



# Naim Supernait 3

IN REINVENTING ITS ACCLAIMED ONE-BOX AMPLIFIER, NAIM HAS MORE THAN SIMPLY SUCCEDED TO FASHION WITH AN ONBOARD MOVING MAGNET PHONO STAGE – IT HAS ALSO IMPROVED OVERALL PERFORMANCE TO A REMARKABLE EXTENT

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For a long time – since the introduction of the original version back in 2007, in fact – the *Supernait* has been one of the sweet spots of the Naim range. Based on the *Nait* theme, which can trace its history back to the 1983 original shoebox-sized integrated, the *Supernait* has provided a highly cost-effective alternative to the multi-box amplification systems for which Naim is famous, and done so while still providing plenty of upgrade potential for those who ‘feel the itch’.

You can add on a power supply to feed the preamp section, removing a link plug to insert a *HiCap*, for example, into the chain; you can use the *Supernait* as a preamp with your choice of power amplifier; and, thanks to Naim’s ‘signal plus power connections’, you can even add on one of the company’s *Stageline* phono amps.

That’s still the case with the latest iteration, the £3499 *Supernait 3* we have here, although the headline feature is the inclusion of a newly-designed internal phono stage, an addition the amp shares with the £2199 *Nait XS 3* launched alongside it. That’s an interesting move in the history of the *Supernait*, which has had an unusual relationship with fashions in hi-fi: the original model offered both digital and line analogue inputs and then, when the *Supernait 2* arrived in 2013 – just as ‘computer audio’ was becoming more firmly established – the digital connections were dropped, and the amp became an all-analogue affair.

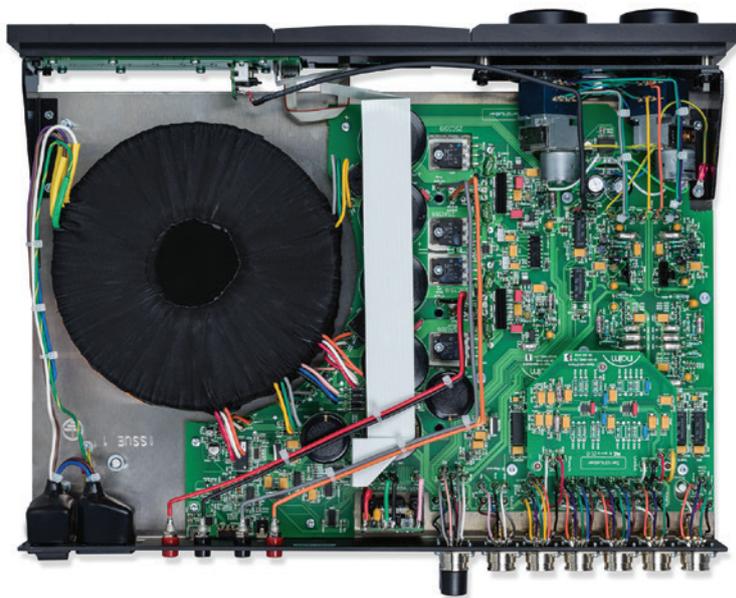
Now, in the *Supernait 3*, we have that phono stage, reflecting the continuing popularity of the ‘vinyl revival’, but – to the surprise of some, at least at the launch event Naim arranged for the UK press – still

no digital inputs. Eyebrows were also raised at the fact the phono stage here is moving magnet only, with some reviewers and the denizens of Naim’s forum suggesting that surely anyone buying a £3000+ amplifier would want to use it with a decent turntable fitted with a moving coil cartridge.

Both the analogue-only decision and the moving magnet one are linked, it seems: the company wanted to make the best integrated it could, and so chose to go down the low-noise route, which means avoiding the potential interference of having a digital section onboard, and the susceptibility to electronic noise of a phono stage switchable between MM and MC. Plus, it explains, the range already has options for those wanting to add those missing facilities, in the form of its ND- series network players, which have digital inputs alongside their streaming capability, and the *Stageline* phono stages already mentioned above, which would enable the user to add dedicated MC preamplification/equalisation if required.

The only significant omission in the range is that of a dedicated high-end digital to analogue converter, the prosaically-named *Naim DAC* having bitten the dust in 2018 after almost a decade in the company’s catalogue. The compact *DAC-V1* DAC/pre/headphone amp continues, but arguably isn’t the ideal choice for use purely as a line-level-out converter with an amp such as this, even if it does have a USB input for use with a computer, lacking in the current ND- models. Buying the -V1 for use purely as a DAC would seem to involve spending money on features you’ll never use in this context; fortunately there’s no shortage of alternatives outside the world of black boxes with green lights.

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However, retained in the latest *Supernait* are the truly useful features of its predecessor, including a high-quality headphone output – again achieved in an unusual manner, as is the Naim way – along with the ability to set the AV input for unity gain passthrough, to enable it to be used with the front channel preouts of a surround receiver or processor. There’s also still Naim’s ‘network automation’, allowing the amp’s input selection, volume control and muting to be operated using the company’s Android/iOS app via one of the ND- players, old or new.

#### Very long term review

That those features are really useful, and not just frills, becomes apparent when one uses the *Supernait* long-term, as I have: I started out with an original version some years back, although beyond testing purposes I have to admit I made little use of the digital inputs, and moved on to a *Supernait 2* when that was launched some six years back. Since then the SN2 has been more or less my ‘daily driver’, used both for testing other products and for leisure listening – whenever I have time for some! – as well as being connected to my Onkyo AV receiver to power the front left and right channels of the surround system on which I watch TVs and – very rarely – movies.

