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Box Clever

Naim's new Mu-so Qb takes the one-box wireless streaming loudspeaker concept to a new level, says Jon Myles.



The way people listen to music is changing rapidly – and manufacturers are having to adapt. For evidence, look no further than Naim. This was, remember, the company that held out longer than most before embracing the CD revolution. Yet it was one of the first to produce true hi-fi streaming products

with its ground-breaking Uniti range.

Now it has enthusiastically entered the one-box wireless 'speaker market. First came the Mu-so – a handsome standalone product that packs six drivers, 450 Watts of amplification, network connection, Bluetooth, native Tidal and Spotify compatibility, Bluetooth, internet radio, Apple AirPlay and digital

connections (up to 24bit/192kHz) into a single chassis. It looks like no other Naim product that has gone before but more importantly is both a joy to use and listen to.

Now the design and engineering team in Salisbury have taken the same concept and features but built them into a more compact package in the shape of the Mu-so Qb.



The top-mounted touch-sensitive dial controls volume, inputs and radio pre-sets.

Thinking of this as a Mu-so-lite, though, would be missing the point. Yes, it's smaller and less expensive (£595) but it's been engineered from the ground up to provide that traditional Naim sound in a form factor that suits some of our more bijoux living spaces but also allows you to listen to your music from the



Five active front-firing speakers are angled to provide wide sound dispersion. They are augmented by two passive bass radiators.

same range of inputs as the original Mu-so.

So, as the name (sort of) suggests it's in the shape of a cube measuring 210mm x 218mm x 212mm (H/W/D) and weighing 5.6kg. Behind the wraparound grille are five active front-firing drivers – one woofer, two mid-range units and a pair of tweeters.

These are set into a sculpted and extremely rigid glass-filled polymer housing that angles the mids and tweeters to left and right for better sound dispersion. Lower frequencies are also augmented by a pair of passive bass radiators on each side.

Inside, individual Class D amplifiers power each of the active drivers (50 Watts apiece for the mid/tweeters and 100 Watts for the bass), controlled by Naim's in-house designed DSP signal-processing engine.

And talking of control, you'll need Naim's free app for mobiles or tablets (both iOS and Android supported) to set the unit up and take full advantage of its capabilities for selecting music from your network. This is a

fine piece of software which guides you through all the various options available without too many confusing sub-menus.

Once done, volume, source, radio

play/pause and forward/back when playing music.

For existing owners of Naim streaming products Mu-so Qbs can be added to their home network for multi-room music streaming.

As supplied the Qb comes with a standard black speaker grille but other colours will be made available soon for users that wish to match their unit with the home decor.

SOUND QUALITY

The Naim Mu-so Qb may have a small form factor but it also has a very potent sound.

Obviously, as a one-box unit, you don't get true stereo sound or that last iota of detail, but it trades that



The rear of the Mu-so Qb has an integral heatsink as well as containing all the inputs.

"it combines versatility, ease of use and great sound with superb design"

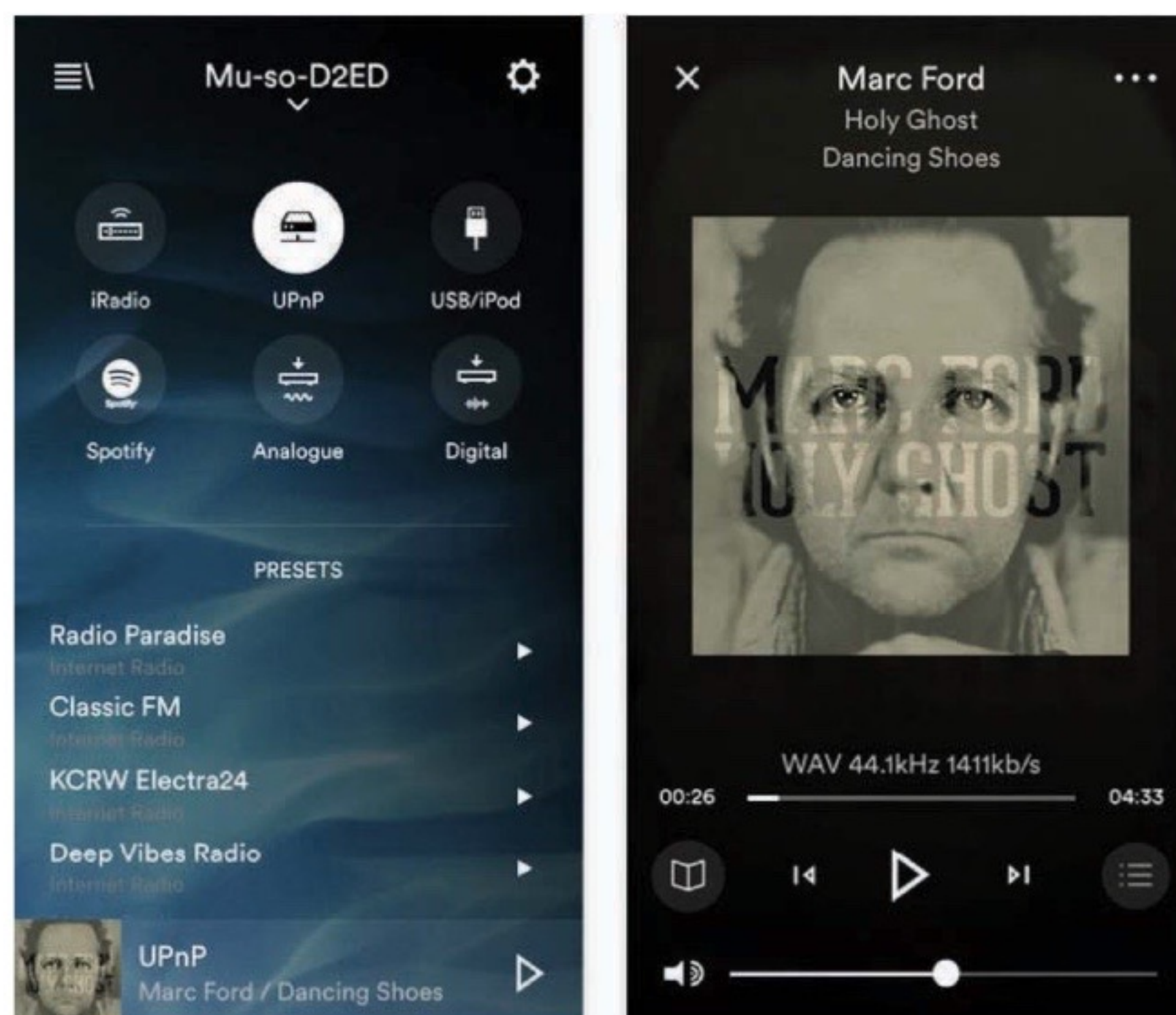
presets, play/pause, track forward/back can also be accessed from the unit's top-mounted illuminated dial.

