Star attraction

David Price goes star gazing as he samples Naim’s stellar Uniti streaming system with built-in amplifier and CD playback

It’s been fascinating watching Naim Audio evolve into the company it is today. It seems to have achieved the impossible, namely keeping many of its minimalist fans born and raised on two-channel separates while successfully engaging a new audience that wants stylish, versatile, easy-to-use systems. It has trodden a very careful path where neither type of buyer is seen as mutually exclusive, and indeed there’s some symbiosis between the two. Naim still makes distinctive and capable traditional separates hi-fi, but now also makes products such as the Uniti Star you see before you. It’s a fascinating offering inasmuch as – rather like a high-end Jaguar, Porsche or Bentley SUV – it infuses more than a whiff of its brand’s traditional values into a new and different platform. Put simply, this product is ‘Naim without tears’ as it crams traditional Naim purist thinking into just one box. Yet looked another way, you could also say it’s a ‘style system without tears’, because it offers all the functionality of trendy products from lesser manufacturers, but with Naim DNA to deliver serious sound. Ultimately, though, it doesn’t matter what you call it or how you frame it; the real question is how good is it at the all-important task of making music with the minimum of fuss?

As you take it out of the box, you’re immediately struck by its weight. Look closer and you’ll admire its finely textured, brushed aluminium finish and large rotary controller. Power it up and the Naim logo glows white as the main control lights up. The front-mounted LCD screen fires up with a full-colour splash graphic and suddenly you get a sense that it’s actually a rather exotic consumer electronics product. After 15 seconds, the menu screen appears. Here you discover that it can play your networked music, analogue or digital inputs, CD and internet radio or streaming services. Pair the fancy backlit remote control, and you can configure the wi-fi, whereupon the Uniti Star really springs into action. Download the excellent Naim app (iOS or Android) and you have full control of its functions. The facia-mounted slot loading CD drive lets...
you play or rip your own compact discs (to an external drive; none is fitted inside), and it can play music via its front-mounted USB socket. There’s full UPnP streaming (wired or wireless) and aptX Bluetooth functionality too. It has Chromecast and Apple’s AirPlay built-in, and if you’re an old-school radio listener, you can specify the optional (£150) FM/AM radio module.

Inside, it’s jam-packed with circuitry, yet extremely neatly laid out. The designers chose to retain a Class AB power amplifier section (rather than a more compact Class D) derived from the Supernait and it offers a claimed 70W RMS per channel into 8ohm.

The first point of contact with the Uniti Star is its large top-mounted rotary controller, which has a lovely action; the design is taken from the high-end NAC 272 (£7,400). The casework feels extremely solid and is very well finished, but – for better or for worse – doesn’t quite have that silky smooth texture that you would expect from a Japanese design. The extruded aluminium heatsinks are neatly integrated into the overall proportions of the product. The glass cover for the LC display is classy; the screen is easy to read from middle distance, but doesn’t have the contrast that we’re used to from OLEDs. The bi-directional backchannel remote control is fully leafy of plastic, which also lets the side down slightly. The disc drive is reasonably quiet, but a little noisier than hoped and oddly sometimes the display asks me if I would like to play the CD when a disc is already in the process of playing.

Sound quality

Sonically, no one will ever find the Uniti Star bland. It’s a positive and purposeful performer that doesn’t need to do any soul-searching before it goes out to bat. You can play the most analytically easy listening tracks and still this system cuts right to the musical chase. Suddenly you can feel the music’s progression, its expressiveness and sense of drama. There’s no chance of you being able to sit a track out, half asleep on the sofa as it plays.

Instead this new Naim grabs things by the scruff of the neck and shakes hard. Those wanting a smooth system to relax with will be better off with a whiskey and water bed before should look elsewhere – this is the sort of sound that makes you want to crack open a can and do an all-nighter.

