Naim Audio SuperUniti

by Nicholas Ripley

t's almost impossible for a British audio enthusiast to escape some exposure to Naim Audio, but I have come off relatively unscathed. Until now: a white box containing a Naim SuperUniti turned up *chez* Ripley. It wasn't to be a review, though. More an investigation on my part. However, I have been re-considering putting my toe in the streaming waters, and this is as good a place as any to start, as it's currently one of a handful of audio components over about £2,000 that actually sells in good numbers in the UK. It's this and the Devialet, apparently, that dominate the UK sales charts.

I'll skip a lengthy description of the functionality of the product. That is extremely well documented (the SuperUniti has been around since 2011) and much of its raw technical description can be had from the Technical Specifications in the closing credits. Instead, it's more a description of the journey; of how someone who was until very recently wedded to CD gets pushed – mostly willingly, I should add – into the 21st Century.

I'm not a 'computer in the living room' guy. I'm a 'music in the living room' guy. Even the goggle-box is in another room, hanging on a wall opposite the dining table in the 'family room', and in fairness we spend a great of time gathered round this place, enjoying food and wine and company. But perhaps

we have a different relationship to most when it comes to TV; it's a source of news, information, and entertainment, but not our primary source of entertainment. Our living room is a space where reading and listening happens. My partner, it must be said, would prefer more space given over for books, and less space for CDs and audio equipment, so the motivation behind investigating next-generation disc-less audio systems has in no small part come out of that demand.

I tried the 'Mac 'n' DAC' route a few years ago, but found placing a laptop in 'the inner sanctum' something of an imposition. Strangely though, the Apple iPad was nowhere near as imposing in the same setting, and we soon found ourselves bonded to these tablets throughout the house. And ▶

so, the combination of a streamed music system, controlled from the iPad, made a lot of sense. Like many, I tried Sonos, which stresses the convenience and ease of installation. But, it never quite sounded as good as my CD player to me, and ultimately it didn't make the grade. I guess I should have tried the Squeezebox while it was still a going concern, but frankly the Sonos sound quality made me discount streaming for too long.

In fairness, I enjoy the performance and convenience of Mac&DAC systems from a sonic perspective, but what I want is the Holy Trinity of digital audio: something with the performance of CD, the convenience of 'Mac 'n' DAC', and the in-room discretion of Sonos.

All of which brings me to Naim's SuperUniti.

I felt that if I were to do this, I should go with an 'all-in' approach initially. I know a streaming device can be 'just another box in the system', but if this were to be the end of my time with CD (and from a perspective of marital harmony, putting almost a room full of discs in the attic would be useful), there is no sense being all half-hearted about the change. And the SuperUniti represented the most 'all-in' I could take without filling the hallway with boxes. So, I borrowed the Editor's UnitiServe (I'm not big on the whole networking thing yet, and the UnitiServe seems the most bullet-proof option around), plugged it and the SuperUniti into my Internet router (I had a short run of CAT5 between the UnitiServe and the router, and ran a far longer length of CAT5 from router to the SuperUniti in the next room), and started loading up discs. The Naim apps make this a surprisingly simple process.

I had been warned about the Naim running in process, and it proved no exaggeration. One day good, next day bad, then OK, then dreadful, and so on until the SuperUniti settled down.

Frankly, my initial time with the SuperUniti all but confirmed why I hadn't gone down the Naim path years ago. Naim moves in a different musical direction to me: my triggers are stereo separation and detail (or so I thought), and Naim does tempo and leading edges. So I listened, boxed the SuperUniti up, and put my old system back together. And that was the point I began to realise why Naim has a loyal following.

My existing system, I concluded, sucks... and it sucks for all the reasons I supposedly like (liked?) hi-fi. It focused on the trivia, not the nub of the music, something the SuperUniti just pointed you towards. It didn't change my musical core, but it pulled me out of a musical rut, of only listening to the sound music makes, rather then the music itself. Given my affinity towards 'gnarly' 20th Century music, I would have expected the Naim's sonic strengths to have

"My existing system, I concluded, sucks... and it sucks for all the reasons I supposedly like (liked?) hi-fi. It focused on the trivia, not the nub of the music, something the SuperUniti just pointed you towards."

little effect – a device that's all about tempo is going to struggle to find much to latch on to in Panufnik or Varese, but in fact the SuperUniti's sharp focus of musical energy – I can only describe it as 'snap' – really works to put difficult pieces from complicated composers into much-needed order. It's odd, because the Naim sound is not a recreation of the live event as defined by the dictums of 'The Absolute Sound', but it has more of the intensity and fascination of the musical event, and it's hard to go back to something less driven as a result.

