

Naim Statement Revisited

TEN WEEKS AFTER FIRST POWERING UP, THE NAIM STATEMENT PRE-/POWER COMBO CONTINUES TO IMPROVE, AS MARTIN COLLOMS RELATES

A trail of visitors have been arriving at my listening room eager to hear Naim's ambitious new amplification, so I was in a position to monitor their reactions and record their opinions, while also charting my own continuing experiences. Checking back to my first reactions and observations, one might expect that some of the initial wonderment might have worn off, but I still consider that from almost the beginning I was right to judge the *Statement* as potentially excellent. Indeed, had it never got any better with further use, it would still have received a very good review, though without doubt some lesser issues were up for discussion. However, as with most Naim designs, a prolonged running in period has brought subtle changes to the sound. These have continued to make themselves heard, and this will likely continue for a few months or more, after it has left my premises for its next review outing.

Disruption

For audio reviewers, equipment introductions such as the *Statement* amplifiers are both disruptive and constructive. Disruptive because they question the status quo and challenge the reviewer and his reference system; constructive because they open a window to the possibility of substantial sound quality improvement, rather than merely incremental performance gains.

I recall an awkward experience when reviewing first the Magico *Q1* and then the Magico *S5*. With the benefit of hindsight, I now know that instead of successfully assessing the issues associated with these review loudspeakers (particularly the *Q1*), I was instead hearing numerous and complex sound quality aspects of the reference system that was ostensibly being employed to review them, as if for the first time. Colorations in particular, which at first sight are almost instinctively blamed on transducers, particularly the loudspeakers, were found to be more associated with cables, equipment supports and with the system electronics, after the painstaking

substitutions of music sources and a variety of highly regarded pre- and power amplifiers. With the Magico *S5* in particular I had to break down the system completely and carefully rebuild it, experimenting with several alternative combinations before I was at last able to make useful progress with that review, as the loudspeaker turned out to be less coloured than my carefully selected system.

The Naim *Statement* turned out to be another very revealing product. Once again it exposed the innate characteristics of my system, specifically the mains supply arrangements. Long experience has taught me that an amplifier that is relatively indifferent to the mains supply arrangements is often over protected, over-filtered and may well not reach beyond a certain performance level. Conversely, quite often those amplifiers which have a high attainment potential and that are revealing of source and set up quality, also demand paying close attention to the mains supply quality – in my case this is normally a strip of well used unswitched sockets fed from a single 60amp spur. Using this arrangement, certain shortfalls in meeting the *Statement* power amplifiers' particular needs were reflected in some audible roughness and a significant loss of absolute detail and timing precision.

This initially led me to bring in my second spur supply, using one for the *SI*'s pre-amplifier and source (in this case a Naim *NDS* with *555DR*), while the second was used solely for the monoblock power amplifiers. I felt that this arrangement significantly improved the sense of timing, and it certainly brought substantial improvements in the already high levels of detail, focus and depth. However, encouraged by a colleague's experience with star mains cable sets with Naim equipment, I managed to borrow a four output cable set powered from a single plug, which was custom made by a dealer using Naim *Powerline* components. (No *Powerlines* were harmed in the making of this review!)

Following this 'star' single supply connection (and noting that we were now about five weeks into

a running in pattern of around 10 hours a day), I initially felt that spaciousness and finer textures both showed a loss, and that focus was a little less pinpoint than before. Conversely, while it had previously been no slouch, the rhythm, swing and dynamics now took off in style, with impressive bass slam and power, and notably solid timing. Brawn was now winning over brain, however, and musical performances of all genres – rock, jazz and classical – were grabbing me by the throat. Furthermore, as this custom-built Hydra mains cable set settled in, the amplifier's continuously improving and high standards of detail retrieval and timing began to erase that first impression of a mild loss in space and texture. (In retrospect I suspect that some of these improvements derived from this amplifier's continuing running in process.)

Running In

In the earlier stages of evaluation we had wondered how the amp, both pre and power, could possibly improve on the high standards it had already demonstrated after the first few days (following a suitable warm up and the lab bench testing). However, Naim folklore has it that the final voicing of its amplifiers is not confirmed and signed off until it has passed crucial subjective in-house criteria after about three months of intensive use. As mentioned in the technical section of the main published review (*Vôl9 No2*), Naim favours certain electronic components (especially both polymer film and solid electrolyte tantalum capacitors) for their long term sound quality, particularly in respect of timing, dynamics and definition.

