

HIFI CRITIC

AUDIO REVIEW MAGAZINE £17 Vol9/No2 APR - JUN 2015

THE NAIM STATEMENT

Martin Colloms gets to grips with Naim's fearsome Statement amplification

THREE MID-PRICE CARTRIDGES

Chris Bryant tries out the Audio-Technica ART9, the Lyra Delos and the Ortofon Cadenza Bronze

HIGH END MUNICH 2015

Jason Kennedy spends a couple of days at the biggest hi-fi show on the planet

IVOR TIEFENBRUN

Chris Frankland talks to Linn founder Ivor Tiefenbrun, a seminal figure in the British hi-fi industry

FOUR BLOGS

Andrew Everard, Malcolm Steward, Jason Kennedy and Paul Rigby summarise their recent web-blogs

REVIVING THE MINSTREL

The Royd name has been revived and a Troubadour replaces the Minstrel. Paul Messenger checks it out

MUSIC & MORE

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

Jordan Aurora 800
Aurorasound Preda
Brodmann VC7
Naim Statement
Vertex AQ Aletheia dac-1.5
Naim Super Lumina cables
Naim UnifiLite
Focal Aria 905
Audio-Technica ART9
Lyra Delos
Ortofon Cadenza Bronze
Royd Troubadour



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Today's hi-fi 'press' consists of a modest number of paper mags alongside a substantially larger quantity of web-mags. The traditional paper-based mags (including *HIFICRITIC*) all have their websites of course, often with associated forums and the like, but considerably lower start-up costs have meant that numerous web-mags have emerged that are owned and operated by individual journalists, including some of our regular writers.

Although I try to make sure that the material supplied for and used in *HIFICRITIC* is entirely exclusive in both writing and opinion, instances of undesirable overlap have occurred and can breed suspicion on both sides. However, it's also clearly ridiculous to ignore these web-mags and pretend that their findings don't exist. I've therefore decided to invite those contributors who run websites to contribute a 1 or 2 page feature that summarises their web-oriented reviewing activities over the previous three months (as we're a quarterly magazine).

This is bound to provide interesting copy for our readers, yet will also help the web-mag operators publicise their websites. It is, in my opinion, a win-win situation, increasing the breadth of our coverage while also directing attention towards the other writings of our regular contributors.

Our four 'web-blogs' come from Andrew Everard, Malcolm Steward, Jason Kennedy and Paul Rigby. The first three mentioned have all made regular appearances in *HIFICRITIC* in the past. However, Paul Rigby is a newcomer to our pages, though he does write regularly in *Hi-Fi World*, as well as putting his web material together.

And his appearance did inspire some talking points. Colloms didn't agree with a number of Rigby's opinions, but I believe that people do have different priorities in hi-fi and music reproduction, and I shouldn't impose anyone's personal preferences.

The more serious point was recently raised across a variety of topics in the mainstream media, questioning the whole validity of blogs. Who polices the internet? Nobody, so one can't trust its opinions, which might even go some way towards validating the roles of editors and publishers.

There seems to be no avoiding the influence of the internet on paper publications. It has now become clear that if a review is likely to appear on the net at some point, it has to be easy to find *via* a search engine. That in turn means that the name of the reviewed component must effectively be the same as the title of the review. Snappy puns and leftfield references are no longer acceptable, simply because search engines don't have a sense of humour!

The publisher has asked me to pass on some bad news: to wit, rising costs mean that we have to increase the price of *HIFICRITIC* (modestly, and for the first time since the end of 2012). Individual copies are now £17 (up from £15) while UK subscriptions will now be £65 (rather than £60). (Overseas subs will increase *pro rata*.)

Martin Colloms has asked me to point out that his sound quality scores for the various Naim components he reviewed in this issue have been deliberately held over until the next issue, as the sound is continuing to evolve.

Paul Messenger
 Editor

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Naim's Super Lumina Cables

MARTIN COLLOMS TRIES OUT NAIM'S LATEST CABLES, EXPRESSLY INTENDED FOR USE WITH THE STATEMENT AMPLIFIER COMBO, BUT ALREADY FINDING APPLICATIONS ELSEWHERE



Loudspeaker Cable

All Super Lumina cables are direction-coded, if subtly. This is usually less of an issue for the interconnects, where the often differing terminations indicate which end is 'send' and which is 'receive', but it tends to be more significant with the loudspeaker cable, for example when fitted with spades at both ends, as the internal construction is not entirely symmetrical.

The identifying Naim logos, printed onto the little boxes at each end of the cable, do subtly sign signal path direction. Here the top of the Naim logo ought to be positioned in the direction of the source, and we wondered why. Reason one is merely in order to make the results consistent; it's simply a Naim hallmark to leave nothing to chance, and directional effects have often been noticed in cables. Reason two (which is arguably rather more significant) is that the build of the speaker cables is not as symmetrical as at first appears, as a terminating RFI damping resistor is situated at the amplifier end of the business.

