite astonishing was how it showed that the active *6-pack DBL* system is indeed considerably higher end than I had previously thought. This 'backend' delivers a performance that will complement the highest of high-end speakers and amplifiers from the well-known American manufacturers who prefer passive rather active drive, and I think it's fair to assume that the *Statement* power amps will achieve a similar standard.

For those contemplating upgrading an existing Naim system, a *NAC SI* demands and reveals the very best from the power amps and speakers, so in my view it pushes one towards the higher performance of active operation. In a non-Naim system, careful planning will be required as the level of clarity and resolution may ruthlessly highlight limitations elsewhere.

Is it worth the money? Without question the *NAC SI* justifies its pricetag by delivering a performance that I believe breaks new ground. By comparison, it questions the performance given by Naim's previous *NAC 552* flagship pre-amp at a more modest eighteen thousand pound level, and clearly indicates the magnitude of Naim's achievement here.

Downsides are few. The ergonomics of the top rear input selection and mute buttons are poor, with pale labelling. The volume indicator is not visible if you are close to the *NAC SI* looking down on it. The remote control feels very solid but has sharp edges and relatively pale labels: I felt that its top plate finish harked back to a 1970s Amstrad rack system, but the quality of the machining is undoubtedly impressive.

It's likely that lessons learned developing *NAC SI* will trickle down to new products that may deliver much of the performance improvement at a lower price. If affordable, the *Statement NAC SI* wholly justifies being on any audiophile's wish-list in any system context, and I consider it an immense achievement.



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