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Naim NAIT XS integrated amplifier

The musically rewarding Naim NAIT now delivers lavish poise and style, too

PRODUCT Naim NAIT XS

TYPE Integrated amplifier

PRICE £1,250

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 43.2x7x30.1cm
 • Weight: 8.6kg • Analogue inputs: 4x RCA/DIN, 1x phono stage, 1x 3.5mm stereo-jack socket for iPod/MP3 • Analogue outputs: 1x preamp, 1x tape (DIN) • Stereo subwoofer output • Rated power: 60W (8 ohms)/90W (4 ohms) • NARCOM remote control
CONTACT ☎ 01722 426600 🌐 www.naimaudio.com

The NAIT (Naim Audio InTeGrated) amplifier has enjoyed an intriguing history. The first iteration, released in 1983, was a truly fascinating shoebox design for which no output figures were ever published – the standard reply to anyone foolish enough to ask “How many watts has it got?” was “Enough”. (In truth, the figure was around 12.5, but the amplifier would deliver sufficient current to drive most loudspeakers.) And the perverse functioning of the design’s highly individual balance control still bemuses people to this day. In spite of this and other idiosyncrasies, though, the amplifier acquired a legion of enthusiastic and loyal supporters who recognised its ability to convey music with an assurance that eluded most of its contemporaries, even if they cost more, offered conventional balance functions and had lots more watts.

The SUPERNAIT, released in 2007, is in its own way equally as ‘out there’. This high-powered, full-sized integrated was unusual because it contained DAC circuitry and had digital inputs so that users could connect their 21st-century digital sources – computers, media servers and the like – directly to the amplifier. This marriage of convenience and high performance proved hugely popular, to the extent that Naim has now produced the Son of SUPERNAIT, the less costly design

whose development name apparently was the NAIT Speed, but which is now officially called the NAIT XS.

Fitted into a slimline aluminium Series 5 case, the amplifier is powered by a 380VA toroidal transformer, but can be usefully supercharged with a Flat-Cap, Hi-Cap or

“The design is the first to use Naim’s newly developed bayonet PCB mounting technique, which reduces microphonic effects.”

Super-Cap external power supply for anyone who wants to extract the maximum amount of performance from this no-frills design. It might look like the familiar NAIT 5i, but under the hood there’s a powerplant derived from the SUPERNAIT.

Although the NAIT XS benefits from an optimised, shortened and simplified signal path, this isn’t the only performance-enhancing feature it enjoys. The design is the first to employ Naim’s newly developed bayonet PCB mounting technique, which permits the board to ‘float’, reducing microphonic effects. Furthermore, the heatsink is castellated to provide maximum cooling for reliability, enhanced dynamic performance and to reduce the capacitance effects of a small number of longer PCB tracks. Naim has been aware of the problems caused by vibration creeping inside its electronics for some time, and the XS includes features specifically designed to reduce it. That’s why, for example, the mains switch and IEC socket on the rear panel are also allowed to float and aren’t immovably attached to the chassis. This controlled freedom reduces air- and structure-borne vibration entering the amplifier through the mains cable.

Many detailed aspects of the construction of this amplifier might sound far-fetched to a cynic, but each has undergone stringent listening tests to demonstrate its validity and justify its inclusion in the design. This extends as far as the precise placement and tightness of the cable ties used to dress the

minimal cable runs. While that might sound rather like obsessive/compulsive behaviour, if it makes an audible difference where a cable tie is placed, then why not address that situation? Especially when the cumulative effects of these ‘insignificant’ considerations are audible and beneficial.

The amplifier has six line-level analogue inputs, one of which, like Naim’s preamps and the SUPERNAIT, outputs power to run an external Naim phono stage, which is a worthwhile facility for those who value the superlative performance that vinyl offers. Conversely, for those who don’t, there’s an auto-switching 3.5mm stereo-jack socket on the front panel for connecting an iPod or other MP3 player.

The XS also offers a unity gain option and an AV bypass function, whereby it can be used in conjunction with an AV processor in a home cinema system. This is controlled by a rear-panel switch, which for normal use should be set to ‘off’. Be warned: when the bypass mode is selected, the signal connected to the AV input passes straight through the XS at full gain – neither the volume control nor the mute button will have any effect upon it! 📺



Q&A

We spoke to Naim's sales manager, Doug Graham, about the user-friendliness of the NAIT XS.



HFC: The XS sounds more than acceptable straight out of the box, which is something you couldn't always say about Naim gear in the past. Is there any reason for this?

DG: Our experience indicates that the same incremental improvements that occur during warm-up and running in with our other products also occur with the NAIT XS. Your review sample was partly run in and will continue to sound better as it becomes fully warmed up. But if you're enjoying it straight from the box, then perhaps we're just getting better at designing things!

