



From Muso to mu-so

MALCOLM STEWARD GETS TO PLAY WITH NAIM'S NEW MU-SO MUSIC CENTRE

MALCOLM STEWARD

I really have no idea of the best angle from which to approach this new Naim Audio offering: it's simply not the type of product for which there is or has ever been any sort of precedent from Salisbury's high-end audio specialists... It's a single silver-coloured aluminium-clad box with half a dozen drive units on the fascia, no disc or disk drive, and is intended for wireless operation (despite its ethernet socket). It doesn't have any external power supplies or Burndy cables, and doesn't include a recognisable display. To be truthful, it doesn't seem very Naim-like at all: it's altogether far too eye-catching...

At the launch, one of Naim's traditional retailers enthusiastically gushed: "The *mu-so* will be the product that makes Naim a household name." I cannot truly see that happening because I doubt his traditional customers will seek out the *mu-so*: it's not a traditional hi-fi product, nor is it competing with them: it seems to be aimed more at the sort of buyers attracted by lifestyle-type products – even if it is more costly and higher performance than those from companies such as Sonos.

The £895 *mu-so* is effectively, I think, a posh music centre, rather than what most of us think of as a hi-fi component. I do not envisage many – certainly not serious numbers – being sold by traditional hi-fi retailers. As I understand it, the made-in-China *mu-so* is aimed more at large-scale non-specialist retail outlets, like John Lewis or the Apple Store, rather than the local back-street hi-fi store strewn with cables, cardboard boxes and desperation. And, from what I've heard of dealing with those alternative large department store operations, and their sometimes uncompromising

commercial practices, I certainly wish Naim the best of good fortune... It might also face stiff competition from the likes of Bose, whose formidable marketing team probably outnumbers the entire employee roster at Naim.

One thing that the *mu-so* certainly indicates is the move that those young folks – whom we often refer to as millennials – have made away from the practice of sitting between a pair of loudspeakers to listen to music – an act that we non-millennials have become accustomed to regard as the 'norm'.

Mu-so is primarily a wireless device (although it will conveniently function with a wired connection, which I always adopt out of habit). Perversely, I used wi-fi to set up *mu-so* alongside an *iPad*. I must compliment Naim on the simplicity of the set-up procedure and the efficacy of the dedicated control software. I parked the *mu-so* on a sideboard in my hall and tweaked it from my office, which is adjacent to that space. The voicing of the unit can be adjusted through the DSP that operates ahead of its (six) switch-mode amplifiers that drive the integral loudspeakers in active mode. So if one takes one's *iPad* into the office, one can fiddle with *mu-so*'s settings through wi-fi. I turned off the loudness function – which had been activated by a previous listener – and set the distance from the rear wall to be less than 25cm, which gave a balance that I found thoroughly acceptable. Even my wife, who does not normally comment upon review gear, remarked: "That *mu-so* isn't at all bad" as we listened to Norah Jones duet with guitarist, Jim Campilongo and his band on the album *Orange*.

I am obliged to say that the *mu-so*, to use music

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The Return of the Multi-Format Release

SOFTWARE DELIVERY METHODS AND FORMATS CONTINUE TO PROLIFERATE. WHILE SOME ARE STREAMING AND DOWNLOADING, OTHERS SEEM TO BE MORE INTERESTED IN COLLECTING MUSIC ON HIGH QUALITY LEGACY FORMATS LIKE VINYL AND CD, AS MARK PRENDERGAST DISCOVERS

Last year WARP Records in London invited me to write booklets for a number of collections of Ambient music. They informed me that both Harold Budd and Roger Eno were to be collected in anthologies and boxed sets, as well as the entire history of All Saints Records, an offshoot of various Brian Eno projects between 1992 and 2006. The resulting works are not only aesthetically pleasing and stuffed full of rarities but are relatively cheap in monetary terms too. The albums include Harold Budd's *Wind In Lonely Fences 1970-2011*, Roger Eno's *Little Things Left Behind 1988-1998*, and Laraaji's *Celestial Music 1978-2011*. These are all gate-folded double CD sets with large illustrated booklets, and all sell for under £10.