Kicking off with the CD player, the Uniti Star makes Marillion’s Keylight into a big, bombastic stadium rocks. So many in-all systems seem to turn it into Smooth Radio material, but here it fizzes with power and pianissimo. It has a wonderful way of conveying the song’s emotional narrative via the music’s phrasing: it’s a highly propulsive listen that really gets the feet tapping. It sounds unlike other single-boxers, imparting an urgency and intensity to the sound that’s quite unexpected from a product like this.

Indeed, it makes all types of music memorable, from Simon and Garfunkel’s soft and lifting Bookends to Steve Hacker’s aptly titled Voyage Of The Acoustic. It has a certain textual warmth and fullness to the sound that’s pleasingly euphonious if not strictly neutral. The Naim doesn’t stray too far off the beaten track here, but does present its own distinctive reading of a recording, which gives a full and firm upper bass to pretty much everything you load, along with a warmish midband and crisp treble. It’s a most agreeable character, but tends to infuse the process of playing.

The Uniti Star’s brain is a highly powerful 40-bit SHARC Digital Signal Processing chip, which performs faster than 2 Terabyte calculations per second and comes with extra office memory to make the unit operate as smoothly as possible. It works in conjunction with Naim’s brand new streaming platform, which is described by the manufacturer to be the result of “significant investment in time and people within our audio laboratory.” Every component and material was put under the microscope, questioned, refined or replaced with something of the best of its type that I have tried.

The Uniti Star is sleekly profiled and is an optimum 40cm wide but 400mm (16”) deep. It’s incredibly light and performs superbly on test. There’s an internal routing and lots of separate audio paths, which make the DAC and analogue filters together to further push sound quality, to allow new services and make operation slick and simple to use. For the best sound, we have carefully suppressed all the digital noise inside the box by holistic design. We looked at physical separation of the digital and analogue PCBs, balanced digital audio for internal routing and lots of separate power supplies.

The Burr Brown PCM1791A DAC is run with the internal Upsampling platform by our proprietary file integer oversampling algorithm running on a 16-bit processor. This allows us to design the digital and analogue filters together to form one coherent filter and run the DAC at either 705 kHz or 768 kHz depending on incoming sample rate. This gives great sound whatever file you’re streaming. We have used an UK DAC6 we can show album artwork, which we couldn’t do with an OLED.

Q&A

Steve Selts
Electrical design director, Naim Audio

DP: What type of person is the Uniti Star aimed at?
SS: Customers who demand maximum sound quality with the minimum fuss and appreciate fanatical engineering and design. The world is so complex and we all want more time for the finer things in life. Uniti is designed to give separates sound quality in a perfectly formed package.

Do you think that this marks a change of strategy for Naim?
Our primary goal is to design hi-fi to recreate the emotion of a live performance; it’s what we enjoy and our customers enjoy. As the decades change the strategy doesn’t, but the way we package reflects modern society – we’re no longer moving away from separates.
Separate box is where we get our inspiration, our new ideas, our new technology. But, wow, it’s amazing what we can do in one-box with modern design tools, a huge team and in fewer years to develop the new range!

Can you tell us a bit more about the new streaming platform?
It’s internal digital filter bypassed by our proprietary file integer oversampling algorithm running on a 16-bit processor. This allows us to design the digital and analogue filters together to form one coherent filter and run the DAC at either 705 kHz or 768 kHz depending on incoming sample rate. This gives great sound whatever file you’re streaming. We have used an UK DAC6 we can show album artwork, which we couldn’t do with an OLED.

Conclusion

It’s practically impossible to find fault with Naim’s new Uniti Star at the price; it is fast, powerful and gripping with oodles of emotion and a pleasingly expressive timbre. True, it doesn’t quite have the forensic detail resolution of an equivalently priced system made up of separate components, but it is still there nonetheless. Stellar stuff, but where it really shines is the way it manages to bring everything together so effortlessly in one compact, stylish case.

OVERALL

We SAY: Brilliantly capable and versatile one-box music system

ENGLAND

ENGAGING

ENGAGING

EXTENSIVE

EFFECTIVE

AND

COMPLETE

DELIGHTFUL

OCCASIONAL

QUALITY

SEPARATE

WE SAY: Brilliantly capable and versatile one-box music system

Score: 84/100