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# NAIM AUDIO

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## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

# Naim Audio NDS digital network player

By Alan Sircom

**T**here is a distinct difference in approach to dealing with what comes next in digital, depending on where you live. In the US for example, a lot of systems rely on the use of a DAC with a computer, either a laptop put to the task or a custom PC built as a dedicated media player. Whereas here, the system is more integrated, as typified by Cyrus, Linn, Naim and Revox's network players. The Naim NDS is Naim's top of the range 'streamer'; a sophisticated media renderer that can be used to play ripped CDs, high-res files or access the wonders of internet radio and more.

This is in Naim's Classic Line, full size products that don't necessarily come with the cost-no-object approach (and the five-figure price tags) of the 500 Series products, but offer a high degree of sophistication and performance in their own right. Nevertheless, in the NDS, there is a lot of the same kind of thinking that went into the creation of the 500 series. And a big part of what was learned from the 500 series includes the level of screening and isolation that goes on inside the NDS.

The main analogue and digital circuit boards sit on their own springy isolation platforms, which is why a product with no moving parts comes with transit screws! Unscrewing them is not the easiest of tasks, because the player has to be level whenever the transit bolts are removed, so you need to have the NDS half hanging off a table and unscrew the four bolts with your free hand. The suspension system is a combination of brass base plates and leaf springs and is said to push any potential mechanical resonance too low for audibility (at 4Hz). In addition, key sections of the circuit (streamer itself, DSP chip, DAC) are fully screened in isolation cans to prevent noise of any kind from polluting the rest of the circuit.

The network streamers are not intended as a replacement to CD, but instead an increasingly popular alternative to disc-based replay. That being said, they are proving popular in places where CD's popularity is on the wane, and Naim like many such brands is finding it is selling more streaming products than CD products today.

Like all streamers, Naim's NDS requires a degree of forethought in terms of system design. It connects to the audio world via the internet. This can scare off a few more used to simply plugging a CD player into a system, but the end result pays dividends. And, as your dealer best sorts this, the system should end up plug and play.

The right way to make a network system is to take a dedicated 'feed' from your internet router into what's

commonly called a 'residential gateway' – Apple's Airport Extreme being a perfect example. Naim recommends a belt and braces approach to the next step, adding a dedicated network switch, such as an eight-way Netgear GS108. This switch connects to a dedicated network attached storage device, a computer used to rip discs (a Naim UnitiServe does a fine job in both contexts, if you bring some backup to the party) and the NDS. Naim supplies a pair of apps (now free) to control the UnitiServe and the NDS, and the tablet should connect to the wifi of that residential gateway. It all sounds a little complex from the outside, but the end result is a system that will see out the twilight years of CD, and can be upgraded into a multi-room system with just another network cable and something like a Naim UnitiQute. For some inexplicable reason, Naim followers seem to prefer using Cat6 to Cat5e network cable, but I remain unconvinced by this; network data is sent in packets, not as a datastream and the likelihood of this causing a sonic difference is minimal. It's not a big thing, nor a substantial price hike and stores are switching to Cat6 anyway, so it's nothing to get hung up over, but in my





system, a brief flip between Cat5e and Cat6 brought no changes to performance. In fairness, the lengths of cable between the individual components in that data network are not significant, and perhaps the differences become more apparent when you are talking in terms of tens of metres of cable. My take – go for Cat6 to keep Cap'n Paranoia happy and don't sweat it either way.

But using its own network is a good idea. By giving the music system its own dedicated network, you limit the potential for dropouts and freezes (the last thing anyone wants is your music to come to a halt mid-bar, because your son is grinding through an online *Gears of War* session, or your daughter's watching that Justin Bieber YouTube clip for the 900th time). Naim doesn't like wireless connections for a similar reason, especially as if you are trying to push a massive high-res music file across a wifi network, chances are you will be the one causing all the buffering problems.

Naim's top products aren't supplied with power supplies as standard. The NDS is no exception. The NDS

requires an XP5 XS, XPS or a 555 PS power supply. Or, if you are feeling exceptionally frisky, a pair of 555 PS power supplies. This must be factored into the system (at least two full shelves are required, and the cost must be considered). My sample came with the 555 PS, and its two large Burndy connecting hawsers can be a bit of a pig to wrangle.

It's worth the effort. This is, quite simply, the best sound I have yet heard from a post-CD streaming source. Although I haven't formally heard the Linn Klimax DS yet, this sets the bar high. Whether it's from a passing USB stick full of music, music files of all kinds stored on a NAS drive, or simply pulling in music from internet radio sources, the NDS never sounds anything less than outstanding.

It does all the Naim strengths with great ease; it will extract a beat from even the most recalcitrant piece of music and play it with great insight and temporal precision.

There's an assumption that this only applies to rock music, largely because a lot of Naim folk play rock. It's not necessarily so – music of almost all kinds has a rhythm and while







▶ it might not make a difference to something like Messiaen, practically everything you can think of listening to will sound good through the NDS.

That being said, the NDS doesn't impose a beat on the music, just extracts the beat from anything it can. Nor does it overplay that beat (this is something non-Naim people find hard to take with Naim equipment, especially when they have to invent that overplaying for the sake of argument), it merely makes the music sound like music. I played a whole bunch of tracks through the NDS, everything from Richard Strauss via Richard Hell, to Richard Thompson, Richard Hawley, Cliff Richard and Little Richard. And some music not made by Richards. And nothing phased it.