Very awkwardly, these components do not show their best audiophile qualities until they have had some use in an audio circuit, with both correct polarising voltages and audio signals. Otherwise they sound a just little dead, two dimensional, obscured, edgy, and mildly 'squashed' dynamically and rhythmically. Such a scenario could not possibly be suspected from first hearing the *Statement*, since these factors already seemed to be held to a very low level by this point. But as the running in process unfolded it was in just these areas that the *Statement* got better and better. In any case, this amplifier uses quite a number of those ubiquitous power supply and decoupling electrolytic capacitors, and it is well known that their electrical and audio signatures will only stabilise after many weeks of use.

In The Marketplace

There are some great amplifiers out there which will impress experts and enthusiasts when used in a well balanced hi-fi system, and rightly so. I have

experienced and evaluated many great amplifiers down the years, from Levinson, Krell, Cello, Cary, Goldmund, Conrad Johnson, Audio Research, Audio Note, D'Agostino, Spectral, Naim, Constellation, Vitus, Burmester, MBL, VAC, Karan, and Robert Koda. I've actually owned a number of these, and more models from brands such as Soullution, Dartzeel, Gamut and CH Precision may also be relevant and important, but hitherto I've only heard them at shows.

Where does Naim's *Statement* fit into this hierarchy? Does it lean towards the speed and crispness of a Spectral; the near hyper-transparency, huge dynamic range and polished timbral delicacy heard from Constellation; the particularly focused exposition of dynamics and rhythm typical of good Naim designs? What about the grace and poise of a Vitus; the warm yet dynamically and musically involving envelopment of a VAC; the almost concealed power, scale and richness of a D'Agostino; the meticulous detail and agility of a Goldmund; the almost perfectly natural timbre and resolution of the Robert Koda's midrange; the fluid continuity and musicality of a Conrad Johnson; the sheer bass control, slam and effortless power of Krell's classic big monoblocks; and the intellectually focused timbre and precision of a Levinson.

At this moment (and I have not in any way hastened to a conclusion), and at the present state of my and colleagues' experience, the *Statement* hits as many of those desirable aspects of performance as one could reasonably imagine or expect. Not only could we not find grounds for complaint, we have just about all run out of superlatives to describe its quality. However, I can imagine that Naim aficionados more used to the traditional Naim sound might well be taken aback by the *Statement*'s very natural, neutral approach, and might perhaps anticipate more obvious overall clout, more highly driven dynamics and midrange attack, and more forceful (perhaps somewhat exaggerated) mid-bass punch.

It can fairly be argued that the usual language of high fidelity is somewhat inadequate to describe the experience of listening to a reasonably run in *Statement* in a well ordered system. A compromise may be found by describing how familiar material sounded, judged against a backdrop of many thousands of such previous comparisons¹. (And it is worth pointing out that the best quality material was not absolutely necessary in order to reap much of the available musical reward, as the splendid quality is so blindingly obvious.)

Certainly it sounds even better with top quality sources, not least with classic vinyl from the pre-

HIFICRITIC
AUDIO EXCELLENCE

"Not only could we not find grounds for complaint, we have just about all run out of superlatives to describe its quality. However, I can imagine that Naim aficionados more used to the traditional Naim sound might well be taken aback by the Statement's very natural, neutral approach, and might perhaps anticipate more obvious overall clout, more highly driven dynamics and midrange attack, and more forceful (perhaps somewhat exaggerated) mid-bass punch"

digital era when the innate naturalness of analogue recording technologies are plain to hear, but I should also add that it sounds just great with fine CD releases at 16-bit/44.1kHz. The *Statement's* overall achievement in sound quality simply surpasses what may now seem to be the rather less important differences that are heard between the various replay formats and available resolutions.

Some of the earliest CDs in my possession, issued soon after the launch of this technology, were reproduced with considerable detail, precision and depth, and at previously unimagined quality. *Excellent Birds*, the last track on Peter Gabriel's 1986 *So* (recorded with Laurie Anderson) came up so clear and focused that we wondered whether we'd previously only listened to a compact cassette version. Indeed, all the tracks on *So* were rendered with unexpected precision, clarity, space, scale, harmony, power, dimension, and infectious musicality. Focus was significantly sharper and more stable than previously experienced, and specific acoustic elements on the recording were rendered more precisely across the soundstage.

