

Naim Audio Nait XS 3 integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

It's 2020 and it's a lockdown. That gives one time and impetus to ponder nonsense past, present and future. And when I think back to what I was doing 30 years ago, it seems to fall into several core things; binge-drinking, going to festivals, taking copious amounts of recreational pharmaceuticals, failing to get off with a whole town's worth of women, and selling lots of Naim Audio Nait 2s. The lifestyle had something of a major course correction pretty soon after that, but the Nait in all its guises has always held a kind of special – if a little addled – place for me.

Back in 1990 there was just the one integrated amplifier to carry the, er, Naim Nait name. Now there are three, and the Nait XS 3 sits squarely in the middle of them. Below is the Nait 5SI from the two-model SI line, and above is the Supernait 3 from Naim's core Classic line. The Nait XS 3 is the lone amplifier in the company's XS range, and is a visual, tonal and price match for the

ND5 XS 2 streamer and the FlatCap XS power supply. The latter beefs up the power supply for the Nait XS 3 (but not the matching streamer) should you feel like giving your amplifier a bit of a treat.

The design lines are simple, elegant, and very, very Naim. It's a well-finished, three-quarter height case with a single volume knob, a row of source selection buttons (and 'mute') and a 6.35mm headphone socket. The famous half-moon logo, the single row of buttons and the indicator on that volume knob all glow green against the brushed black aluminium finish. While there have been subtle changes to the overall styling, you could put the Nait XS 3 next to an original Nait XS from 2008 or even a Nait 5 from 18 years ago and struggle to tell them apart. In fact, the products are so well made, you could put a brand new model next to one from 18 or more years ago and think they came from the same batch... it's not that they 'age elegantly', it's that they don't age at all; I still think that somewhere in the back of every Naim manual is a Dorian Gray-like picture of a hideously beaten-up amplifier.

If the industrial design harks back to the turn of the century, the XS 3 circuit is state of the Naim art. Granted, this is more an evolution of that original Naim XS circuit (holding to the same 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' ethos that has served the company so well) but these subtle tweaks to the circuit not only keep the Nait XS 3 relevant, but make it the amp to beat at the price.

The headline change is the addition of a moving magnet phono stage. While a fixture of the original Nait's, the phono stage gradually disappeared from view and by the turn of the century, Naim's engineers said that adding a phono



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► stage to an integrated amp or preamp design was an exercise in compromise, and a standalone phono stage (like the Naim SuperLine or StagesLine) was a better option. Although the last part of that statement still holds, Naim has been able to re-introduce a moving magnet phono stage to the XS 3 and Supernait 3 integrated designs. This is a step in the right direction; where many integrated amp makers are having to add Bluetooth connectivity to any DAC-sporting integrated designs, Naim has gone back to its minimalist roots and not included a potentially noisy in-box wireless DAC and instead included a built-in phono stage, which makes a lot of sense in this time of vinyl's continued revival.

Naim made its mark by producing one of the best sets of phono cards to show what the Linn Sodek LP12 could do, so it's not going to skimp on the phono boards inside the Nait XS3. Here, Naim uses three distinct sections; the gain stage, passive equalisation and final gain, and active equalisation. This is not a typical phono stage layout (most either opt for a fully passive or fully active EQ) but using this hybrid approach is designed to maximise headroom while minimising noise. Note that this phono stage also adopts an ultrasonic roll-off beyond that of the standard RIAA curve and also treads somewhere between the standard RIAA and IEC/RIAA curve in terms of bass roll-off. This makes for something approaching a rumble filter without the 'sloppy subsonic filter' of the IEC variant of RIAA. Regardless of subtleties of tone-curve, the phono stage's EQ capacitors are all 'through-hole' mounted film types, specifically chosen to reduce microphony.

The change that is often glossed over is perhaps the more important one; removing the cascode! The transistors in the Nait XS 3's second gain stage is not shielded by a cascode stage transistor. Removing the cascode means less of a need for amplifier stabilisation, which effectively doubles the slew rate of the amplifier and that means the amplifier reacts faster to musical transients. The problem with this significant improvement in the Nait XS 3's performance is mainly to do with our ability to gloss over technical innovations as 'the science bit'.

The end result is an amplifier that ostensibly looks identical to its predecessor, has the same rated 70W into eight ohms power output, has the

same Class A headphone amplifier, a similar looking front and rear panel with the same dimensions and almost the same weight. Aside from the number '3' on the rear panel and the word 'phono' on one of the inputs, you couldn't tell them apart. Until, that is, you plug them in and take a listen.

There was always something 'meaty' and 'beaty' about the Nait sound. That has softened slightly over the years; the accompanying 'gritty, yet fun' sound of older models did tend to editorialise your music collection; rock and folk sounded great, jazz sounded fine but classical often sounded just 'OK'. The XS 3 retains much of what made its forebears fun but is more catholic in its tastes. You can realistically put any well-recorded music through this amplifier, and it sounds great. The XS 3 also retains the Naim appeal of being more forgiving of less good recordings too, although really undynamic and compressed chart material is a big ask of any replay system.

In terms of system, I used the XS 3 with a pair of the excellent – and extremely well-matched – Audiovector R1 Arreté standmounts (on their matching stands) and fed by a VPI Prime with an elderly but still functional Goldring MM and a combination Naim UnitiCore/Wadia 121 DAC (Coronavirus Lockdown Edition). Cables were Nordost Blue Heaven at first, but I relented and went ►



▶ with the Naim NAC A5 loudspeaker cable and the supplied Power-Line Lite power cord. Equipment supports were simply Quadraspire with no additional treatments (Nordost's Sort Kones do make a difference, but most Naim people will give you 'the look' if you make that suggestion).

