



XS all areas for just £2k

Naim introduces its 'entry-level' network audio player, but there is nothing 'entry-level', however, about its performance, says **Malcolm Steward**

The ND5 XS is Naim's second network audio player and its first to offer native streaming of 24-bit/192 kHz sources. It follows the lauded and more expensive (£2,995) NDX (HFC 345) that arrived in February, this year. It differs from its forerunner, though, in being built into the attractive, slim-line XS series case rather than the taller Classic series enclosure, but is similar in being performance upgradeable.

Upgrade options currently available include the XPS or PS 555 power supplies and the Naim DAC. We're told that a matching low-profile power supply will be available next year, as well.

In terms of technology, the ND5 XS draws significantly on the established and Naim DAC (HFC 328). It uses the same innovative SHARC 40-bit DSP-based buffering with fixed clocks technology, along with 16-times oversampling and Naim's proprietary low generated noise, digital filtering

algorithms. The ND5 XS's 16-times oversampling mode DAC is the Burr-Brown PCM1791A. This runs at a maximum sample rate of 768 kHz and can handle UPnP signals at up to 32-bit, floating-point, 192 kHz sample rates.

Naim's choice

Like its big brother, the NDX, the ND5 XS adds far more to a system than just streaming. It can also be a digital input expander through offering three S/PDIF digital inputs to support digital connection of computers, set top boxes and CD players. This can be regarded as a 'free' upgrade if your CD player will benefit from an external DAC and few will have on-board DACs anywhere near as sophisticated or as painstakingly implemented as that in the ND5 XS.

Furthermore, the player provides access to internet radio, supported by the vTuner. five-star, full service. This provides useful facilities and

DETAILS

- PRODUCT:** Naim ND5 XS
- ORIGIN:** UK
- TYPE:** Network audio player
- WEIGHT:** 6.5kg
- DIMENSIONS:** (WxHxD) 430x70x310mm
- FEATURES:**
 - Apple authenticated iPod connectivity
 - Playback from USB memory sticks
 - Streams 24-bit/192kHz sources natively
 - Internet radio with V-tuner facility
 - Optional FM/DAB radio module
- DISTRIBUTOR:** Naim Audio
- CONTACT:** 01722 426600
- WEBSITE:** naimaudio.com

organisational abilities including access to 'Naim's Choice' higher-quality radio streams, which include the 320kHz feeds from Radio Paradise and AVROKlassiek. There is also an optional FM/DAB module that lets users add terrestrial radio capabilities to the unit if they so wish.

The fascia of the unit is elegantly simple and features a single USB port, an OLED display and a matrix of nine control/navigation buttons. Naturally, though, these are not the sole means of controlling the device. It comes with a remote control handset and for iPod Touch, iPad, and iPhone users there is the free n-Stream app, which we consider the easiest way to select the source and music you want to hear.

The ND5 XS streams and plays WAV, FLAC, AIFF, AAC, WMA, Ogg Vorbis and MP3 files, either through its UPnP connectivity, or from a memory stick plugged into its USB port. The latter can also be used to connect an iPod or equivalent. Being Apple Authenticated, the ND5 XS will extract a pure digital signal from the iPod or iPhone to enable optimum performance from the device.

Finally, fans of classical music and progressive rock will be pleased to hear that the ND5 XS offers true gapless playback of all formats.

Fine adjustments

The build quality here is typical of Naim Audio: the company obsesses over little details that clearly strike competing manufacturers as too insignificant to concern themselves with. However, the cumulative effect



of all that fanatical attention to detail gives the ND5 XS a finesse that eludes its competitors. The sort of detail we're discussing here is outwardly inconsequential: for example, exactly where and how the cable ties are fitted to a wiring loom; or the length and orientation of a wire between circuit boards. In isolation, these probably makes the tiniest of tiny differences, but include another dozen similar fine adjustments and the cumulative difference becomes far more significant and the result easily discernible.

In order to keep noise levels to an absolute minimum, the ND5 XS features galvanic isolation between sections of the circuitry. The power supplies for each section of the signal path are also independent. Four separate secondary windings feed

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four separate power supplies for complete isolation. These separate supplies provide part of the electrical isolation of the digital DSP section from the DAC chips and analogue circuits. The reservoir capacitors are larger than would typically be used to reduce the unregulated voltage noise and provide increased short-term current capability. Voltage supplies to many of the digital circuits are double- and, in some cases, triple-regulated to reduce noise further. When an external power supply is employed the supply

becomes quadruple-regulated. It also provides a significantly larger toroidal transformer and larger reservoir capacitors to increase the noise reduction.