Exploring this, the more we listened the more we realised that the *Statement* was doing something better than hitherto experienced, by focusing and positioning acoustic objects all over the soundstage, almost like live theatre. This seemed to result from a combination of exceptional focus as we know it, but also a clear, local and related acoustic, coding every item into an aurally identifiable space. The soundstage seemed to be populated by images of individual objects, within a whole and stable ensemble. The stereo soundstage seemed rather better focused and deeper than hitherto, lending a wonderful sense of scale and dimension where appropriate. This focus was particularly special as complex image sources were rendered almost solid, and all the sounds associated with that source were placed at that virtual source location. From a perception viewpoint we know that the delivery of a virtual stereo image is an imperfect process, but the *Statement* somehow supplies just that bit more, with crisper coordination, the better to help the listener decode the detailed content of those images. Steve Reich's *Music for Mallet Instruments* was another revealing piece which showed how such delicate and complex percussion could be unravelled like a map. All the junctions and connections, and the natural, lively, seemingly pitch-true sounds of the complex counterpoint were now brilliantly illuminated, with class leading rhythm and delicacy.

Speaker Cables

To hear the maximum of the immense image

depth of which this amplifier is capable needs either Naim's *Super Lumina* cables, or a similar reference quality equivalent (even though such otherwise excellent *Super Lumina* speaker cables do not quite show off the full dynamic and rhythmic power possible from this amplifier combination, in my opinion). The ultra-costly Transparent *XL MM2* cable certainly has similarly substantial image depth, excellent detail together with great dynamics, massive bass power and very fine focus, but some listeners may find that even these are not quite as upbeat nor as midband neutral as the amplifier itself.

Somewhat unexpectedly, I have done much *Statement* listening with 16 foot lengths of well run in, well terminated Naim *NAC A5*. This cable has very good but not exceptional depth, but is also notably upbeat, dynamic and well timed. I have previously found with lesser amplifiers that *NAC A5* can sound a little closed and mildly coloured in the midband, and with some depth constraints too, but somehow these characteristics don't seem at all intrusive when used with the *Statement* combo.

Clearly some colorations are additive, and if you do not add to them the *NAC A5* result can be more than satisfactory, even exceptional in my view, certainly when driven by a *Statement*. A curious thing is the way that this amplifier combo alters perceptions and preconceptions. With the use of this 'budget' Naim speaker cable, and as this amplifier ran in, we began to hear more depth and clarity, more ambience, spaciousness and acoustic decay, plus more low level detail than several costly pre-/power amplifier combinations when used with some £35,000 worth of well regarded interconnect and speaker cable. We felt that the still improving *Statement* combo was delivering so much musical information that it was demolishing our preconceptions regarding the performance limits for the rest of the system components, even the speaker cable. Should a new reference level speaker cable emerge, a *Statement* user may anticipate a further improvement in sound quality over that which we have experienced.

It's some time since I last played Sheffield Labs' 1983 Doug Sax engineered *James Newton Howard and Friends*. Certainly a showpiece at the time, its clarity, accurate timbre and superb full frequency range dynamics probably helped sell many audio systems. Playing a CD file on the server from the *XRCD* version (uploaded via *UnitiServe*), and replayed over the CAT 7 network using an *NDS/555DR* (recently updated to handle DSD), the sound quality was absolutely spectacular, as if on the very first hearing.

Also when the *NDS* was given this current software update we were able to closely compare the ‘before’ and ‘after’ sound quality for PCM material using the *Statement*. (Reliable received opinion is that this revision does provide a subtle but worthwhile improvement for PCM programme, while the new DSD capability is certainly welcome.) However, through the *Statement* the improvement in *NDS* quality was considered more than subtle, with an unmistakable improvement in focus and clarity, still more natural timbres, combined with a noticeable and quite beguiling increase in those subtle nuances of vocal expression and swing. In our experience, this amplifier sounds as if our ears have just been cleaned out!