This first appeared on Naim's flagship Statement pre/power combination before finding its way onto the Mu-so and, while not offering as many functions as the app, is so smooth and tactile that you can't help but keep using it to adjust volume. It's also touch sensitive to allow selection of inputs as well as

for a rather up-tempo, foot-tapping sound that is extremely enjoyable.

Overall it sounds smooth and fast. Listening to The Killers 'Smile Like You Mean It' (24/96) via wireless highlighted what it does well: there's an ability to latch onto the essentials in the music so although 'obvious' bass or ringing treble may seemingly be missing, the overall sound more than compensates with its smooth accuracy.

Similarly, on 'Go Easy' from



Control of the Mu-so Qb is easy through Naim's free app for both iOS and Android mobiles and tablets. The app will let you select inputs, alter volume and display album artwork.

John Martyn's 'Bless The Weather' the gentle guitar strumming was portrayed with depth and realism - a strong sense of plectrum hitting strings. There was not the definition you'd get from a full-size system - but it was rather captivating all the same for something of the size.

Where the Qb impressed me was across the midband and higher frequencies - the way it integrates everything into a whole. For example on 'Where The Wild Roses Grow' from Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds' 'Murder Ballads' the interplay between Cave's gruff, menacing voice and Kylie Minogue's innocent replies wasn't just relayed mechanically - it had real frisson to it.

On the same album, when 'The Curse Of Millhaven' starts, the descending organ riff gave me a start - just as it should. After that the Qb let me hear just how well the drums, bass, guitar and occasional keyboard meld together to create the atmosphere of the track.

Shutting my eyes, it was hard to believe the sound was coming from a box the size of the Mu-so Qb. The only thing I wanted was a bit more bass power - but that's probably being a bit greedy considering how well-judged the rest of the sound is.

Switching to internet radio the Qb was even more impressive. With Radio 3's 339kpbs stream of Arthur Rubinstein playing Schubert's 'Opus 90/4' there was no lack of definition, or the sense of his deft

touch between left or right hand on the keyboard. The same went for voices on radio: they came over as natural and free of either chestiness or sibilance.

All this was using the Qb in a living room measuring 6.5m x 5.2m - which it managed with some ease without the volume control progressing past the halfway point.



Inputs include USB, optical digital, ethernet as well as 3.5mm analogue line-in.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Our third-octave analysis of frequency response, using a pink noise test signal, shows the Mu-so Qb has been carefully engineered to give an impressively flat response, extending the full width of the audio band. The small tweeters

extend output right up to 20kHz - and without peaking, so treble will sound smooth, not sharp or spitty. This is quite important with digital, since poor quality compressed files are in themselves coarse up top and are best not emphasised.

Secondly, you can set the DSP for operation for more or less than 25cm from a rear wall. This is rather more subtle and is worth experimenting with but can be done on the fly from the app.

That might, though, take you a little time to get around to - because even without those tweaks the Mu-so Qb sounds rather captivating straight out of the box. As it stands I'm struggling to think of anything that comes close to it in terms of functionality and price at anywhere near the price. I'd recommend you take a listen.

CONCLUSION

Not so much a wireless 'speaker' - more a classy hi-fi system in a compact package for just £600. It combines versatility, ease of use and great sound with superb design. It also offers the cheapest and probably most convenient way into the Naim sound - and offers existing Naim streamer owners an alternative to the likes of Sonos in providing multi-room streaming in an easy package.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



There is no crossover dip around 3kHz so detailing will be good. The single elliptical bass unit and twin ABRs extend bass right down to 40Hz - a surprisingly low frequency from such a small cabinet.

Acoustically, the Mu-so Qb measures as well as a full range hi-fi loudspeaker, so Naim have not skimped here. A quality product. **NK**

NAIM MU-SO QB
£595



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best

VALUE - keenly priced

VERDICT

Sets the standard for one-box music systems at an affordable price. A real innovative product.

FOR

- design
- smooth yet punchy sound
- easy set-up
- intuitive control app

AGAINST

- nothing at the price

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