Sound XS

We auditioned the ND5 XS mainly through a Naim SUPERNAIT integrated amplifier/Hi-Cap power supply combination and a pair of NEAT Acoustics Ultimatum XLS loudspeakers. The electronics were on Quadraspire Sunoko Vent supports; the speakers were on their own dedicated stands; while the loudspeaker cabling was TelluriumQ Ultra Black. It was also auditioned through an active, tri-amped, Naim DBL system.

The sound of the ND5 XS immediately makes one smile: the



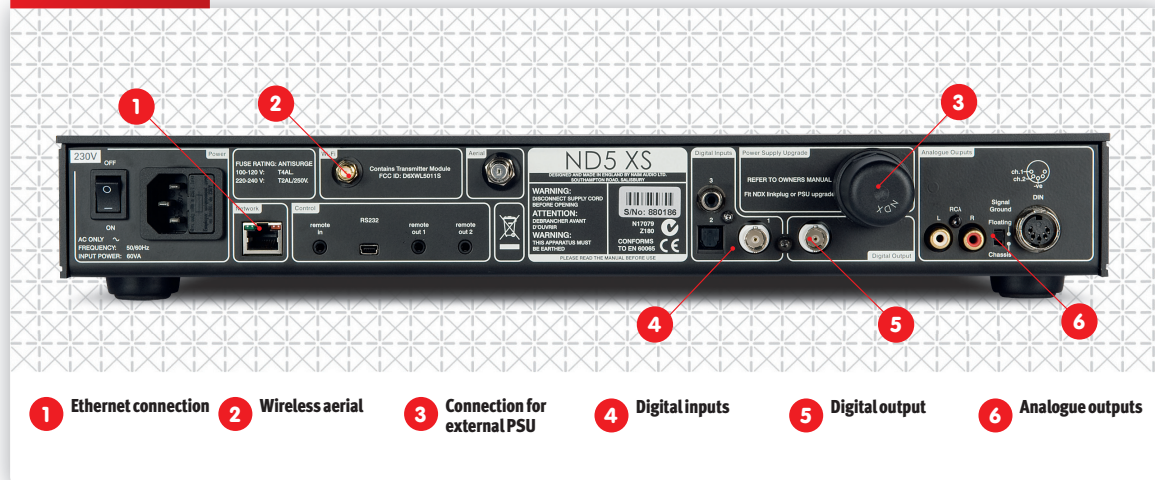
NAIM EQUIPMENT focuses primarily on musical performance. That is the be-all-and-end-all of its products, even if in recent years the aesthetics and user convenience elements have been given greater consideration than before.

The appearance of Naim's electronics has moved on quite a way since the 'Chrome Bumper' and 'Olive' eras. In this respect, though, one still cannot expect the overt styling flair of, say, Yamaha and the NP-S2000, another fine-sounding, if not as comprehensively equipped streamer.

One can hardly also expect the low prices of a mainstream product such as the Marantz NA7004, which turns in a credible performance and an excellent array of facilities, including Apple Airplay, for around £600.

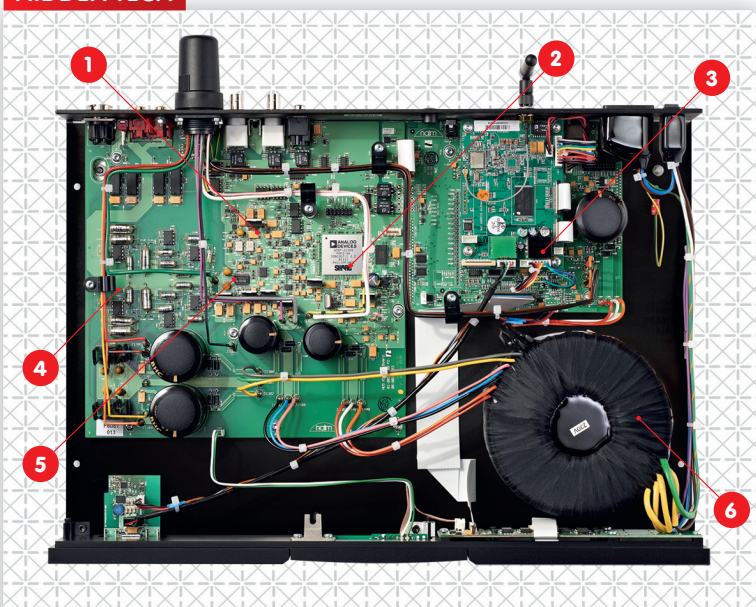
Regardless of its utilitarian build, the performance of the Naim tends to leave its fancier competitors very much in second place.

