

Naim Mu-so Qb system

by Alan Sircom

The Mu-so Qb was the audio buzz of CES, and not in the wrong way. Although many 'specialty audio' rooms at the show were frighteningly empty at times, Naim Audio's room was not one of them - there was a steady through-flow of visitors looking specifically at the new Mu-so Qb. Following in the footsteps of the Mu-so, this new, small, cube of sound is designed to reach a new set of music lovers.

In a way, this new device has the toughest job to do of all the products in the Naim line. On the one hand, it has to stand alone, inviting new listeners

to join the club. On the other hand, it has to be exciting enough to entice existing Naim users to add more rooms to the mix. On the, er, third hand, it needs to be the perfect introduction for people who want something a bit better than a Sonos Play (which is harder than it seems, it's a very good package at the price), and on the fourth hand it needs to do all that while being simple enough for almost ▶





▶ anyone to use, with or without aid from specialist retailers. All in a package better thought out than this Shiva-esque paragraph.

The original Mu-so works in part because it combines the elements that make good traditional audio in a more modern aspect: it's basically amps and speakers in a wooden cabinet. The size and complexity of the Mu-so Qb shape (it looks like an Olmec stone head under the grille) meant wood was out of the question at the price, so the cabinet is made from a tough glass-filled polymer. From the front there are two angled tweeters, two slightly less angled midrange units, one 'racetrack' bass unit, and two well-made passive radiators firing out to the sides. Independent 50W amplifiers drive both the tweeters and midrange drivers, while a single 100W device powers the bass. Naim could have gone for exotic DSP to create more of a stereophonic sound, but instead the company went for a less processed sound with a 'slightly-stereo' presentation. It uses the same 32-bit digital processing as the Mu-so, however.

Mu-so Qb's rear panel is a heatsink for the amplifier and digital audio circuitry, and it gives the device some weight, solidity, and surprising tactile advantages - you can't help putting your hand reassuringly on the heatsink when first installing it. Like its bigger brother, the Qb sits on an acrylic sheet that has three levels of illumination and a white Naim logo, and the top plate is given over to that super cool touch multiway controller/volume control dial.

The device is ludicrously easy to install, with one notable caveat. Take it out the box,

power it up, and play. That's it! OK, so you need a device to control the Mu-so Qb, and that means an iOS or Android phone or tablet, and Naim's own app. Nevertheless, once you installed the Naim app, the process needed to add a new Mu-so is unfeasibly 'light-switch' easy. The caveat is there is no display as such on the Mu-so Qb, just different coloured lights in set-up: if you live in a place of massively contended wireless internet, there's no obvious way to make sure your Mu-so Qb has glommed onto the right wireless router. In most cases, it will take you longer to take the Qb out of its box than it will to get it up and running.

There are a range of options, including display brightness, loudness, two alarm functions (it makes one hell of a clock radio), and the optimum installation configurator (as in, 'is it less than or more than 25cm from the wall!'). You can even get different colour moulded grilles for the Qb, and 'skin' your app to match.

Mu-so Qb - and for that matter, the original Mu-so - can play digital sources (wired through USB or optical digital, or wireless through AirPlay and Bluetooth), or stream digital audio through wired or Wi-Fi ethernet, whether local UPnP network streaming or from online streaming sources. The box comes with a voucher for a month's free Spotify Premium, and there's also a 90-day Tidal trial (both are fully integrated into Mu-so Qb's system). There is also a vTuner Internet radio service, and even a 3.5mm analogue input jack. Multiroom use is entirely possible (although currently there is no planned provision for turning the Qb into a master-slave stereo pair in one room) and just as easy to operate and install as that first Mu-so.

Technologically, then, Naim Audio's Mu-so Qb ticks all the boxes. But does it sound any good? In a nutshell, it sounds a lot better than you might expect. It does very well with voices: a day into using the Qb it became a part of the morning ritual, playing *The Today Programme* from BBC Radio 4's HD internet radio channel around the room at a 'shake out the sleep dust' level. And when it comes to music it's similarly fun, projecting a good sound around the listening room.

OK, let's be totally honest here, this is no high-end performer and in absolute terms there are a few undernourished strings when hearing the sound of open guitar chords, the sound is slightly boxy and where the Mu-so was bass-heavy, if anything this errs on the side of upper bass warmth and not much else. But this is coming straight after a system where one single power cord cost almost 23x as much as the Mu-so, and the loudspeakers have about eight times the cabinet volume. ▶



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▶ This is the fairly typical ass-backwards way we audiophiles have of looking at stuff. Compare it to the best possible and forget about context. Coming back down to earth then, and looking at the Qb for what it does, where it does it, and the price it does it for, the ‘Qb’ in Mu-so Qb clearly stands for ‘Quite brilliant’. It’s music stripped down of all that pretentious nonsense that good audio can sometimes add, and it’s got that intrinsic fun factor that a good clock radio has, only a lot, lot bigger sounding. Whether it’s the effortlessness of the set-up, that it looks pretty damn good, the fact it doesn’t overdrive the room, the sheer clean-ness of the overall sound, or just the fact everything works together in a package that’s about the size of a teapot doesn’t ultimately matter.

