

# Star attraction

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



## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Naim Uniti Star

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
One-box system

**WEIGHT**  
13kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
432 x 95 x 265mm

**FEATURES**

- CD; UPnP streaming; aptX Bluetooth; AirPlay
- 24-bit/384kHz and DSD128-capable DAC
- Claimed power output: 2x 70W RMS (Bohm)
- Digital inputs: 2x coaxial; 2x optical; 1x USB-A; 1x HDMI
- Analogue inputs: 1x RCA; 1x DIN
- Chromecast support; integrated Spotify and Tidal streaming

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Naim Audio Ltd.

**TELEPHONE**  
01722 426600

**WEBSITE**  
naimaudio.com

**I**t'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

## The Naim Uniti Star grabs things by the scruff of the neck and shakes hard

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 fascia-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/DAB 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

### A full and firm upper bass along with a warmish midband and crisp treble

70W RMS per channel into 8ohm. Factor in the large toroidal transformer, and you could say it's an exercise in packaging the likes of which we haven't seen since the original Mini. Yet at the same time there is real audiophile attention to detail; for example, the analogue and digital circuit boards are carefully separated, and optical isolators are used too. Even the mains plug is mechanically isolated, preventing ground or rear wall-borne vibration feeding into the unit.

The SATA-connected TEAC optical drive is run with a true 'many read' algorithm and memory buffer. The Burr-Brown PCM1791A DAC plays lossless PCM music files in WAV, FLAC, AIFF and ALAC formats, as well as lossy MP3, AAC and Ogg Vorbis, and supports up to DSD128 playback – although the internal disc drive won't play SACDs. There's a bespoke headphone amplifier with its own

fascia-mounted 3.5mm jack. Antennae for both wi-fi and Bluetooth are inside and it's the latest type, supporting both 2.4 and 5GHz, and performs superbly on test. There are twin optical digital inputs (up to 24-bit/96kHz), two coaxials (24-bit/192kHz), BNC, USB Type-A, HDMI ARC and two analogue inputs (stereo RCAs and DIN).

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-N 272 (HFC 400). The casework feels extremely solid and is 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 nicely 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 backlit remote control is made of plastic, which also lets the side down slightly. The disc drive is reasonably fast, 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 anodyne of easy listening tracks and still this system cuts right to the musical chase. Suddenly you can feel the music's phrasing, 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.



**HOW IT COMPARES**  
Musical Fidelity's Encore 225 (HFC 422) is a similarly compact streaming music system with disc functionality for £4,399. It beats the Naim in terms of power, and has an equally wide range of inputs and functionality – with a 1TB hard drive built in (that's upgradeable later) for ripping up to 2,500 CDs. It has a better hi-res display and very friendly, easy to use ergonomics. Sonically it's a bit softer and warmer than the Uniti Star; there's oodles of power, but it is dispensed in a slightly more genteel manner. Fine detailing, air and space, plus a pleasing tonality make it especially enjoyable with classical music.

Instead this new Naim grabs things by the scruff of the neck and shakes hard. Those wanting a smooth system to relax with, as they sip a whiskey and water before bed 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 *Kayleigh* into a big, bombastic stadium rocker. So many all-in-one systems seem to turn it into Smooth Radio material, but here it fizzles with power and pizzazz. It has a wonderful way of conveying the song's emotional intensity 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 lilting *Bookends* to Steve Hackett's spikier *Voyage Of The Acolyte*. It has a certain tonal warmth and fullness to the sound that's pleasingly euphonic 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 play, along with a warmish midband and crisp treble. It's a most agreeable character, but tends to infuse into everything that's played, whatever the original recording sounds like. Suddenly Isaac Hayes' lush *Soulsville* doesn't seem that different in tonality to The Smiths' chilly *The Queen Is Dead*. This is where Naim separates tend to do better, offering up greater insight and more neutrality.

Led Zeppelin's *Rain Song* at 24/96, streamed via my Western Digital UPnP NAS drive, is a joy. It proves quick to access – via the app – and glitch-free to play back. Sonically it is superb, really lifting the bar. I love the lustre of the



### STAR SYSTEM

The Uniti Star's brain is a highly powerful 40-bit SHARC Digital Signal Processing chip, which performs no less than 2.7 billion calculations per second and comes with extra buffer 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 laboratories, where every component and material was put under the microscope, questioned, refined or replaced with new custom parts at every stage'. It has been built to be as

future proof as possible, being easily software upgradeable should new formats come along or functionality be needed further down the line. Another key thing that was built into the Uniti Star from the word go is Multiroom and Party Mode. With two or more Uniti products on your home network, you can stream the same music in up to five rooms, even analogue sources, or different music can be played in different zones. This is all controllable via the Naim app, which works on both iOS and Android smartphones and tablets, and is one of the best of its type that I have tried.

cymbals and piano, and the strong but grainy lead vocal. Once again, the Uniti Star strings all the different musicians and layers of sound together in a brilliantly syncopated way. The energy and raw emotion are a delight, and I find myself focusing on the song itself rather than the quality of the recording – just as it should be.

Across all inputs it excels itself, given its modest price and compact size. The DAC is a really classy affair and sings with an external CD transport or Blu-ray player. With Crosby, Stills and Nash's *Wooden Ships*, I am struck by its ability to throw the soundstage deep into the listening room, running wide from left to right. At the same time it is fulsome, gutsy and tracks dynamics brilliantly. The analogue inputs are very strong too, if not quite so direct and engaging. Although limited, even Bluetooth makes listening fun.

### Conclusion

It is practically impossible to find fault with Naim's new Uniti Star at the price; it is fast, powerful and grippy

with oodles of emotion and a pleasingly expressive tonality. 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 or thereabouts. Stellar stuff, but where it really shines is the way that it manages to bring everything together so effortlessly in one compact, stylish case ●

### Hi-Fi Choice

#### OUR VERDICT

##### SOUND QUALITY



**LIKE:** Engaging musical sound; flexibility; build and style; completeness

##### VALUE FOR MONEY



**DISLIKE:** Occasional CD drive glitches

##### BUILD QUALITY



**WESAY:** Brilliantly capable and versatile one-box music system

##### FEATURES



##### OVERALL



### CONNECTIONS



- 1 Loudspeaker outputs
- 2 Ethernet port
- 3 2x optical digital inputs
- 4 2x coaxial digital inputs
- 5 Preamp output
- 6 5-pin DIN input

### Q&A

#### Steve Sells

Electronic 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 are steadfastly not moving away from separates. Separates hi-fi 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 over three years to develop the new range!

#### Can you tell us a bit more about the new streaming platform?

A team of 25 engineers developed it 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 digital filter bypassed by our proprietary 16x integer oversampling algorithm running on a SHARC DSP. This allows us to design the digital and analogue filters together to form one coherent filter and run the DAC at either 705.6kHz or 768kHz depending on incoming sample rate. This gives great sound whatever file you're streaming. We have used an LC display so we can show album artwork, which we couldn't do with an OLED.