



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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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

Contact:

Tel: 01722 426600

www.naimaudio.com