What type of buyer is the NAIT XS primarily targeted at?

I think the majority of NAIT XS buyers will be first-time Naim owners. There will, of course, be the older 'Olive' range owner who will make the transition into triptych design attracted by the NAIT XS's upgrade potential and power. I think it's fair to say that the amplifier will surprise quite a few of those people!

Can the phono connections provide the same degree of isolation available through the DINs, or will using them always compromise the performance of the amplifier to some degree?

The phono sockets have never been our 'first choice' in connectors, but we fully understand the inconvenience of not having them included on some of our products for some consumers. We want our products to be able to 'live outside' a full Naim system. Flexibility is highly attractive, but, nonetheless, we can't drag ourselves away from what we believe is the best connection for the sake of convenience. We will continue to use DIN and enjoy its electrical/sonic benefits, while offering flexibility with the traditional phono sockets. The comments we've received since we included both DIN and phono connections on our CD players and preamps have been quite interesting. The customer can try both, and they do. Would you care to guess which one they mostly prefer to use?



◀ The XS provides preamp-out and power-amp-in sockets that are connected with a linking plug for normal integrated-amplifier operation. It also provides an unfiltered analogue stereo subwoofer output through a pair of RCA phono sockets. This duplicates the preamplifier output and has no low-pass filtering applied. (Since this is a full-range signal and the output is happy to drive long interconnects, it could conceivably be used as a line-level feed to another power amplifier and speakers to extend the main system's sound into a second room.)

While the XS is obviously going to work well in a system with other Naim components, the model is also designed to be sufficiently versatile and flexible to be included in a wider range of set-ups with non-Naim sources and loudspeakers – which, in part, is how we tested it.

SOUND QUALITY

The £1,250 XS sits between the NAIT 5i and the SUPERNAIT in terms of pricing and position in the company's integrated-amplifier hierarchy. Comparing it with these two amplifiers (£735 and £2,350 respectively) demonstrates how well it sits between them performance-wise too. While the NAIT 5i is a very respectable and musically informative

performer, the XS clearly has the beating of it in an A-B comparison. Not only does it sound cosmetically more polished and capable than the NAIT 5i, which sometimes sounds a little raw alongside the XS, but it also seems more temporally organised and better able to define the space between notes, as well as the note shape itself. In this respect its performance moves closer to that of the range-topping SUPERNAIT, an amplifier whose communicative skills and expressive ability are comfortably in the premier league.

The XS, as one might expect, exhibits the long-established Naim characteristics of crisp timing, precise pitch determination and rhythmic urgency, all of which imbue appropriate music with vitality and pace. However, like more recently released Naim components and, perhaps, unlike Naim amplifiers of yore, it also possesses what used to be called 'Round Earth' (as opposed to Flat Earth) qualities. This is perhaps most noticeable in the way that it handles the didgeridoo on Vivid Curve's *Live at Edgefield* CD – although the instrument sits at the back of the mix on tracks such as *Hundred Naked Kangaroos*, the XS renders its contribution in almost microscopic detail, presenting it not as a monotonous, continuous drone,



but as a progression of differently intoned phrases, each of which adds colour, expression and individuality to the music.

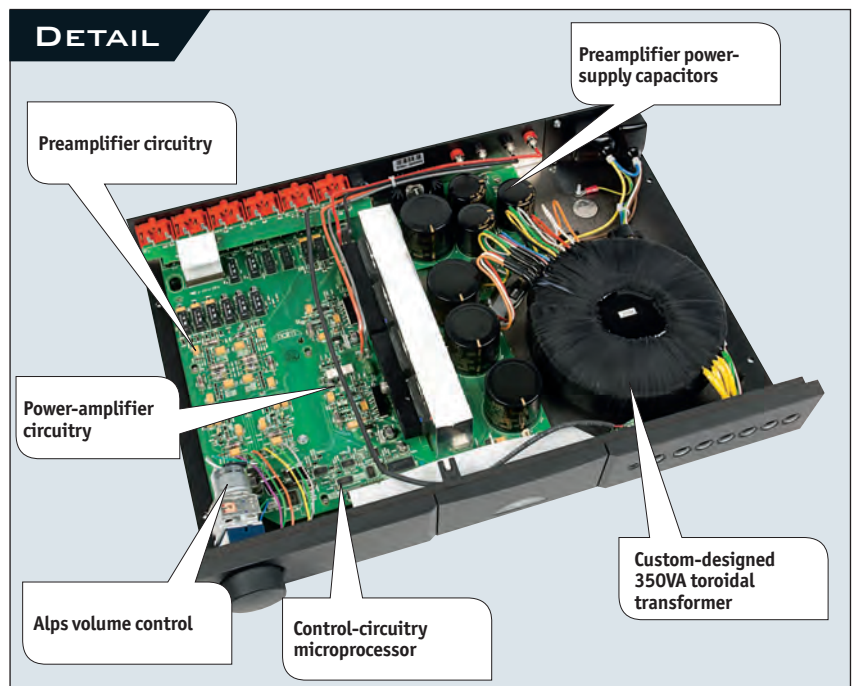
In truth, analysing the performance in terms of specifics is rather missing the point. The XS is designed to make music more communicative and enjoyable on an emotional level, and in that respect it fully achieves what it sets out to do. It enables listeners to appreciate those often subtle effects performers include that instantly raise a smile or a nod of recognition when you hear them. This communicative ability, which elevates the baby Naim's performance way above that of many far more expensive high-end amplifiers, is almost certainly a result of the design's speed and lack of background clutter. When music is present, you hear it; when it's not, you hear nothing. There's no smearing or blurring with the XS: notes begin and end with near clinical precision, regardless of their depth in the mix.

