

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Naim Nait XS 3

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
8.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 70 x 314mm

FEATURES

- Claimed power output: 2x 70W (8ohm)
- Inputs: 4x stereo RCA; 5x DIN
- Moving-magnet phono stage

DISTRIBUTOR
Naim Audio Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01722 426600

WEBSITE
naimaudio.com



Back to basics

David Price samples the latest incarnation of the classic Nait integrated amplifier that re-introduces a built-in phono stage

There's a generation of audiophiles for whom the Naim Nait is very special. Many who now have something close to their dream hi-fi systems, will have started with Naim's first integrated amplifier – and never forgotten it. Effectively the Salisbury company's entry-level pre/power amplifier combination that had shrunk in the wash, so to speak, it was a remarkably convincing little thing. So much so that its minimalist ethos went on to define the eighties zeitgeist as far as British specialist hi-fi was concerned.

That first Nait was paired down to the point of having no tone controls, a single-channel volume trim pot disguised as a balance control and a

power output lower than many of today's headphone amplifiers. It was one of the most extreme hi-fi designs of a pretty whacky decade, and became a badge of one's audiophile purity. Sonically it was pretty extreme

A more emotionally articulate and engaging performer that's hard not to love

too – despite having just 13W into 8ohm, it was a remarkably engaging listen, making music sound intense, enthralling and captivating. What little power it had was deployed with a great deal of zeal.

Since the original Nait was discontinued in the late eighties, a lot of water has gone under the bridge. The small integrated has gone through a number of incarnations, growing up into a fully fledged full-width design that has a wide range of inputs and a balance control. For a couple of decades, the Nait has been a line level-only product, and has got ever slicker, more mainstream and less quirky with each incarnation.

Fascinatingly, the third-generation £2,200 Nait XS 3 reverses that trend in two ways. Firstly, the company has carefully tweaked the circuit design to deliver a more classically 'musical' Naim sound – just the sort of thing that made those early Nait 1, 2 and 3s so much fun. Secondly, it comes with

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Earth grounding post for a turntable
- 2 Stereo RCA subwoofer outputs
- 3 4x stereo RCA analogue inputs
- 4 5x DIN in/outputs
- 5 Moving-magnet phono stage



a moving-magnet phono stage built-in and this is the first time the input has appeared since the classic Nait 3 of the mid-nineties.

It shares the full-width, slimline form factor of previous XS models and claims a rated power output at 2x 70W into 8ohm, unchanged from its XS 2 predecessor. The discrete Class AB solid-state amplifier sports a large toroidal power transformer – for its size – and careful circuit design. Leaded through-hole components are used in the signal path to minimise the negative effects of vibration and heat cycling, and the chassis-mounted input sockets are hand wired to the circuit boards, to help with vibration. An Alps Blue Velvet volume potentiometer is specified for even channel balance, with reed relay input selection and a galvanically isolated microprocessor control section to keep electrical noise away from the audio circuits. Ceramic insulators are used for the power transistors to help deal with heat, and Naim's 24V Discrete Regulator (DR) module powers the preamp. A Class A headphone amplifier stage is also fitted.

As you would expect, the XS 3 is well built and finished – albeit with the company's typically rugged, 'industrial' feel. It is not a slinky Japanese product with acres of soft-touch brushed aluminium. It has a profusion of analogue inputs, and separate pre-power sections with a jumper on the back panel to link them together for normal integrated amplifier duties. The power lead comes with Naim's special decoupled plug, which removes many of the mechanical vibrations travelling down the cable into the amp.

Sound quality

The Nait XS 3 is a clear improvement over its already fine predecessor, and a really strong purchasing proposition in its own right. It feels like it has been dusted down and sharpened up, and the result is a more emotionally articulate and engaging performer that's hard not to love. Take Chic's *Good Times*, for example. Some will know how hypnotic this can sound when given the chance, and the Naim does precisely this. This amplifier turns in a well-defined, highly

The chassis is recognisable as a Naim: chic and minimalist

detailed and carefully ordered sound – ticking all the right 'hi-fi' boxes – but more than this, it really sings. Via a line input, it shows a new-found rhythmic dexterity missing on its predecessor. It seems particularly good at carrying the dynamic inflections in the music, the subtle accenting in the playing that makes the song so engrossing. It is fast and agile in the way that I remember the old nineties Nait 3 being, for example – being able to track dynamics far better than you might expect for an integrated of this price.

The starting point for its consummate musical skill is the bass; there used to be a time when Naim amplifiers stood out from the crowd in their handling of this, but the house sound seems to have got a little softer around the edges of late – not so with the Nait XS 3. The Chic track is fun enough, but when I spin up some classic dance in the shape of Beatmasters' *Rok Da House*, this integrated amplifier proves an

The circuit has been tweaked to deliver a more classically 'musical' Naim sound

absolute hoot. It's the combination of control, transient speed and power that really strikes – this amp is grippy and sinewy, with no spare fat, yet has real punch at high volumes. It shows surprisingly little strain for something so small and is able to be the life and soul of any party.

The combination of synth bass, bass drum from a drum machine and vocals gives this track real urgency and pace; the Naim grabs it like a rottweiler and doesn't let go. Yet it is the control that it exhibits in the midband that really impresses; it separates out different strands of the mix as well as anything at this price. This is particularly nice to hear on well recorded modern jazz; Herbie Hancock's *Speak Like A Child* is beautifully handled. There's no sense



Q&A

Steve Sells
Electronic design director,
Naim Audio



DP: Why did you bring back the phono stage to the Nait integrated?