This speaker cable is constructed as a closely spaced twin with high current conductors. It's built using an individually insulated multi-parallel strand form, with low molecular weight polyolefin as insulator. Each bundle is first clamped in a sheath and then covered by a conductive screening braid or shield. This braid is not actively connected, save via a low current 10kohm damping resistor (the value chosen for our 7m lengths) interconnecting the floating shields. This will drain away a proportion of any environmental RFI induced in the cable run.

Checking the numbers, measurement gave just 0.089ohm for a 7m loop, which therefore indicates a very low resistance of 0.013ohm/m; this will suit any conceivable speaker. Likewise its capacitance was very low (at about 75picofarad/m), and again will have negligible effect. (I could barely measure the loop inductance due to the floating shields; the meter read 0.08uH/m.) It's usefully physically flexible and compact, also has some mechanical damping, and in all this very high power cable clearly has sound electrical properties.

At first hearing with new Statement I found that the speaker cables demonstrated remarkably good detail, imaging and transparency, with exceptionally good image depth and extraordinary recovery of low

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RECOMMENDED

Super Lumina Speaker Cable Data

Prices (stereo pair) £600/m
+ termination (parts & labour)

Typical of the care and detail expressed in Naim electronics, the new Super Lumina cable collection is more complex than appears on the surface. Although they have been found to perform well with other manufacturer's components, certain of their technical optimisations are only fully expressed when used with Naim's own amplification.

These cables were specifically designed for the Statement amplifier combo, but Naim indicates that they are also suitable for the company's existing electronics, at any rate where this is appropriate on grounds of cost and performance. In this context the new £1,750 Super Lumina interconnect is something like 2.5 times the price of the established and already quite elaborate Hi-Line interconnect. It also costs considerably more than the company's 'standard' interconnects (typically £100), which are by no means inappropriate for general use.

The price of Super Lumina speaker cable is somewhat complicated by possible variations in length and termination. Although the base price for just the stereo cable is £600/m, the silver-plated custom Naim terminations and the labour involved adds significantly to the cost, so our 7m terminated pair cost about £7,000. Dare we say that this is not untypical of high end speaker cables, and dare we point out that it's actually much less costly than some? But the Super Lumina speaker cables are certainly very much more costly than Naim's very well established (and, ultimately, surprisingly capable) NAC A5, which costs a modest £420 (£30/m) for 2x 7m (unterminated).

MARTIN COLLOMS

level ambience. Focus was also extremely good in all respects. However, both cable and amplifier were a bit below par for rhythmic expression in the midrange and bass on classical works, and more clearly so in the bass on rock material. This was a worry, although at this point both the Statement and Super Lumina had only been running for a few tens of hours.

In the Statement review I have noted that with some running in and the adoption of a double spur supply (allotting the NAP S-1 its own supply) the power amplifier began to take off handsomely on pace, timing and rhythm, right through the frequency range, substantially helping the Super Lumina speaker cable. However, when compared with the classic NAC A5 cable, despite the latter's mild coloration and clear loss of transparency and image layering, it was clear that the new cable still had some way to go. For the present I regard this assessment as 'work in progress', but it had already matched the standard of several very respected high end cables.

Super Lumina Interconnects

The Super Lumina interconnect cable is manufactured as a channel-bonded stereo pair of screened balanced cables, employing low loss dielectrics and a mechanically self-damped, compliant construction. It may be wired to the available audio plugs (DIN, RCA or XLR) in almost any useful configuration. Discernible gains in clarity, dynamics and rhythm accrue when a cable construction lines up with Naim's traditional approach. Here we note the anti-vibration techniques, the close physical coupling of signal channels, and the hierarchical grounding defined for a Naim audio chain. For example, twin-pair cable construction used in the Super Lumina interconnect reduces the incidence of induced hum and noise by avoiding the usual casual loops that are commonly found among separate L and R channel accessory cables from other sources.

A particular feature of both DIN and XLR plugs is their proprietary Naim construction, which mechanically decouples vibration from the equipment to the cable and vice versa. Called Air-PLUG, this uses multiple aluminium rings to form the rear of the connector, and these are intentionally loosely coupled in order to create an articulating lossy section that inhibits the conduction of vibration. In addition, with the DIN terminations the connector pins make a clearance fit within their custom sockets (while tightly engaging electrically), further damping out any coupled vibration. These cables are rather more complicated than they first appear, as the signal conductor is a complex



bundle of multi-diameter, individually insulated silver-plated copper conductors, surrounded by a tin-plated copper shield. A soft outer jacket is extruded over the assembly, forming a compliant but closely-spaced stereo pair. This facilitates easy installation whilst inhibiting self and conducted vibration. These cables are optimised for a limited range of lengths, typically 1.5m.

Each signal, return, ground and shield wire is individually specified and manufactured for its particular function. That vitally important ground conductor references the audio band waveform between source and load, mirroring the internal architecture of Naim electronics with its classic linear hierarchical grounding.