This brings us neatly to another subject that isn't traditionally regarded as a Naim forte: soundstaging. Partner the XS with suitable loudspeakers and you may well be surprised by the depth and width of the images it can cast, as well as the solidity and stability of the elements within that stage. Given a sympathetic recording, those elements are presented within a distinct acoustic environment, which can be wet or dry depending on the amount of reverberation it offers. The air surrounding percussion instruments and percussive elements – for example, cymbal strikes or artificial harmonics on a guitar – truly enhances the credibility of the portrayal the amplifier provides.

A NAIM PERFORMANCE

Since its early days, Naim has strived not just to build high-performance amplifiers, but to build high-performance amplifiers that are consistent. To ensure sample uniformity, the firm goes to inordinate lengths both in selecting and matching components and in rigidly standardising the build of each of its designs. That extends to measures such as always placing cable ties in exactly the same position on a particular wiring loom and strictly maintaining the layout of the wiring. In the NAIT XS, for instance, the volume control is hand-wired to the PCB to minimise microphony.

These aren't Looney Tunes notions, as demonstrated by a manufacturer who we witnessed altering the sound of a CD player merely by changing the orientation of a single earth connection. Turning a wire and connector through 90 degrees on the circuit board spectacularly transformed the player's presentation.



“Partner the XS with suitable loudspeakers and you may well be surprised by the depth and width of the images it can cast...”

The downside of this scrutiny is that sometimes the truth doesn't sound as good as the performance through a less revealing amplifier: the XS paints a warts-and-all picture of recordings, exposing overtly, for example, the fact that home-studio synthesized backing tracks can rarely match the genuine articles from a professional studio. One favourite review recording closes with a track laid down by the artist in his home studio, compared to the rest of the CD, which is a live recording. The multi-track home brew sounds horribly artificial, gated and dry with lifeless timbre to the instruments. We doubt that was the effect the artist was aiming to achieve. If he'd had the opportunity to play back the track on the XS he might have realised his error.

The class of the NAIT XS also shines through brilliantly on well-recorded classical music, where its acuity with instrumental timbre and ability to reveal playing nuances come straight to the fore. On the London Chamber Orchestra recording of Dave Heath's *The Frontier*, not only can you appreciate the fine acoustic of the venue and the rich tonality of the strings, but also the gusto with which the players approach the music and the striking effects of the unusual playing techniques employed. Throughout this entire CD, the XS majors on blending

power with subtlety, easily conveying the full weight and might of the orchestra playing fortissimo, while at the same time showing remarkable finesse and delicacy in revealing the composition's detailing and the dynamics of the instrumentalists' playing.

With the XS, Naim continues to broaden the appeal of the NAIT concept to encompass an ever wider range of listeners. Like the early NAITs it's a musically communicative, minimalist design, but now the performance is balanced by worthwhile sophistication and poise. **HFC**

Malcolm Steward

VERDICT	
SOUND ★★★★★	PRO The XS is an extremely persuasive musical performer, and the longer you listen, the more this amplifier convinces you of its potential.
FEATURES ★★★★★	CON The phono connections broaden its appeal, but they're not on a par with the DIN sockets if you want the optimum performance.
BUILD ★★★★★	
VALUE ★★★★★	
CONCLUSION The Naim NAIT has traditionally always been a love-it-or-loathe-it kind of amplifier, but the XS iteration turns it into one that will appeal to and please a far broader audience than before.	
HI-FI CHOICE OVERALL SCORE ★★★★★	
URL www.techradar.com/498536	