



UltraDeck+M

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Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 459

February 2020

Power up!

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Six muscular amplifiers to make your music sing

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PRODUCTS ON TEST:
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Music Legends

How Damon Albarn became the UK's greatest auteur since Bowie

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US\$15.00



CONNECTIONS

- 1 Single-wire speaker outputs
- 2 RCA subwoofer output
- 3 MM phono stage input
- 4 4x RCA analogue inputs
- 5 5x DIN inputs
- 6 Turntable grounding post

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Naim Nait XS 3
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
8.5kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 70 x 314mm
FEATURES
● Quoted power output: 2x 70W (8ohm)
● Inputs: 4x RCA; 5x DIN; 1x MM phono stage
● 6.35mm headphone socket
DISTRIBUTOR
Naim Audio Ltd.
TELEPHONE
01722 426600
WEBSITE
naimaudio.com

Naim Nait XS 3 £2,200



Does the latest Naim incarnation have the functionality and poise to come out on top?

As the name suggests, the Nait XS 3 is an ongoing evolution of the original Nait XS integrated and compared with several amplifier designs in the group, this third-generation model looks a little on the simplistic side. The power output is quoted at 2x 70W into 8ohm and it provides four line-level inputs via RCA as well as DIN connections for use with Naim sources. There are no digital inputs and unlike the Primare, no option to add them as an upgrade further down the line. There is, however, a headphone amp via a 6.35mm socket on the front panel.

Unlike its predecessor, the XS 3 incorporates a moving-magnet phono stage and Naim is adamant that the care taken with its implementation and design ensures best-in-class performance along with a number of revisions to the pre and power amplifier stages. Further performance upgrades can be achieved by investing in one of Naim's external power supplies.

The Nait XS 3 possibly isn't the most eye-catching chassis in the group, but

it is handsome and well proportioned. It's beautifully made and the familiar casework feels solid and carefully assembled. It comes supplied with £100 Power-Line Lite mains cables (HFC 427) as standard, while the remote control is sensibly laid out and has a solid feel to it.

Sound quality

The test level is easily reached and the Nait XS 3 has plenty of output power in reserve. The most noticeable aspect of the performance, however, is the vastly improved sense of space and three dimensionality over its predecessor. The effect this has on Hugh Masekela's performance of *Stimela* is significant as the Naim does a great job of creating a believable space, clearly differentiating between the audience and the band. It demonstrates the same attributes with instruments too, with Masekela's trumpet solo sounding vibrant and entirely believable.

This dovetails with more traditional Naim virtues of rhythmic energy and ebullience that consistently entertain.

The result is that it handles *Walking On A Thin Line* with a genuine sense of fun and enthusiasm that is comfortably the best in the group. It also shows an impressively forgiving nature with the upper registers, although it doesn't have the ability to define the locations of Lady Gaga and Tony Bennett with the same total assurance of some rivals in the group. Having said that, it still manages to deliver the track with plenty of get up and go.

The space and three dimensionality is vastly improved over its predecessor

Aurora Aksnes' rendition of *The River* is also delivered brilliantly, with a deep clean bass extension that perfectly matches the smooth and spacious upper registers.

Moving to the built-in phono stage reveals that the Nait XS 3 has a consistent character to its line-level inputs. Noise levels at idle are fractionally higher than some of the other phono stages incorporated into rivals, but once the music is playing, this ceases to be an issue and the Naim delivers a performance that consistently allows the positive attributes of whatever turntable is connected to shine through ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Lively, refined and spacious performance; exceptional build
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No digital inputs
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Not the best specified amp, but it delivers a consistently excellent performance that brings music to life
FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL



Group test verdict

These six integrated amps offer a talented mix of high-level performance, but there can only be one winner. **Ed Selley** weighs up the pros and cons

EACH AMPLIFIER DESIGN here has something different to offer depending on your needs. In the case of the Cyrus 82 DAC QXR and Musical Fidelity M6si, both have plenty of functionality, excellent build and deliver a good sound. Where they have their limits is that both need a bit more care than most when it comes to selecting partnering components to avoid highlighting the slight top end edge of the Cyrus or constrained upper registers of the M6si further. Hence they don't receive a recommendation here – as there are better all-round designs in the group.

The Primare I25 and Rotel RA-1592 tie for third place despite offering very different features and strengths. The Primare has the smallest feature count of any amp in the group, but the wonderful midrange warmth and refinement and the intriguing upgrade path both impress. The Rotel by contrast, wants for nothing in specification terms and its wide and effortless presentation will appeal to many. Despite the differences in their features, they both have slight performance limitations with our listening material which robs them of higher placing in the rankings.

Leema Acoustics' Pulse IV comes close to musical greatness. It offers a brilliant spec combined with a performance that consistently places at or near the top of the group, regardless of the material played. The very slight lack of rhythmic engagement is something that can almost certainly be dealt with by sensible speaker matching to inject that last ounce of energy. It is also important to remember that the functionality on offer means that the total cost of building a system around it will be less as it already does so much.



WINNER

The best-sounding amplifier is Naim's Nait XS 3, which is consistently brilliant with all types of music. It's beautifully made, attractive, easy to use and has an MM phono stage for turntable use, which all adds up to a winning combination at the price.

| Make/model | Cyrus 82 DAC QXR | Leema Acoustics Pulse IV | Musical Fidelity M6si | Naim Nait XS 3 | Primare I25 | Rotel RA-1592 |
|-----------------|--|--|--|---|--|---|
| Price | £2,300 | £2,300 | £2,500 | £2,200 | £2,250 | £2,100 |
| Sound | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Value | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Build | ★★★★☆ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Features | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| Overall | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ | ★★★★★ |
| | A capable and highly appealing amp that requires a little care with partnering kit | A flexible option with a respectable performance across a wide range of inputs | A big, powerful amp but the soundstage can feel congested compared with rivals | It might not offer the best spec, but the performance is consistently excellent | A highly talented performer with a useful range of upgrade possibilities | A capable amp that's great value, thanks to its features and strong performance |

Key features

| | | | | | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------|------------------------|
| Quoted power | 2x 88W (6ohm) | 2x 80W | 2x 220W | 2x 70W | 2x 100W | 2x 200W |
| Phono stage | No | MM/MC | MM/MC | MM | No | MM |
| Analogue inputs | 6x RCA | 5x RCA | 4x RCA; 1x XLR | 4x RCA; 5x XLR | 5x RCA | 3x RCA |
| Digital inputs | 2x opt; 2x coax; USB-B | 3x opt; 3x coax; USB-B | USB-B | No | Modular | 3x opt; 3x coax; USB-B |
| DAC | 32-bit/768kHz | 32-bit/384kHz | 24-bit/96kHz | No | Modular | 32-bit/384kHz |

TRY WITH THESE

NETWORK AUDIO PLAYER: Auralic Altair G1 **£1,900 HFC 455**

The Altair combines a brilliant streaming platform (with Roon compatibility), useful extra features and handsome good looks with sound quality that gets very close to the more expensive models in Auralic's range. It's a streaming bargain.



TURNTABLE: Rega Planar 6 **£1,050 HFC 427**

Fit the Rega with a moving-magnet cartridge to work with the Nait XS 3 and you have a fine turntable that manages to sound bigger and more capable than the sensible price suggests it should. It's also beautifully made and a joy to use.



STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKER: Dynaudio Special Forty **£2,500**

An absolutely spellbinding standmount. Dynaudio's birthday present to itself combines accuracy, scale and realism underpinned by an unburstable sense of fun. Throw in the beautiful appearance and fine build quality, and you have an outstanding loudspeaker.