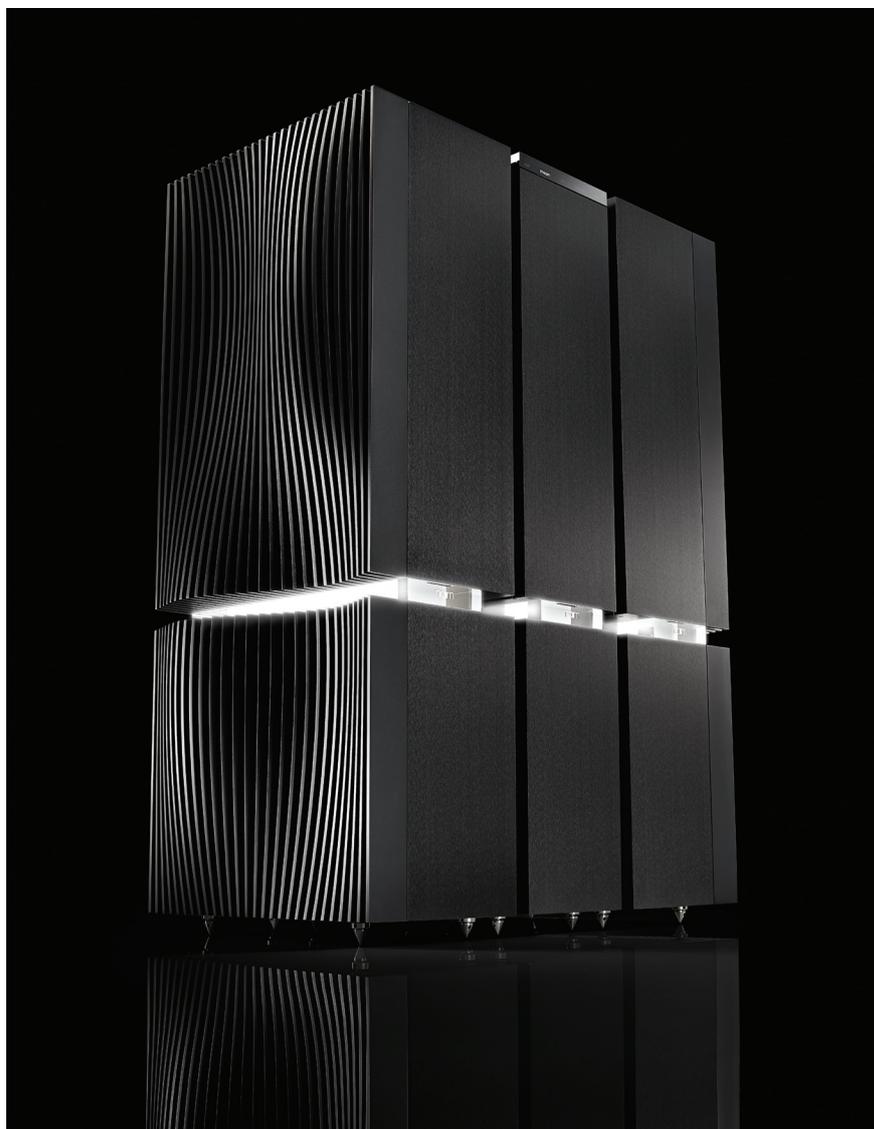
Interconnection

We were using Naim *Super Lumina* line level interconnect cables for the pre-to-power amplifier connections (the relevant XLR-terminated lead was included with the amplifier). Any substitution resulted in multiple and complex losses in sound quality, and I cannot recommend alternatives at this stage. With a Naim music source such as a *CD555* player or an *NDS*, the best connection was a DIN-to-DIN *Super Lumina*. No alternatives in our possession could beat it, and the DIN-to-DIN also beat the phono/RCA and balanced/XLR formats in this situation, presumably due to Naim’s optimised inter-unit grounding.

At the time of writing, the supply of *Super Lumina*s for *Superline/SuperCap-to-Statement* (4-pin 270deg DIN to 3/5-pin 180deg DIN) for vinyl replay looked unlikely to be available (due to a technical incompatibility with the phono stage). We employed ‘standard’ cables for LP replay and still loved the results, especially with original analogue material, which sounded, well, just very analogue. It was sweet and rich with great depth, great resolution of orchestral textures, top class timing, and delightful interplay between the ranks of musicians. More than ever one appreciates this aspect of musicality, for example in bringing out the wit and humour in Mozart’s crisp, economical scoring. Linn’s *LP12* has never sounded so good!

Powering Up

To explore the performance limits, the units may be powered up separately using the top panel buttons, omitting the (included) control link cables (which are otherwise daisy chained and synchronise power control to the three units). As might have been anticipated, our purist approach preferred the performance when the chain connections were omitted, delivering a subtle improvement



in all aspects of sound quality, but obtaining this degree of excellence is a delicate matter that needs careful system housekeeping. Only the purchaser can decide the balance between the convenience of coordinated start up and power down, and manual powering up that gives the very best possible sound.