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Ethernet connection
- 2 Wireless aerial
- 3 Connection for external PSU
- 4 Digital inputs
- 5 Digital output
- 6 Analogue outputs

HIDDEN TECH



- 1 Low jitter clock
- 2 DSP
- 3 ARM9 uController
- 4 Analogue filter
- 5 DAC
- 6 Large toroidal transformer

SYSTEM BUILDING

NAIM EXPECTS the ND5 XS primarily to appear in systems that include other XS range components, as these are designed to be especially synergistic and do, in fact, work together exceedingly well. So you will probably find it being demonstrated by retailers with a CD5 XS CD player, NAIT XS or NAC152 XS/NAP155 XS amplifier, a FraimLite support system and, perhaps, the Ovator S400 loudspeakers in an all-Naim set-up. The CD5 XS can usefully benefit, of course, from the digital inputs on the ND5 XS.

The ND5 XS is not only designed to deliver its best performance in all-Naim XS systems: we found it worked well and sounded balanced and highly informative with a Creek 5350 amplifier and NEAT Petite SX speakers. It also worked flawlessly in a revealing, fully active system using Naim reference quality Classic components and DBL loudspeakers.

Cat Stevens' 1971 album, *Teaser and the Firecat*: the ND5 XS revealed both strikingly dramatic and subtle dynamic contrasts in the music that came as something of a delightful surprise. It should not have surprised anyone, however, after the Naim's spell-binding presentation of a 24-bit/96kHz vinyl rip of Art Pepper's 1957 album, *Meets the Rhythm Section*. This was a genuine 'musicians in the room with you' experience. The instrumental timbre was so credible and vivid, and the playing so vital and animated, there was no other way to describe the sheer realism that we experienced.

The final challenge was to see how well the ND5 XS fared with the *bête noire* of most music collections, country music... albeit the modern variety of artists such as Shawn Colvin. The portrayal of her voice, and those of other singers, was superb, and packed with expression and emotion.

Close to sublime

The performance of the ND5 XS is not far short of sublime and easily justifies its comparatively modest – in the scheme of things – price. It even holds its head high and exposes no weaknesses in the company of more expensive Classic components, which is high praise in itself.

Its ability to cope with 24-bit/192kHz streams future-proofs it for some considerable time and allows the lovers of hi-res to pursue their studio-master fix. The n-Stream app adds all the convenience to the package for which one could ask.

In an appropriate system, the way the ND5 XS makes music simply makes you feel good to be alive. It must be said that the £2,995 NDX has the edge over the ND5XS in sound quality terms, but most people will find that their performances are very close: there are certainly no glaring night and day differences. ●

presentation is more than just hi-fi, it is communication at its most intimate and telling. Rather than analyse the sound, one's instant reaction is to sit back, relax and simply enjoy the music. And that is regardless of whether one is listening to a baroque guitar quietly strumming the works of Fernando Sor or the challenging *musique concrète* of Edgard Varèse being played with vim and vigour by a full orchestra. Either way, the word *finesse* springs instantly to mind: the music sounds so natural and unforced with no 'mechanical' or 'electronic' overtones intruding on your enjoyment.

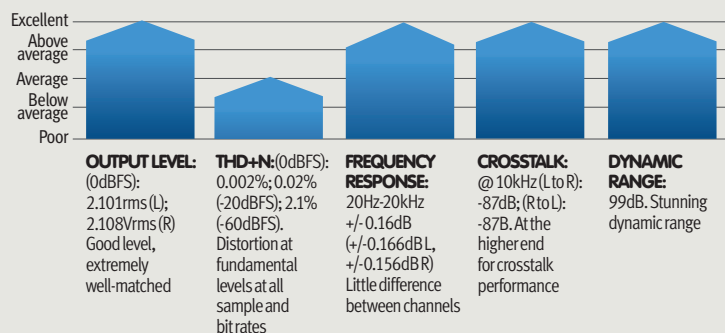
Similarly, the sound is clean, extended at both frequency extremes, and free from any obvious coloration or added emphasis. Instrumentation

and voices on the 24-bit/96kHz rip of the eponymous Buena Vista Social Club album are pure and gloriously expressive, with a characteristically persistent but relaxed, Cuban beat. The top end is open and clear while the low frequencies have impressive weight and are sufficiently crisply defined to be rhythmically genuinely propulsive. Piano, that most telling of instruments, has weight, definition and absolutely secure, stable pitch, along with excellent transients and note shape.

The system produced excellent sound-staging, exhibiting incredibly accurately focused stereo images on Cassandra Wilson's album, *Belly of the Sun*. The next surprise came when we played *Moonshadow* from

TECH LABS

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** We love the musical integrity and overall coherence of the design

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** There is honestly little to dislike in this competitive package

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WESAY:** A 'starter' product, its performance comes close to that of a reference-level streamer

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL

