

Naim Audio SuperLine + Hi-Cap DR



HARRY TRIES OUT A DECADE-OLD NAIM SUPERLINE, CONNECTED TO THE LATEST HI-CAP DR POWER SUPPLY

Neither the company nor indeed the *SuperLine* product need much introduction. Naim Audio is the French-owned specialist hi-fi company based in Salisbury. Despite a history that goes back ten years, the *SuperLine* is still the company's best phono stage, and its continued popularity justifies its inclusion in this group. It's representative of what can be done with a budget of around £4,000.

The *SuperLine* is a two-box phono amplifier, requiring external power from one of Naim's power supply units, such as a *FlatCap*, *Hi-Cap* or *SuperCap*. While a £4,315 *SuperCap* DR would undoubtedly have wrought better performance, I was content to use it with a *Hi-Cap*. Said *Hi-Cap* was a recent model, complete with the discrete regulator (DR) upgrade that is said to bring substantial improvements. Note that the combined price is currently £3,968 (£2,549 + £1,419).

Naim's shoebox-sized separates are often heavy, but the *SuperLine* is especially so, thanks to a floating sub-chassis for the input stage, made of solid brass and supported on six tiny compression springs. This is to counter ambient vibration, leading to a curiously wobbly rear panel. DC power comes in via a 5-pin 240° DIN cable, which also pipes out the finished audio signal to the power supply to control signal ground loops. Signal connection to a line pre-amp is via the *Hi-Cap* supply through a 4-pin DIN socket: I initially used the standard grey Naim DIN-to-phono cable, later upgrading with The Chord Company *Sarum T* interconnect to great effect.

A packed dual-mono circuit board almost fills the entire floor of the unit. Discrete bipolar transistors comprise all the active electronics, fed by 25 local regulated supplies, again based on discrete transistors, following an array of Elna electrolytic reservoirs. RIAA equalisation is passive in the treble, followed by an active stage that straightens the bass shelf and the required lower-mid EQ kinks.

Gain is fixed at 64dB (though a lower sensitivity of

58dB is a recent option). Cartridge loading involves two blank 5-pin DIN sockets on the floating panel, ready to accept metal plugs fitted with suitable capacitors and resistors. First trials were with 500ohm and 1nF, before settling on 220ohm and 100pF.

Sound Quality

The Naim *SuperLine* combined the attractive virtues of smooth, unforced resolution and effective dynamic grip. Acoustic piano provides a good example, such that I could hear – even picture – the scale of concert grand in the somewhat murky 1960s Waldstein sonata played by Barenboim, resolving the dancing right-hand mayhem and the 'body' of the instrument in an acoustic space.

The choice of interconnects played a key part here, as the regular Naim interconnect overly thickened and smeared the lower midband. The Chord Company's *Sarum T* restored much of the hear-through transparency found from other stages (wired with Nordost *Valhalla* interconnect), and was used for the rest of the listening.

The ability to move from soft to loud while also cementing a tidy and stable soundstage marked out the *SuperLine* as a top class phono amplifier, able to convince with a wide range of musical styles. Naim is perhaps best known for its fine attention to timing, and this was clearly evident when playing rock and pop recordings, where the top-to-bottom timing kept attention focused while never thrusting rhythm in the face.

That overall music-making ability is in no small part due to the way it gets the bass 'right'. While lesser phono stages may pay lip service to keeping the low notes in time and in-tune, *SuperLine* rightly preserves the key foundation below. Everything else falls naturally in line thereafter.

Highlights include the jazz-infused rock of Caravan's third album *If I Could Do It All Over Again...* (Decca SKL 5052), where propulsive 11/8 numbers like *As I Feel I Die*, where the dynamic gear-shifts are laid bare, over bass guitar grooves that move from walking amble to progressive riffing. However, Naim's phono stages have never been exclusively rock and jazz oriented, playing the best from the classical as much as from the modern collection.

Conclusions

The *SuperLine*, driven via a Hi-Cap DR, does cost roughly twice the price of the Rothwell, but this seems to be justified, as it's virtually immune from criticism and delivers top-to-bottom timing. It does so from a 'fit-and-forget' package that is itself attractive, and makes the whole process of listening to music thoroughly addictive.



Manufacturer's Specification

Gain	64dB
Input impedance	various
THD + N	<0.005% (500uV @ 1kHz)
S/N ratio	82dB ref 500uV
Size (WxDxH)	20.7x31.4x8.7cms
Weight	7.7kg
Price (inc HiCap)	£3,968 (£2,549 + £1,419)