It’s all about context here, and there are some very big hitters aggressively priced below the Mu-so Qb that the Naim box has to address head-on if it is to succeed. And it does succeed. Masterfully so, in fact: it projects sound into the room well, perfectly filling the sort of small to medium sized rooms in which you’ll most likely find a box like the Qb. We don’t want to mention some of these brands by name as they have really big legal teams that could tie us in knots for months on end, but if you’re considering one of those extremely well-advertised, very

popular boxes, but the Las Vegas connection fits, because it deals with them ol’ school: It pulverises them, drives them out into the desert, and buries them in a shallow grave. The Naim Mu-so Qb sounds just so much better than a lot of what passes for sound from some of these units, it’s laughable. There will be some people who, in all innocence, spanked down a few hundred pounds on some well-respected equipment in this class that sounds actually pretty good... until they hear what the Qb can do. Then those few hundred pounds were wasted money.

What you get here is musical diversity. At one point, you’ll argue the toss over the difference in performance between Spotify and Tidal (but you can hear a difference, and between MP3, CD, and – if you wire it into a network – 24/192 high-res) but it really doesn’t matter, because you’ll just soak up music in all its guises and love doing so. You’ll surf through your own networked music, you’ll plough through online, you’ll spend hours just listening to Radio Paradise, and more.

I’ve not logged as many hours with the Mu-so as I have with the Mu-so Qb, but in a way, the Qb is perhaps the more audio-enthusiast ready product; the Mu-so is a great gateway for people who aren’t audiophiles to gain new insight into the sound music can make, but it does have a bit of a boomy bass by hi-fi buff standards. That boom and bloom are significantly decreased in the Mu-so Qb, and yet, it doesn’t sound particularly bass light. I can see Mu-so Qb’s springing up around the house of someone with a dedicated Naim networked music system in the listening room, and I can see that happening more with the Qb than with the original Mu-so – not because of the higher price of the Mu-so, but because the Qb is more like a teeny-tiny Naim system than the larger Mu-so. Some are already doing this, combining the big Naim system in the main room with devices like Sonos Play:3 and Play:5 speakers in secondary rooms. The Mu-so Qb is the perfect upgrade in such homes, and I’d wager that most of those homes will be almost entirely Sonos-free in fairly short order.

Here’s why. My classical-loving father-in-law has just discovered jazz and has started asking me questions about the subject. Rather than drag him into the listening room and play him a handful of tracks in which he expressed interest, I played him a quick burst of Art Tatum, followed by some Oscar Peterson, and then on to Herbie Hancock (he’s very into piano, too), played quick, dirty, and fairly loud in seconds, all from the kitchen. Were I to have done that on something less than competent, he’s the kind of listener who would be more focused on the minutiae than the way the three players ‘flow’. Were it not capable of being played loud, those 70+ years of concert going would mean Tatum especially would disappear beneath the background noise of tinnitus. Instead, he revelled in his burgeoning jazznological knowledge in spotting how Art Tatum was extending out ragtime, how Peterson chilled it out, and then how Hancock re-inserted the groove. ▶



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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: integrated streaming system

Inputs: UPnP, TM AirPlay, Spotify and

Internet Radio via wired Ethernet or Wi-Fi, Bluetooth (with aptX) USB/iOS (USB Type-A socket), Optical S/PDIF (TosLink) up to 96kHz. Analogue: 3.5mm jack

Audio formats: WAV, FLAC and AIFF

up to 24bit/192kHz, ALAC (Apple Lossless) up to 24bit/96kHz, MP3 up to 48kHz, 320kbit (16 bit), AAC up to 48kHz, 320kbit (16bit), OGG and WMA up to 48kHz (16bit), Bluetooth SBC, AAC and aptX (Note: All formats to 48kHz maximum over wireless network)

Internet radio: vTuner premium

Connectivity: Ethernet (10/100Mbps)

Wi-Fi (802.11b/g) Bluetooth, RC5 remote-control

Speaker system: Dual, three-way

Amplification: 6 x 75 Watts into 8 Ohms

Finish: Brushed aluminium casework, silver anodised heatsink, black fabric grille. Grille options in Deep Blue, Vibrant Red, Burnt Orange

Dimensions (WxHxD): 12.2x62.8x25.6cm

Weight: 13kg

Price: £595

Manufactured by: Naim Audio

URL: www.naimaudio.com/mu-so-qb

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▶ Here’s why, part II. I spent some time listening to BBC Six Music and Spotify discovering new sounds that I would not normally do through ‘the stereo’ but instead would normally find from the desktop of my computer. This made those discovery moments so much richer, in part because I was trying to distract myself while chopping vegetables, but also in part because it made me want to find those albums and play them through the main system.

I even get the reasons why Naim went with ‘slightly-stereo’ instead of heroic amounts of DSP. It sounds better. You listen longer. You play louder (remember this when you install one in your kid’s bedroom; the days of them quietly nodding away in the corner to their headphones might quickly end with a Qb in their room, and you’ll reconnect with parents from the 1950s-1990s who had to shout ‘turn it down or else!’ threateningly at a closed door). It doesn’t crap out at high volumes or sound phasey at low levels. And most importantly, it doesn’t need to apologise for itself sonically thanks to the design. I don’t think that’s unique to not using DSP.

Ultimately, I’m not surprised Mu-so Qb was one of the big hits of CES – it puts a smile on your face! In truth, I’ve possibly spent more time just listening to sounds through the Mu-so Qb than I have any high-end audio device I’ve had in the last two years, because it’s just so damn fun and easy to operate. Basically, the only downtime was when my iPad needed a charge. This gets to the absolute core of what music is all about, without costing a fortune! Very highly recommended! +