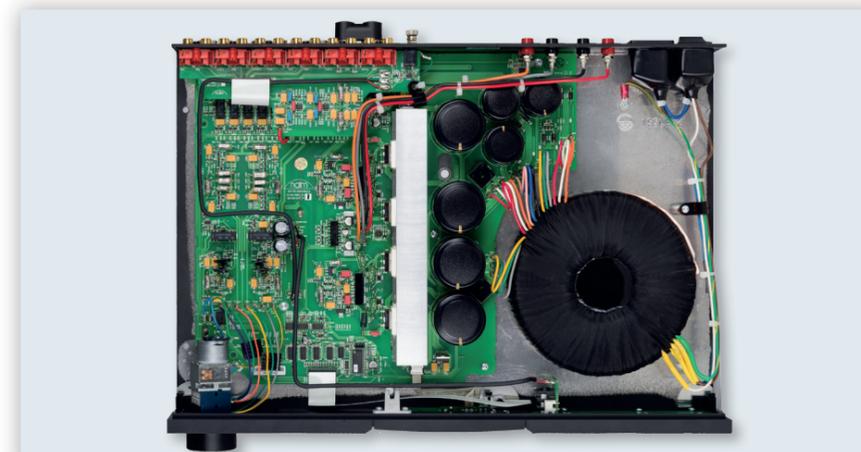
SS: We have a cross-departmental product innovation team that gathers information and proposes products. That gives us a great mix of input – including market research; requests from our global distributors, retailers and end users; our dedicated Naim Forums and other social media. It was a pretty strong and easy message to pick up on that vinyl use is increasing. We then coupled that demand with a range of technical advancements we'd made within research and development – including the ability to add a phono stage within the already crowded confines of an integrated amplifier without it harming sound quality.

Why did you opt to only provide a moving-magnet option?

It's all to do with system balance versus performance. We looked at how the budget of a vinyl system is apportioned and for Nait buyers, this would typically be with a MM cartridge. To make the phono stage do both MM and MC would mean adding in extra amplification stages, loading options, screening and signal switches. This would degrade the performance of the MM stage. We wanted a really excellent MM stage and if the customer wanted MC we offer the option of an external stage.

What informed your changes to the amplifier as a whole?

We started from the premise of trusting our ears, and then interpreting measurements relative to how the human ear and brain work. After a long period of development, we ended up doubling the speed of the power amplifier section by simplifying it. This has brought a closer and more immediate sound. It's also slightly increased some types of distortion, but those are consonant with music and are subjectively very hard to hear – unlike the improvements that we have made.



IN XS

It's a big deal to bring a phono stage back to a long-running line of premium integrated amps. The last small Naim to have one was the Nait 3, built between 1993 and 2000. The first 'modern era' Nait 5 – made between 2000 to 2003 – ditched it and was a line-level model only.

Design supremo Steve Sells says it's based on pre-existing designs, but the second gain stage transistors have been improved with greater power handling so they no longer need to be protected by a cascode stage transistor. Removing the cascode means less amplifier stabilisation is required, which doubles the slew rate and reduces the group delay – to improve the sound.

He says it's a challenge to fit a phono stage in an integrated. "A quiet environment is needed," he explains. "It needs to be free from electromagnetic interference from power supplies, free from RF interference, free from microphonic vibration and have a clean power supply."

The decision has been made to offer a moving-magnet stage only because the company thinks typical Nait XS 3 buyers generally won't be running moving-coil cartridges. Some will think this is a shame, given the number of affordable high-quality MCs that are available these days, but instead Naim's design team has focused on getting the moving-magnet stage right.

that the Nait XS 3 is shouting at me, yet it still delivers a vivid and engrossing rendition of this great piece of music. Tonally it remains a good deal smoother and darker than those early classic Nait's, yet it is obviously more vibrant and lively than its XS 2 predecessor. There is definitely a better sense of sparkle to softly struck hi-hat cymbals for example, making for a more realistic and atmospheric sound.

Its stereo soundstaging is impressive at the price, even if not the match of the more expensive Supernait 3 (£3,499) or the company's bigger pre/power combinations. Simon and Garfunkel's *America* is presented with a great deal of scale, being especially capacious from left to right, and it shows a fair degree of stage depth too. In a sense, though, this amplifier's character is such that you don't get too hung up on lowly hi-fi considerations, because it's so good at whisking the listener deep into the musical event.

The built-in moving-magnet phono stage is very good. Those fitted to the early Nait's were often the star attraction, and this is similarly special. Of course, a high-end phono stage will better it, but I am amazed how much it unlocks from my prized vinyl. If anything, it rather perks up the sound; it sure catches the full majesty of Neil Young's *Ohio*. The

recorded acoustic is full of detail and has a vibrancy and there is a lovely spacious feel to this old analogue recording – the result being that I just want to keep on listening.

Conclusion

There's been a sense that each successive generation of Naim's Nait integrated amplifiers has been getting stronger and more sophisticated, but not necessarily better. Each refresh has brought greater smoothness, poise and assuredness – yet with some of that intrinsic 'Naitness' missing. The Nait XS 3 changes all that and delivers a more engrossing sound than its already capable predecessor – and gets back to basics with an excellent phono stage too ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



★ ★ ★ ★ ★

LIKE: Engrossing sound; minimalist design; build; MM phono stage

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WESAY: The Nait strikes back!



Like the Nait series, Roksan's Caspian M2 – around £2,000 – has been around for a long time now. With a claimed 2x 85W into 8ohm, it's a feisty beast considering its rather diminutive dimensions – and its sound reflects its punchy power output. The little Roksan is fleet of foot, entertaining to listen to and has a slightly smoother and sweeter sound than the Naim. The latter, however, is crisper and more engaging, appears better built and finished, and has the benefit of that great MM phono stage.