A control link (*via* the simple included cable) may also be installed between the pre-amp and a suitable source. In our case an up-to-date *NDS/555DR* streamer was connected, and the volume level of the *NAC S1* pre-amp may be controlled via a suitable app. However, a small price is again paid in sound quality for that convenience, presumably since a parallel electrical path now operates between the signal source and the pre-amp. (Such is the critical fulcrum on which the overall sound quality of this amplifier combination is balanced.) For the very best sound quality, volume is best adjusted by

“It also clearly revealed that even somewhat worn original contemporary LP pressings are often punchier and closer to the sound of the original master than many re-cuts made decades later”

using the preamp’s infra red remote handset. (The pre-amp is RC5-coded, so many other handsets including earlier Naim examples will also be useable; I often used the remote handset which came with Naim’s music streamers.)

Based on experiments with numerous cable types and both digital and vinyl audio sources, using direct CD sources, streamed CD material, and hi-res material (including 24-bit/192kHz PCM and DSD), supplied by several means including the *NDS/555DR* streamer, we could not reliably attribute any particular characterisation or perceptible sound quality defect to the *Statement* amplifier combo itself. It invariably and truthfully revealed what we already knew about the recordings, the ancillaries and the signal sources. (I have previously experienced this behaviour before with well run in *Magico S5* and *Wilson Alexia* loudspeakers.)

Speaker Cables Revisited

Deciding whether or not to use Naim *Super Lumina* speaker cables will require some thought and maybe a dealer loan, and may also depend on the match to other system components. Consider a big installation where space allows the electronics to be arranged on the front wall using large, bass-capable speakers set 1.5m or more clear of the electronics. Here a shorter length of *Super Lumina* speaker cable could work very well, as previous experience has suggested that shorter cables can provide faster and tighter bass with better timing. However, for this review the system configuration followed the classic Naim topology, placing the entire electronic system to the side, and in my case required matched 8m lengths of *Super Lumina* speaker cables.

The sheer intrinsic speed and clarity of an optimised *Statement* has indicated that *Super Lumina* speaker cable is fine on all sonic parameters apart from supplying the last word in rhythm and timing. Not everyone may need that last word, and some loudspeakers may not be able to convey it so well either. Some might even choose *Super Lumina* cables on grounds of their other manifest (if rather un-Naim-like viewed in a historical context) virtues. Indeed, they sit very well in the broader audiophile market, and are also relatively keenly priced, so I can well envisage owners of other high end amplifiers seriously considering *Super Luminas* as a competitively priced cable upgrade. It is also usefully compact, unobtrusive and comes with impeccable technical parameters and terminations.

LP Replay

I have said little about LP replay but it deserves special mention. The view that amplifiers typically

add complex subtle distortions that affect our perception of signal sources, and also inherent variations in source quality, was particularly reinforced in the *Statement* sessions. Vinyl replay, via a Naim *Superline/SuperCap* combo and Koetsu *Urushi Vermilion*, was illuminating because the familiar and inherent signatures of these components (and indeed that of the vinyl disc and player combination) were quite plain, but also somehow free of adornment. Surface noise was low yet treble sounds were nicely illuminated with near pin-point detail. Theme and counterpoint was brought out really well on many familiar classical works, while rock music vocals were more intelligible and articulate than before, and it proved revealing without being too demanding. The virtues of the Lyra *Delos* moving-coil cartridge (Vol9 No2) were beautifully illustrated by the *Statement*, which somehow brought out the best in it.

Classic live albums like Little Feat’s 1977 *Waiting for Columbus* were rendered with excellent clarity, and the memorably complex rhythm syncopation achieved a level of sophistication and precision not previously experienced. Even with worn recordings there seemed to be more music and pleasure, with less noise and distortion. It clearly revealed the different character of digital and analogue LP mastering, the pure analogue sounding more flowing and relaxed, as it always has. It also clearly revealed that even somewhat worn original contemporary LP pressings are often punchier and closer to the sound of the original master than many re-cuts made decades later, ironically and presumably because even a part-worn vinyl pressing has weathered the years better than the magnetic tape original. This should not be seen as an endorsement for analogue LP over other formats, rather to note that the *Statement* seems determined to make the best of whatever musical diet it is fed.

Final Evolution

After around eight or nine weeks use in my system (some ten weeks after manufacture and commissioning), it began to change again. Low level detail improved from ‘very good’ to ‘excellent’, but with an additional quite unexpected extra too. The amplifier began to deliver immense image depth, with layer upon layer of reverberation and far image definition and scale, like a concert hall soundstage had been added to the front wall of my listening room.

