



# Uniti goes to your head

WITH THE ARRIVAL OF ITS LATEST UNITI MODEL, NAIM ADDRESSES THE NEEDS OF HEADPHONE ENTHUSIASTS – BUT THE UNITI ATOM HEADPHONE EDITION COULD ALSO MAKE A PERSUASIVE SYSTEM HUB WITH THE ADDITION OF A POWER AMP OR ACTIVE SPEAKERS, SAYS ANDREW EVERARD

**Though I'd promised myself not to reference every review of late to the effects of the pandemic, it's hard to overlook in the case of the latest addition to Naim's range, the £2399 Uniti Atom Headphone Edition. As the name suggests, this is the smallest model in the company's all-in-one systems line-up, shorn of its speaker-driving power amplification and redesigned to drive headphones – the same price as the original on which it's based.**

So, what's that got to do with the whole Covid-19 thing? Well, when the Atom HE broke cover in the second week of May, Naim's Head of PR let slip that the press information for the product had been very thoroughly prepared, as she first wrote it in time for a launch last year. Such is the state of play in the consumer electronics industry of late, but I'm assured that the intervening period hasn't been wasted: Naim's Technical Director Steve Sells and his team took the opportunity to further refine the product before manufacturing commenced in earnest in the Salisbury factory.

It's also clear that, unlike some Naim launches which have been followed by an extended wait for the arrival of actual products – that for the latest-generation Unit models was a case in point –, the company had been able to ramp up production and distribution before the Atom HE was announced, allowing almost instant availability.

Of course, this isn't the first Naim headphone product: enthusiasts will be familiar with the company's long-running all-analogue Headline headphone amp, selling for £529 in its current iteration, while the DAC-V1, launched in 2013, combines its multiple digital inputs with outputs for both headphones and power amplification or active speakers, this configuration and its compact dimensions making it a firm contender for the headphone-wearing 'desktop audio' enthusiast. And let's not forget that the main attractions when the Supernait 3 was launched, a couple of years back, were the provision of a dedicated moving magnet phono stage, and a high-quality headphone output.

The Uniti Atom HE, however, is a rather different animal from those past offerings. For a start, as Uniti product, it's based around the company's very flexible – and future-proofed – in-house streaming platform, as found in models from the Mu-so range

all the way through to the flagship ND555 network player. It also means the newcomer follows the same styling language as the other current Uniti models, complete with smooth-operating volume/input control on the top panel, and a large front-panel display able to show a variety of menus as well as cover art and the like. And for a DAC/headphone amp, this is a substantial piece of equipment, at 24.5cm wide and weighing a healthy 7kg.

### Look, no DINs

There's another difference, too: while the Atom HE offers preamp-level outputs in addition to its headphone connections, there's no sign of the company's familiar DIN socketry: instead, the pre-outs are on a choice of unbalanced RCA sockets or a pair of three-pin XLRs. Now Naim is at pains to point out that this isn't quite as revolutionary as some might have suggested, as the latest-generation Uniti products have never offered DIN preamp outputs, but the presence of those balanced XLRs has caused a bit of a stir. Yes, they're well-suited to use with the active speakers in Naim stablemate Focal's monitoring range, which also have XLR input sockets, but this connection is a less obvious one for existing Naim power amplifiers, which use single-ended XLR Cannon sockets for input.

Some cable ingenuity will be required for such a connection, the unbalanced preouts on the Atom HE proving the most suitable, as they were in my testing using both a NAP 250 and my usual Supernait 3's unity-gain input in concert with cables from the late lamented Flashback Sales, which specialised in cables for doing all sorts of unusual things with Naim equipment. However, the balanced preout on this unit raises intriguing possibilities, and it will be interesting to see whether future Naim power amplifiers will be forthcoming supporting this method of connection – after all, the company's flagship Statement pre/power combination, from which some of the technology in the Atom HE is said to be 'trickled down', does offer connections on both unbalanced DINs and balanced XLRs.

Anyway, back to the Uniti Atom HE itself, which offers a choice of three headphone outputs: on the front panel is a standard 6.3mm unbalanced socket, and a 4.4mm balanced Pentaconn outlet of the kind increasingly found on products – both mains-powered and portable – offering balanced headphone drive. Meanwhile the rear panel houses a four-pin balanced XLR headphone output alongside those preout sockets.

Although Naim suggests that only one set of headphones is connected at any one time for the best sound quality, it's possible to use all three outputs at once if you must, toggling between them using the headphone button on the fascia: this

activates the rear balanced output while muting the preouts, so should be turned off if using the unit as a streaming preamp. The front headphone outputs automatically mute the preouts.

Incidentally, the user is left to discover this from Naim's online support pages for the Atom HE, at <https://naim.freshdesk.com/support/solutions/folders/33000213929> – the manual in the 'document pack' supplied in the box with the unit is that for the standard Atom model, and while it covers the set-up for streaming, it's less relevant when it comes to connecting and using this unit.

Also in the box is Naim's now-familiar Power-Line Lite mains cable, with its floating pins for superior contact and decoupling to exclude vibrations, along with a glossy and well-proportioned remote handset – the same one provided with other Uniti models.

### The Naim app

However, most users will choose to control the Atom HE with Naim's app, available for both Android and iOS devices – the latter more successfully, it must be said – and making streaming from both network and online sources considerable smoother. By the way, the unit can also accept a single analogue line input via a conventional pair of RCA phonos, has two USB Type A port to which a storage device can be attached (one to the rear, the other on the fascia), and provides three digital inputs – two optical and one coaxial, as usual limited to 192kHz/24 bit audio.