This is in stark contrast to boxed vinyl sets by established acts like David Bowie and Pink Floyd, which can cost hundreds of pounds. One boxed set from late last year followed this trend. The entire output by Can on vinyl: fifteen vinyl platters with original artwork, five posters and a huge illustrated 12-inch colour book, all adding up to an eye-watering £300! And this was on the staunchly independent Mute record label.

Since 2011, Mute has been re-issuing and anthologising the entire output of Sheffield electronic music pioneers Cabaret Voltaire, who reached the top of the UK Indie chart with their masterpiece *Red Mecca* in 1981. At the end of 2013 came *8385 (Collected Works 1983 to 1985)*, a 4LP/6CD/2DVD chunk of a box set which contained deluxe vinyl pressings of the band's famous mid-period Virgin years: albums like *The Crackdown* (1983) and *Micro-Phonies* (1984), as well as legendary rarities like *Drinking Gasoline*, plus live concerts, promo videos and the 1985 film *Gasoline In Your Eye*. All this costs the princely snip of £159.99.

Incredibly, people seem to be more than willing to pay these prices. Why? Well they are getting pristine new vinyl pressings of old material, and it saves legging it to one's not-so-nearby vinyl emporium. Vinyl prices for new versions of classic albums tend

to range from £16.99 for a single album and £24.99 for a double. Cue the recent release of The Durutti Column's *The Return Of The Durutti Column*. Originally released in Jan 1980 in a completely sandpaper sleeve, FACT 14 (its serial number) was meant as a Situationist attack on the music business – ie release an ambient album amid the blizzard of post-punk music; place it in a sleeve that will attack everything around it, and will ultimately self-destruct. In the end, record shops were forced to return the albums to Factory Records, as the sleeves were so rough. Recently, the Factory Benelux operation has re-issued the album as FBN 114 in a sandpaper sleeve - one version comes in a beautiful box with extras like badges, a little helmet, and Martin Hannett's 7-inch test card flexi-disc EP. A more streamlined version is available for under £17, for a double album housed in a die cut sleeve, which shows the original Factory Logo but thankfully has the sandpaper protected by clear film.

All this shows that the premature burial of vinyl and CD may be just that, a tad premature. Since early 2013 the rumour mill has talked about a huge Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young boxed set. Graham Nash has said that it will be a ³ five album boxed set on vinyl, with 40 songs to represent the group's 40th Anniversary. (Others say it will be a 3xCDs and DVD set!) Whatever it turns out to be, it is hugely anticipated, as so little official unreleased material is available from CSNY. And what about *Human Highway*, the legendary 1973 CSNY album recorded in Maui in Hawaii, from which only the gorgeous *Through My Sails* surfaced in 1975 on Neil Young's *Zuma* album? Hmmm.

Boutique labels like New York's High Moon Records are looking at music in a refreshing way. Two of its newest releases feature legends. In 1973 Love's Arthur Lee configured an all-black hard psychedelic rocking band and recorded a legendary album entitled *Black Beauty*. Slated for release in 2011 as a ten-track album, High Moon has turned it into a lavish 64-page hardback book affair with

unseen photos plus six bonus tracks. It also comes on vinyl. High Moon Records has also given similar treatment to Gene Clark's seminal 1977 album *Two Sides To Every Story*. Each of these retail for about £22 each.

It seems no matter where you turn, the old formats are refusing to go away. The new U2 album that has been rumoured as *Songs Of Ascent* is to come in every format in the universe - whenever it's ready! Holger Czukay's excellent *On The Way To The Peak Of Normal* from 1981 is now available on super vinyl from Gronland. Even those giants of prog rock Yes have a 13xCD 'clamshell' box set, titled simply *The Studio Albums 1969-1987* on Rhino, for only £30!

If one is looking towards heavy metal groups, the stage is well set by Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin. Universal's classy presentation of Deep Purple's majestic 1972 *Made In Japan* album (yes, that's the one with *Smoke On The Water*) comes in so many formats it's mind-boggling - single CD, double CD

deluxe, 2xLP and a £130 9xLP box or a 4xCD box plus DVD, complete with encores from those nights in Osaka and Tokyo from 1972.

