

# Future Perfect

**Ed Selley** finds out if high-end sound can really go hand in hand with convenience

**T**here is a curiously durable notion that doing something – be it anything from cookery to sports cars – properly requires a little sacrifice. For an object to perform a role perfectly, it cannot do anything else at the same time or make any concessions to user friendliness in the pursuit of absolute performance. The industry has at times taken this idea and run with it. Minimalism, confusing controls and equipment that weighs enough to exert its own gravitational pull has been the order of the day.

The system you see here doesn't abandon all of these long-held principals – I would counsel against

trying to lift a Focal Sopra No2 alone for starters – but it does take much of this accepted wisdom and ignore significant chunks of it. The electronics carry out an impressive range of functions and do so with a level of convenience that some lifestyle setups can't match. The speakers are a dizzying combination of science and engineering that also happen to be remarkably room and positioning friendly.

In the case of Naim, we should not be too surprised. The company's progression from purveyor of starkly minimalist boxes that performed a single role to their current portfolio, has been comparatively brief but ▶

## COMPONENTS

### NAIM NAC-N 272 STREAMING PREAMP £3,300

The 272 combines Naim's UPnP streaming technology with an analogue preamp and a selection of analogue and digital inputs. As well as network audio, Tidal and Spotify's streaming services are also supported.

### NAIM NAP 250 DR POWERAMP £3,500

A long-standing classic of the Naim range, the 250 DR is an 80W power amplifier and in latest 'DR' form takes technology from the flagship Statement series to achieve higher levels of performance.

### FOCAL SOPRA NO2 LOUDSPEAKER £9,600

The newest member of the Focal range bridges the gap between the Electra and flagship Utopia, but uses a range of new driver technologies to extract higher levels of performance.





impressively radical. The adoption of streaming, digital inputs and app control has been undertaken without losing the brand ethos, but even so, the first of the boxes you see here is still a bold piece of engineering.

This is because the NAC-N 272 is a startlingly multi-role product. This one box is a preamp, streamer, DAC and Bluetooth receiver. Do you want more? What about brilliantly sorted internet radio and the ability to access Spotify and Tidal directly? Still not convinced? The 272 does all this and still allows for the traditional Naim upgrade path of external power supplies to be employed to squeeze more performance out of it. This is all squeezed into Naim's classic casework without any visible sign of it bulging out of the top or bottom.

#### It's NAP time

As a result, it is the same size as the partnering NAP 250 DR power amp. Compared with the feature-laden 272, the 250 is a minimalist stalwart that traces its roots back to Naim's early years, but even here all is not as it seems. This latest iteration features the Discrete Regulator technology and NA009 power transistors from the flagship Statement pre/power amplifier in the pursuit of higher performance. The

result is still a 250 power amp, but one that is incrementally better than the one that came before.

By comparison, the Focal Sopra No2 is a rather more radical proposition. The latest range from the French speaker artisan bridges the gap between flagship Utopia and Electra ranges, but definitely has more of the Utopia about it. The cabinet, with its absence of parallel surfaces and incredibly dense front panel is made

### Naim's NAC-N 272 handles pretty much any format you're ever likely to own

in the same way as the Utopia is. The composite 'F-Sandwich' drivers and legendary Beryllium tweeter are employed too, but in the case of the Sopra additional features like a new tuned mass damper, infinite horn loading for the tweeter and a neutral inductance circuit mean that in many ways the Sopra is more advanced than its big brother.

It is – dare I say it – better looking too. The Sopra No2 could only be a Focal speaker with the angled cabinet and combination of flat and curved edges, but the softening of the lines

**Above left: The tweeter chamber of the Sopra is covered in a distinctive grille**

**Above centre: While the 272 boasts extensive connectivity, the 250 is simplicity itself**

**Above right: Clean lines on both products hide clever technology and sophisticated materials**

and features like the grille around the tweeter horn chamber look absolutely fantastic. The Sopra is unquestionably a big speaker, but it hides its mass rather well under a layer of sumptuous metallic paint. By comparison, the Naim duo is utterly understated, but that glowing front logo, immensely solid casework and those perfectly weighted buttons are still profoundly satisfying. Given the features and functionality, though, they are extremely compact and should present no trouble for even the most space-constrained owner.

#### Bring the noise

All very impressive, but let's get down to brass tacks; can a system that combines so much functionality into one device and that is so painless to use really deliver a compromise-free sound? The mighty *Children Of The Sun* by Dead Can Dance is as good a place as any to start listening and in seven minutes and 30 seconds it reveals a great deal about this system. First and perhaps inevitably, the sense of scale is outstanding. Even at low levels, the Sopra has a scale, impact and authority that is simply impossible to achieve from a smaller loudspeaker. Bass is a palpable thing with the Sopra. All the texture and depth you might reasonably expect is

there, but it is underpinned by proper impact that is felt rather than heard.

The Naim units play an important role in this too. There is a sense of grip and authority on display that is pure Naim. Everything starts and stops with a precision and control that is the trademark of the brand and it makes for an immediacy and excitement that is addictive. Even with pieces that don't depend on this timing and impact, the system has a deftness and agility in the way it flows that gives it effortless musicality.

#### Keeping it real

Beyond the bass, the rest of the frequency response is open, assured and phenomenally detailed, but it is the way that this system delivers the information that really sets it apart from the opposition. Every nuance and every last audible moment is there to be heard, but there is nothing forced or artificial about the process. You simply sit in front of a soundstage that is a living, breathing representation of the music – nothing more, nothing less. This effortless presentation allows the music to be the centre of attention. There is no recording that's too large, no arrangement so complex that this system doesn't have the measure of it sufficient to get the meaning within.



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If this all sounds a little... intense, you might want to consider that the real-world implications of living with this system are effectively nil. Naim's control app is slick, stable and beautifully intuitive. The NAC-N 272 handles pretty much any format you're ever likely to own and its stability on a network is effectively absolute. The time and effort Naim

### The Sopra hides its mass well under a layer of sumptuous metallic paint

has put into streamers is demonstrated by just how well sorted the 272 is.

The extra features are brilliant too. Switching from my NAS library to Tidal is again utterly painless and usually leads to an excellent couple of hours exclaiming: "wow, I haven't heard that in years!" before listening to something splendidly random. I'm not sure if the design teams at Focal or Naim voiced their products with *Hyperspeed* by the Drummatic Twins in mind, but the results are deeply and intoxicatingly wonderful. Being able to switch between music you own and streaming services so seamlessly is incredibly effective and

gives you a flexibility that is unusual in any equipment, let alone stuff that performs at this level. As you potter through the more curious corners of Tidal, you also begin to realise that although it is at times almost forensically detailed, the Naim/Focal pairing is impressively forgiving too.

#### A true masterpiece

And it is this astonishing real-world competence that makes this system so special. It delivers a level of performance that allows it to trade blows with anything you could assemble for the same price. The scale and accuracy and the scintillating speed it possesses is truly extraordinary and a testament to the heady combination of engineering prowess, exotic materials and careful assembly that has gone into it. That it asks nothing more of you than two mains sockets and an internet connection to deliver this and a host of other features that make it so easy to live with is the truly brilliant part. This system is a beautiful counterpoint to the claim we must suffer for the last percentage of performance and quality. What you see here is physical proof that brilliance need not be accompanied by inconvenience and it is a masterpiece in all senses of the word ●