In common with other Uniti products, the Atom HE can stream audio at up to 384kHz/32bit and DSD128 via its network connections – Ethernet and Wi-Fi – and also supports a wide range of streaming services, including Qobuz, Spotify Connect, TIDAL and Internet radio. It also offers further flexibility via Apple AirPlay 2, Bluetooth and Chromecast Built-in, and is Roon-ready.

All of that should mean the user is just about covered for any kind of music, be it local or online, and once the Naim App has found the unit on the home network – which in my case happened instantaneously – it's easy to access any of those



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### Specifications

#### Naim Uniti Atom Headphone Edition

Type Network player/DAC/  
headphone amp/preamp

Price £2399

Digital inputs UPnP, two optical,  
one coaxial, two USB Type A

Analogue input One, on RCA  
phonos

Outputs Unbalanced headphones  
on 6.3mm socket;  
balanced headphones  
on 4-pin XLR and  
4.4mm Pentaconn;  
preamp outputs on  
RCA phonos and balanced XLRs

Networking Wi-Fi, Ethernet

Accessories supplied Remote  
handset, Power-Line  
Lite mains cable

Dimensions (WxHxD)  
245x95x265mm

naimaudio.com

options, or indeed to combine the Atom HE with other Uniti, Mu-so or ND-series products for multiroom operation. An interesting feature shared with other Uniti models is that connected USB drives can be shared with other products on the same network, using the Atom HE in 'server mode'.

Naim has been working with streaming systems for a dozen years now, since the introduction of the original Naim Uniti in 2009, and it shows in the slickness and ease of use here. The app also allows the user to customise the look and feel of both the Atom HE and the interface of the app itself, for example setting separate maximum output levels for preamp and headphone sections, adjusting balance, changing the order in which the inputs appear on the screen, or bypassing unused inputs.

Also much in evidence is the way the Uniti design has been refined over the years in terms of functionality; that large top-plate control, now used on Statement, Uniti and Mu-so models is a delight use, thanks to its 'well-oiled' smoothness and precision of volume adjustment. What's more, the location of basic functions – play/stop, input selection and access to favourites – on the front panel makes it much less 'hit and miss' than the similar control on my 'kitchen' Mu-so, which combines all this functionality, and still occasionally finds me changing input or radio station when I want to turn it up or down (even though this problem tends to resolve itself after the first strong cup of the day from the adjacent coffee machine!).

True, this positioning of the volume control may preclude the use of the Atom HE between close-spaced shelves, but then there's always that remote handset or the Naim App if you want to use the unit so positioned. Mind you, best to keep your balanced headphones permanently connected in that case, thanks to that output being mounted to the rear.

Clever, too, is the way Naim has done away with the profusion of add-on antennae bristling from some rival designs – I recently used a product with two rubber stub aerials, for Bluetooth and Wi-Fi, and a telescopic one for radio, rather spoiling the 'designer' looks. Instead, all the radio receiving

gubbins here is concealed within the Atom HE, and yet Naim has managed to give the unit sufficient Wi-Fi sensitivity to allow higher resolution audio to be streamed wirelessly, with no faltering or buffering.

### Make the most of your 'phones

The Atom HE uses both a new transformer design and a discrete transistor circuit design for the output stage, both to facilitate that balanced working and give the unit the ability to drive even demanding headphone loads, and in use it proves an excellent way to make the most of just about any headphones you choose to connect to it. I used a range of headphones, from various Bowers & Wilkins models to my long-serving Focal Spirit Pro and a couple of pairs from the recently-launched Austrian Audio range, along with Oppo's late lamented PM-1 planar magnetics used in balanced configuration, and in each case the Naim was as impressive for its weight as it was for the levels of detail retrieval.

There's also a sense that headphones are being both controlled and driven with real conviction, with an openness and space in the sound sufficient to allay the sense of being 'shut in': with the closed-back Focal and Austrian Audio Hi-X55 models – both designed with studio monitoring in mind – the airiness of presentation afforded by the Naim was especially impressive, whether with classical recordings or the near-operatic orchestrated production job on the 10-minute-long *Cricket wife* single by the Pet Shop Boys.

The rhythmic drive familiar to users of Naim systems is clear with the infectious pop-soul of *Hi*, the latest album from Texas, whether Sharleen Spiteri's vocals are duelling with the rap of Wu-Tang Clan (yes, really) on the title track, or giving it a spot of country on 'Moonstar'. What's more, the Naim sounds magnificent playing the great sweep of Moby's retrospective *Reprise* album, complete with guest artists of the calibre of Gregory Porter, Mark Lanegan, Kris Kristofferson and a full orchestra: the touching cover of Bowie's 'Heroes' sounds suitably fragile and yet lush in its orchestral scoring, the new take on 'Why Does My Heart Feel So Bad?' is mighty, and 'Go' just hammers hard and unstopably, daring the listener to crank that big, fluid volume control.

Whatever you choose to play through it, the Atom HE never ceases to delight, and it also impresses when you put down the 'phones and switch to using it as a preamp. I found myself listening to it much more than I'd intended for this review, even using to play Radios 3, 4 and 4 Extra for extended periods, making use of its access to the BBC's 320kbps AAC streams. And that's the strength of this new arrival: not only is it an excellent – and very flexible – unit for the headphone enthusiast, but it also does 'the Naim thing' exceptionally well.