Of course it all began in 1990 with Led Zeppelin and the first Super CD box set. Now nearly fifteen years on the stage is set for a plethora of re-issues. The first batch is the legendary Led Zeppelin's *I to III* in single CD, double CD with bonus, single vinyl, double vinyl with bonus, and deluxe boxed sets retailing at £90 which include High-Def audio download card, 70+ page books, prints, press kits, remastered vinyl etc. Jimmy Page says: "The new material presents a portal to the times we recorded the albums. It is a selection of work in progress with rough mixes, backing tracks, alternate versions and new material recorded at the time." *Led Zeppelin III* is particularly fabulous, as it comes in the original die cut revolving wheel psychedelic sleeve. The deluxe 2xLP even has a black-faced version of the original cover for the bonus material. Bring it on home!

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centre-era parlance, certainly has 'a great tone'. It sounds nothing like its less expensive and more plasticky rivals, and seems far more substantial. Its aluminium-clad casework provides truly robust bass, a rich, comfortably warm, fulsome midrange, and a vivid but well-controlled HF that makes tracks like *Just As Was Told* from Lift To Experience's album *The Texas-Jerusalem Crossroads* sound perfectly satisfactory and not in the least raucous or scrappy.

The low end impresses most obviously on tracks such as the Fatboy Slim remix of Groove Armada's *I See You Baby*. Much more surprising is that the *mu-so* also makes complete sense of the avantgarde distinctiveness of French, Frith, Kaiser and Thompson's *Invisible Means* album, even far-out stuff like *March Of The Cosmetic Surgeons* and *The Book Of Lost Dreams*. This is an ability that frequently eludes many a costly high-end hi-fi system.

Furthermore, the *mu-so* presented an enthralling account of jazz pianist Keith Jarrett's playing on his *Paris Concert* album. It performs in typical Naim fashion, wringing every last ounce of emotion and timing nuance out of his playing: okay this is not what anyone would call a typical Naim hi-fi, but the way it delivers the passion within the music is unmistakably familiar and characteristic. It even manages to convey the commitment of the London Symphony Orchestra playing Beethoven's *Symphony No 7* with a remarkable facility, even though (as

expected) there's not much in the way of a stereo soundstage (although the presentation does deliver an expansive, generous, room-filling quality).

One album to which I find myself returning all day is Jim Campilongo's *Orange*, and in particular his *No Expectations* duet with Norah Jones. The performance of the *mu-so* vividly convinced me how wrong I had once been to refer to the lovely Ms Jones as 'Snorer', intimating that her singing bordered on being soporific... It is nothing of the sort played through any Naim equipment - even *mu-so* - and I hang my head in shame for expressing so poorly considered a judgement.

Equally communicative and compelling was its rendition of an old favourite, Jeff Buckley's classic *Hallelujah* from the album *Grace*. The *mu-so* seems to have a particular fluency and an ideal range of dynamic expression with voice and guitar compositions, sounding entirely magical and wonderfully spacious on Buckley's *Corpus Christi Carol*.

At the end of the day, the *mu-so* is only a music centre. However, it is a thoroughly contemporary and strikingly excellent one. I would not hesitate in recommending it to any modern individual in the market for an all-in-one, decent looking network-player that needs no loudspeakers nor cumbersome cables to complete the installation. It is outstandingly musically capable, as well as attractive and lifestyle-friendly, if that is a significant concern.

MANUFACTURER'S SPECIFICATIONS

Name	NAIM mu-so
Type	network/Wi-Fi music centre
Inputs:	UPnP, AirPlay, Streaming and Internet Radio (Ethernet or Wi-Fi)
Digital	Optical S/PDIF (up to 96kHz)
Analogue	3.5mm jack
USB/iPod	Type-A
	Bluetooth (including aptX)
Control	IR remote control, Ethernet, Wi-Fi, Bluetooth
Power output	6 x 75W
Loudspeakers	3-way, 2x channels
Formats supported	WAV, FLAC and AIFF (up to 24bit/192kHz), ALAC (up to 24bit/96kHz), MP3 (up to 48kHz, 320kbit, 16-bit), AAC (up to 48kHz, 320kbit 16-bit), OGG and WMA (up to 48kHz, 16-bit)
Wireless	up to 48kHz on all formats
Dimensions (WxHxD)	628x120x256mm
Weight	13kg
Price	£895

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