This combination rocked so well I didn't want to turn it off. In fact it worked so well that the rest of the street started sending me requests during our regular Lockdown Thursday 'clappy hour'. It's a fast-moving, quick-reacting kind of sound that makes most music sound great but makes a lot of fine sounding rock get really into its groove. One of my go-to pieces of music (not just for reviewing sakes) is 'La Grange' by ZZ Top [*Tres Hombres*, London]. It's a fine test in a way because you want to play it loud, you want it to be clean enough to hear the detail but not so clean that it sounds sanitised, and it needs to be up-beat enough for you to start playing air guitar, air drums... even air beard. And the XS 3's addictive sense of energy does all of that.

Those fluffy audiophile elements like soundstaging and precision of timbre were always a bit of a weakness in Naim of old, but no Naim fan really cared because it sounded so much fun. They are not emphasised here but neither are they underplayed anymore. The XS 3 has a fine soundstage – perhaps not the last word in 'holographic', but natural and more like the sound you hear in a concert hall in fact. Similarly, that ability to recognise the sonic differences

between the 'chime' of a Fender Stratocaster and the 'chimey-twang' of a Telecaster is easy to hear.

That 'science bit' of the removed cascode stage transistor from the XS 3's second gain stage does more than just give you nerd points. It really does help make the XS 3 sound livelier and more upbeat than its predecessors, which is no mean feat as the Nait's were almost always lively and upbeat. There's a precision to the leading edges of sounds now that not only keeps the XS 3 rhythmically on the money but gives more than a nod to high-end sensibilities as it improves on those subtle little 'micro-dynamic' cues that audiophiles crave. A fine example of this improvement – from both sides of the coin – is playing 'Tamacun' from Rodrigo Y Gabriela's eponymous second album [ATO]. The bite of the two nylon- ▶

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▶ stringed guitars is powerful and just the right side of aggressive (as it should be), but the string noises and finger squeaks as they fly up and down the fretboard are more immediate and noticeable. They don’t detract from the recording – if anything, they make the music that bit more real – but they become more directly audible here. And do so without an obvious downside to the performance.

The addition of a phono stage is an obvious inclusion at this time. When the original XS landed a dozen years ago, the vinyl revival was still two or three years away and the zeitgeisty statement of the time was “why should I pay for a phono stage that I will never use... vinyl is long gone!” No-one’s saying that these days and including a phono stage in an amplifier seems like a fine idea. But for Naim, there’s no room for simply bolting on a phono stage... it needs to be damn good. And Naim’s XS 3 phono stage IS damn good; good enough to require a fine turntable, arm and MM cartridge package to partner it (the Vertere DG-1 reviewed in this issue is a perfect foil). It’s deft, fast, light, and extremely quiet. Bass isn’t underplayed but is well controlled. I recently picked up a minty original pressing of Cannonball Adderley’s legendary *Somethin’ Else* [Blue Note] and ‘Love For Sale’ has some of Miles Davis’ finest playing in a group that didn’t bear his name, but it’s Sam Jones deft bass lines that count here. Too much and it unbalances the recording; too little and the music drifts into blandness. This is just about right... and allows that extended upper frequency to cope with Miles’ muted horn perfectly. The same tidy, easy rhythmic properties and fine detail applied universally; the swampy beats of ‘El Morro’ [98-99 *Road Map*, Quarterstick] for example will make anyone an on-the-spot Calexico fan when played through this amp. Even the headphone amplifier is less of an afterthought than this part of the review! It’s a Class A design and is both fine sounding and capable of driving almost any headphone extremely well. Naturally, there’s a link with Focal’s designs, but realistically unless you are trying to power drive units made of concrete, this will sound like a Naim amp, only closer.

I began this review discussing selling a lot of Nait 30 years hence. The sound of Naim has changed since then. Those who want a time machine instead of an amplifier prefer that more characterful, chummy sound, but that sound may have been well suited to the loudspeakers and music of 30 or 40 years ago. The XS 3 is perfect for someone who might also want to listen to music recorded after 1986... and some of that music is really quite good too!

The reason why I used to sell so many Nait 30 years ago was down to one big thing; it sounded damn good. Thirty years on, the core concepts have not changed: the Nait was a damn good amplifier then, and the Naim Audio Nait XS 3 is a damn good amplifier now. If we’ve come full circle, that seems like it’s a good thing... although sadly I’m not holding out for Nirvana reforming any time soon. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Integrated amplifier

Inputs: MM phono (via RCA only),

4x line level (4x RCA and 3x DIN),

1x AV/tape loop (DIN only), power amp in (DIN only)

Powered Accessory socket: +24V for Naim phono amplifier

Phono specification: 47k parallel 470pF input impedance, suitable for 5mV MM cartridges

Line inputs: 130mV sensitivity, 47k input impedance, suitable for 2V

Power output: 70W per channel into 8Ω, 100W per channel into 4Ω

Headphone output: 6.35mm jack, Class A headphone amplifier

Features: Class A headphone amplification, Alps Blue Velvet volume control, reed relay input selection, ceramic insulators for the power transistors, galvanically isolated microprocessor control section, microphonic-isolating PCB mounts

Dimensions (HxWxD): 70 × 432 × 314 mm

Weight: 8.5kg

Price: £2,199

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