There is a Naim-ness to the overall sound though. A sort of immediacy and focus to the sound that can make it seem both clean and detailed in some systems and possibly a little strident in others. In the case of the NDS however, that stridency is kept to an absolute minimum and as a consequence the player just sounds clean and detailed. This works surprisingly well with internet radio sources and high-res sources, because it brings the former to life and brings out a lot of the detail in the latter. The better the radio source, the better the life of course.

Its key strength, though, is an ability to shock you with the sort of dynamic range that few other sources can resolve. And that's part of the NDS's abilities; it brings out a lot of information that didn't make it out of digital players of any kind. It's not overly dynamic; just that other players in contrast sound undynamic and uncoordinated. This isn't just the big stuff that makes a difference; listening to those late Johnny Cash recordings is always at once a brilliant and painful experience, but hearing the same cut on the NDS is a heart-stopping, searing sound of a man at the end of his time.

Couple that with a sound that's as graceful as it is dynamic and you get a player that doesn't just play the Naim Audio card... it works well throughout audio. You can happily slot the NDS into a distinctly non-Naim system to good effect. I began this review by discussing the difference between streaming solutions from the US and UK. This is because they do sound slightly different in reality; the 'Mac 'n' DAC' solution (it doesn't

have to be a Mac, but it scans better than PC 'n' DAC) does imagery and detail well, streamers are more temporally communicative. The Naim NDS, however, is the bridge between the two, giving the expanse and imagery of more ad hoc computer solutions, but retaining the musical communication network streamers have become so good at. This means not only will the NDS shine in a Naim system, it sounded extremely good (in all the Audio Researchy ways) on the end of the ARC LS27/Reference 75 tested in this issue.

I've heard Naim components (especially sources) taken out of context before. They act like conquistadors, gradually spreading the Word of Naim throughout the whole system, imposing a strong character on the system sound that makes it difficult to mix and match. It often seems like if you insert a single piece of Naim electronics into your system, then either it makes the whole system Naim in waiting, or it is soon replaced. The NDS is genuinely different in this respect. It's not a gateway to a world of Naim (although that is a distinct possibility), it's just a damn good source in and of itself.

There are minor observations. The biggie is while the NDS is outstanding at playing everything you can throw at it, but it's what you can't throw at it that counts. Things like Pandora or Spotify, for example are not supported directly (you can get around this by using things like Nicecast for the Mac that can rebroadcast your Spotify account in MP3 form to the NDS's Shoutcast radio service). Also, Apple AirPlay support would be very nice.

The smaller observation is a philosophical one; Naim is currently making a lot of different streamer-based products to fill practically every niche in the market. This is currently the top of the tree (I can't help thinking there's a 500 Series streamer somewhere in the pipeline) but there are now 10



*“There are people who object to anything to do with computers costing as much as this, or that all streamers basically sound the same and there is nothing here that couldn’t be replicated for less. Well... you’re wrong!”*

different network-based devices in the Naim line. This could get a bit bewildering!

You’ve just worked through page after page on the Naim NDS, all of which can be neatly summed up into a single word; captivating. There will be people who object to anything to do with computers costing as much as this, or that all streamers basically sound the same and there’s nothing here that couldn’t be replicated for less. Well... you’re wrong! Pop this in front of one of the sceptics for five minutes and watch the scepticism melt away. There will also be people who think Naim only works with Naim – ditto; a few minutes with this in their system and the reprogramming begins to take place.

In short, this is a world-class music player on any terms. Its sense of musical poise, its almost frightening dynamics and the resultant sense of drama it brings are almost to be expected – Naim’s sound is always exciting. But this brings more to the table; a refinement and intellectual depth to the sound that makes it one of the best source components I have ever used... and one that demands to be heard in a wider array of systems than just Naim. The future of music is in safe hands.

When it finally goes, I’ll seriously miss the NDS... it’s been emotional! +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Inputs:** 1x BNC, 1x RCA, 1x optical, 1x USB (front), 1x Ethernet, WiFi connection, 2x 3.5mm RC5 jack, DE0 RS232 connection for software updates

**Sample rates supported:** S/PDIF to 192kHz

**Formats supported:** WAV and AIFF (up to 32bit/192kHz) FLAC (up to 24bit/192kHz), ALAC (up to 24bit/96kHz)

Windows Media-formatted content (up to 16bit/48kHz) must be WMA 9.2, Internet radio (Windows Media-formatted content, MP3 streams, MMS, Ogg Vorbis)

**iRadio Service Provider:** vTuner 5\* full service

**Outputs:** DIN and RCA (analogue), BNC (S/PDIF)

**Output Impedance:** <20Ω minimum

**Frequency Response:** 10Hz-30kHz, +0.1/-0.5dB

**Phase response:** Linear Phase, absolute phase correct

**External power supply required:** XP5 XS, XPS, 555 PS (double Burndy connection for 555 PS) 2x 555 PS.

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 43.2x8.7x31.4cm

**Weight:** 14kg

**Price:** £6,250

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