I fully recognise that this has none of the conventions of audio performance descriptions, but where they normally describe a product, they almost miss the point of the SuperUniti. If I analyse the sound in such terms, it comes across as dynamic, with a fundamentally neutral tonal balance and frequency response, with a pleasant, slightly light bounce to the bottom end, ▶

▶ and a little bit of grain to the upper midrange and treble. Not enough to get upset about, but a little bit of extra character to the sound. Stereo imagery, though good, is not exceptional, especially in terms of image height, but it has excellent solidity. In such terms, the SuperUniti's strongest suit is its vocal articulation, projecting a completely understandable voice into the room with scale and grace. But this tells you everything about the sound, and nothing about how music sounds. The SuperUniti instead pushes these audiophile elements back in the mix, presenting the music uppermost.

The net result of all of this was I quickly took the SuperUniti back out of the box… and it was with a room full of 'toys' that my partner went into full 'intervention' mode.

I kind of knew it was coming. All it took was three discs, moved out of the living room and onto the UnitiServe under that watchful, hawk-like gaze. "You mean," came the words, in that slow, mannered tone that means decisions have been made for you in your absence, "all your discs can live in here [pointing to the UnitiServe]?" The voice became even calmer, like a mountain stream; pure, clear, and capable of almost instant hypothermia: "So this [pointing to the SuperUniti]" my partner began, "can replace all *that* [pointing to my system]?" And then the clincher, "And you think this [pointing to the SuperUniti again] sounds better than all that [waving hand pointedly in the general direction of my system], too?" I knew what was coming by the hand waving. My cards were marked, my fate sealed. I tried to argue (somewhat weakly, I admit) that lots of boxes were important for writing reviews, but it was too late. The foot was down, and from this angle it looked distinctly like a cloven hoof.

The result of this is simple. I'm soon to be the proud owner of a Naim SuperUniti, and probably a UnitiServe, too. In fairness, irrespective of the other half's intervention, I'm happy to make the change. It has some kind of core effect on me as a listener that makes me think I've been listening 'wrong' all these years. With the SuperUniti, I'm back on the right heading, and I'm interested to see where that heading takes me: both musically, and in terms of audio equipment. I just wish I'd suggested I look at a complete system. That way, I might have kept more boxes in my room! ✚

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Single-box streaming device

Analog Inputs: 1 × 5-pin DIN, 2 × RCA pair, 1 × 3.5 mm front panel jack

Digital Inputs: 6 × S/PDIF (1 × coaxial BNC, 1 × coaxial RCA, 3 × optical, TOSlink, 1 × 3.5mm front panel mini-TOSlink)

Sample Rates Maximum: 192kHz (coaxial) 96kHz (optical)

UPnP input: Ethernet (RJ45), Wi-Fi

USB/iPod input: Front panel USB (type A)

iRadio input: Ethernet (RJ45), Wi-Fi

Audio Formats Supported: WAV and AIFF (up to 32-bit/192 kHz) FLAC (up to 24bit/192 kHz) ALAC (up to 24-bit/96kHz) WMA (up to 16-bit/48kHz), Ogg Vorbis (up to 16-bit/48kHz) MP3 and M4a (up to 320kbps) WMA, MP3, MMS

Output Power: 80 watts per channel into 8 ohms

Analogue Outputs: Preamp out (4-pin DIN), Subwoofer out (RCA pair)

Digital Outputs: S/PDIF (coaxial BNC 75 ohms)

Dimensions (HxWxD): 87 × 432 × 314mm

Weight: 12.8kg

Price: £3,675

Manufacturer: Naim Audio

URL: www.naim-audio.com

Tel: +44(0) 1722 426 600