Used alongside the Statement amplification, the DIN-to-DIN Super Lumina sounded quite extraordinarily good, building on known strengths of trusted references with exceptional transparency and micro detail, super precise imaging, top class neutrality, and (by no means least) top class rhythm, dynamics and timing. Hitherto I have never heard the NDS/PS555 combo perform as well as this (but will happily concede that its DIN output, as used here with NDS ground 'on', is also its favoured connection and mode). The other Super Lumina interconnect cables with alternative terminations were also found to be very good (for example pre-amp-to-power amp), and performed well up to international audiophile standards, which indicates that they're actually very realistically priced in context. They ran in nicely over just a few days and may therefore be highly recommended.

HIFICRITIC
AUDIO EXCELLENCE

Super Lumina Interconnect Data (1.5m length)

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Capacitance | 346picofarads (moderate) |
| Resistance | 0.27ohm/loop (satisfactorily low) |
| Inductance | <1.5uH (very low) |
| Prices (stereo single/pair) | from £1,500 – £3,000 |

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Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO AND MUSIC JOURNAL

BECAUSE HIFICRITIC IS FUNDED BY ITS READERS THE SUBSCRIPTION COST IS NECESSARILY HIGHER THAN FOR MAGAZINES SUBSIDISED BY ADVERTISING REVENUE, THOUGH CERTAINLY NOT AS HIGH AS PROFESSIONAL SPECIALIST JOURNALS.

Our budget is directed towards obtaining the very best research and writing from the very best freelance authors, whom we encourage to express themselves fully in print, an opportunity not always available *via* established publishing regimes.

Through the use of a virtual office, we aim to be exceptionally cost effective. Subscription management, production, printing, editorial, design, laboratory measurement and journalism are scattered around the world, yet are also efficiently and almost instantaneously linked at the touch of an e-mail send button.

Our independence from product advertising allows us to criticise and comment without fear or favour. The HIFICRITIC team scrutinises interesting and internationally important issues and equipment in depth and detail, technically and subjectively, and provides comprehensive investigations into the key issues facing high quality stereo music recording and reproduction today.

Martin Colloms, Publisher

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My publisher does sometimes accuse me of being too concerned with the weird and the wacky. I do indeed look for unusual loudspeakers in particular, knowing that there's no such thing as the perfect design, and that it's up to me to point out and evaluate the compromises involved in any design.

One particularly challenging ideal is the single driver speaker system that works properly throughout the audio band. It has the obvious advantage of simplicity and overall coherence, but invariably experiences difficulties, especially towards the audio band extremes.

That said, no speaker type shows a greater variation between models, from a vintage Voigt corner horn to a Japanese Feastrex field-coil design. The Soundkaos Wave 40 (*HIFICRITIC Vol8 No4*) is one of the best I've heard recently, but it's also very costly and not strictly speaking a single driver system, as it includes a tweeter and an equalisation network.

The best value for money I've encountered was the Bodnar *Sandglass Fantasy* (*HIFICRITIC Vol6 No4*), a Polish horn design based on a 200mm twin-cone driver from Hungary's Sonido. It works rather well, but is bulky, far from pretty, and not currently available in the UK. (Sheffield-based Fidelity Art, has switched to handling Sonido's somewhat similar looking *Aion*.)

I should also mention the Cain & Cain (subsequently known as Lovecraft Designs) *Abby*, a rather attractive quarter-wave design based on a Fostex driver, which I reviewed for another magazine back in 2008. However, its founder died that same year, and LovecraftDesigns.com seems to be currently up for sale.

This very issue contains my review of the Jordan Aurora system, which is even more unusual than most of the others. However, much the same is true of the horn-loaded models from Berlin-based Voxativ. (The *Pi* model [*Vol7 No2*] might have been too small alone, but it now has an intriguing matching dipole subwoofer that was quite a hit at the Munich show.)

A far more 'multi-national' rival comes from the East, where the Japanese Eclipse brand takes a very different approach for its various *TD* (time domain) models (eg *Vol5 No1*), mounting full-range drivers in large alloy 'dinosaur eggs', with hefty integral stands. All is defiantly contemporary in style and metal construction, and therefore represents a complete contrast to the Finnish newcomer discussed in the next paragraph.

The latest brand on the single full-range driver scene is called Existence Loudspeakers, and is imported from Finland by G-Point Audio (headed by our Jazz reviewer Greg Drygala). The *Euphoric* sits on the second rung of a six step ladder of increasingly large models. It's not exactly fashionable, being a 30litre stand-mount, nor cheap (£3,000 plus £750 for the stands), but it is unusually attractive because the woodworking involved is quite exquisite, as well as rather different from the norm.

Irrespective of fashion or price, this speaker is a beautiful object, but it also actually works rather well. It's not perfect – no single full-range driver speaker system is, in my experience – but it does work much better than most. Measured under in-room far-field conditions, an almost universal characteristic of these single full-range driver systems is an upper-mid peak followed by a treble roll-off. But perhaps only the Bodnar rivals the *Euphoric* in avoiding significant upper-mid exaggeration and maintaining the treble output (though it does have some bass tuning difficulties). A more detailed review of this fascinating speaker will be featured our next issue.