And this was not at all a sweet and floating sort of ambience; rather it was imbued with fine detail, and was founded on a close, coherent association with the primary front stage sounds. This massive ambience

greatly deepened the perceived soundstage, increased the subjective dynamics, and expanded the sense of scale. With eyes closed it could be quite unnerving at times, so surprising and encompassing was this huge projected aural illusion, which was also associated with a blindingly obvious transparency that was audible across the whole frequency range.

Conversely, dry recordings were super dry with no ringing or emphasis, no added colour. Very soon I was being taught what was really on my recordings, and could close my eyes and sail away into amazing aural soundscapes. Naturally an amplifier combo at this highly elevated price point had better deliver or it would have been an all round embarrassment, but none of us had expected quite this very high level of sheer musicality and transparency.

Around this time there were other developments too. No slouch from the beginning, the bass began to show an almost menacing power, and an ability to thunder and thump while generating a realistically lively percussive quality. On the right material, and towards full power, it could be like being punched in the chest. This amplifier was getting physical. We must acknowledge that it is truly powerful, and that up to 2kW of peak programme power per channel in a domestic room will always be an experience, but even when cranked up it did not harden or shout. In fact my listeners and myself were able to explore the present dynamic limits of our hearing. Somewhat to our surprise, previously imagined limits had in fact been historically defined by lesser equipment, since the *Statement* could be played that much louder without causing aural limiting or fatigue. In one recent session we had listened for some six hours with hardly a break, and would have happily continued if supper had not been served.

I must point out that we were hearing something new: a soundstage which was highly focused and layered and which sounded stable, no matter how complex the music. My engineer's instincts told me that this was the behaviour of an amplifier with exceedingly low modulation noise, both uncorrelated and correlated (the latter including harmonic and intermodulation distortions). The electrical noise floor seems to remain very low no matter what the amplifier is called upon to do, which means that distortions which can track the signal and modify the tonal colour are virtually absent. Likewise, higher order distortions and noise are also held very low, so they cannot obstruct the low level information that helps to define the impression of space, depth and ambience. Alongside that superb ambience retrieval there is something else: the massive scale of the reproduced soundstage also seems to deliver superior dynamics, where the contrasts between loud and soft are crystal clear.

Mr Bassman

This amplifier plays tunes everywhere in the frequency range, but especially so in the bass, certainly in comparison with much of the competition. Texture and pitch, speed and slap, thundering yet tuneful low frequency dynamics, are all in its gift. With powerful well damped sealed-box loudspeakers, the bass speed and attack was revelatory and very upbeat.

I play a lot of *Statement*, where an unamplified double bass has a key role in underpinning performances, but is nearly always rendered rather formless, showing attack when required, but failing to reveal the subtle fingering and clear pitched tune playing and delicate strumming qualities which are so readily heard live. Except with the *Statement*, where acoustic bass sounds quite extraordinary: dynamic, crisp, tuneful, upbeat, and characterful, readily revealing the virtuosity of the musicians attacking the strings. I can well imagine that some purchasers may well acquire a *Statement* for this quality alone, so well does this behaviour connect with both our perception and emotional appreciation.

This review must end somewhere, and the *Statement* is scheduled to leave in a few days, yet it continues to improve. Nevertheless, this final and contentious topic must be addressed.

Scoring the Statement

For this review to reach a final conclusion, being squeezed between a rock and a hard place comes to mind. I have historically (to some readers, notoriously) stepped beyond the usual scoring limit, instead adopting an open-ended percentage-based scale which goes on growing (1). Setting the scene, a score in the 50s is not uncommon for audiophile amplifiers, and is very satisfactory; 100 is on the way to internationally accepted standards for superior fidelity; 150 – 200 gets to something quite special, including worthwhile rhythm and timing. For satisfying musical involvement at the audiophile level, top class references historically chase 200 marks, and just a few designs are better still.

So where does Naim's *Statement* combo lie? Over 300, over 400 points? Judging by the amazingly musical way this combination sounds, and is still improving, we must invite an overall sound quality rating between 400 and 475, provided that it is properly installed (mains supply and cabling, connections, placement, and system tuning).

Conclusions

An unmissable *tour de force* at the present state of the art, the *Statement* pre-/power amplifier combination simply and effectively delivers what most others have only promised.



1: Decades of listening tests covering an average of 10 amplifiers a year; each with specific numerically annotated listening sessions of around 5 per assessment.