Looking back at reviews I wrote at the time, I can see that I was immediately taken by the improvements the ‘stripped out’ SN2 brought over the original design, and adding a *HiCap*, then later a *HiCap DR*, to the amplifier delivered another noticeable step up in performance, especially in bass definition and the integration across the whole frequency range. And in the time I have used the *Supernait 2* it has been combined with a huge variety

of source components, and even seen service as a temporary preamp for a couple of Naim power amps under test, just for a quick listen before installing the elderly – but fairly recently serviced – *NAC 52/52 PS* preamp with which it alternates.

Currently the SN2 is fronted by an *ND555/555 PS* much of the time, this proving to be much less of a ‘mullet’ system than at first it might seem, and drives speakers including a long-running pair of PMC *OB1s* and Neat’s unusual *Iota Xplorer* mini-floorstanders.

To say that I know the *Supernait 2*, then, is something of an understatement: over half a decade qualifies as a very long term test, and even though some very ambitious amps, both integrated and pre/power, have been through the system in recent years, I still find I can come back to the Naim and not feel I am missing anything significant. However, even after the briefest of back to back listens at the launch event for the *Nait XS 3* and *Supernait 3* a month or two back, I could immediately hear what the new amplifier was doing better.

Now, after spending some more time with the *Supernait 3*, comparing it with the model it replaces and using both models with and without the *HiCap DR*, those initial impressions have been reinforced. The SN3 is every bit as usable on a day to day basis as the model it replaces – hardly surprising given that the only outward sign of change is the presence of a ‘phono’ button in the row of input selectors to the right of the front panel – but also a sufficient step up in performance that it’s rather tricky to go back to the Mk 2 when you have heard what the new version can do.

The changes involved in creating this new *Supernait* are rather more extensive than those in the less expensive *Nait XS 3*, although designed to the same ends: I’ve left it to Naim’s Steve Sells to do the ‘what we’ve done, and why’ bit, but the listening shows that they’ve all been for the good. Indeed, excellent though the phono stage here may be, with a lovely combination of substance, detail and natural flow, giving the Naim an easygoing yet captivating listenability, I’d go so far as to say that this is an amplifier you should definitely consider even if you have no interest whatsoever in playing records.

Yes, I understand that may be heresy around these parts, although I don’t share the fascination for the vinyl disc much in evidence elsewhere, and am much happier streaming a hi-res file, with fingertip control from my *iPad*. Frankly I find I listen to much more music that way: I ‘get’ the whole vinyl thing, and have heard some very remarkable players in recent times, but I wouldn’t give up my servers of music for an all-vinyl life.

Which is fine, and the beauty of the *Supernait 3* is that it opens up that possibility without precluding any options, or making the buyer feel that money is being spent on features that won't be used. After all, it wasn't so long ago that every amplifier came with a phono stage as part of the deal, and no-one really complained much about that provision.

All that said, I have to say that I haven't heard my modest Rega-based record playback system sound so good through any amplifier with a built-in phono stage, and the *Supernait 3*'s onboard stage sounds almost as good as the amplifier does when used with the *Stageline* I've kept to hand for use with my SN2 for occasional vinyl listening. Whether spinning well-recorded jazz or classical works – the kind of albums a reviewer who's not a vinyl collector tends to acquire along the way – it's hard not to appreciate the generosity and effortlessness of the sound via the Naim's phono stage, even it lacks a little of the tightness and extension of the same discs played through the *Stageline* into one of the amp's line inputs. I could almost be converted – almost...

### Flexible minimalism

For all the minimalism of the *Supernait 3* – although it does have the balance control the less expensive *Nait XS 3* lacks, which can also be operated from the included remote handset – this is still a relatively flexible amplifier. There are five line inputs on Naim's preferred DIN sockets, with two of them – designated for 'AV' and 'Stream' – having in/out capability, and the 'Aux' input having 24V power.

Four of the line-ins are duplicated on RCA sockets, with a fifth set of RCAs, plus an earth connection, feeding the phono stage, while outputs are provided on the usual Naim 4mm sockets, plus 'Biwire' DIN and 'Sub out' RCAs, though the subwoofer outputs are unfiltered, and deliver the full frequency range. The preout/power amp in sockets, connected with their link plug, are designated 'Upgrade', while other connections extend to the 3.5mm socket for that ND-automation I mentioned (or an external remote receiver), and a mini USB for firmware upgrades.

AV integration is simple, with a slider switch on the rear panel allowing the 'AV' input to bypass the volume control, and the headphone socket is a good old 6.35mm one alongside the source selectors on the front panel. And that's about it, save to note that, in the usual Naim fashion, the power switch is on the rear panel, and there's no standby function: when the *Supernait 3* is on, it's on.

As is usual with Naim amplification, the *Supernait 3* has relatively modest 'on paper' output figures – 80W per channel into 8ohms, rising to 130W

into 4ohms – but manages to sound much bigger when in use. Indeed, beside the integrated amplifier rivals reviewed elsewhere in this issue it would look low-powered were it not for the weight, speed and definition it exhibits when actually playing music.

Playing the recent Bergen Philharmonic/Andrew Litton recording of Elgar's *Enigma Variations* (on BIS), it's the speed and deftness of the *Supernait 3* that grabs the attention – well, that and the powerful, extended bass. The amp, fed from the *ND555*, delivers a beautifully ripe sound in the brass, with serious percussion impact, while the strings sound sweet and characterful, and the great sweep of the orchestra in the skittering *Troyte* variation displays the excellent microdynamic ability; however fast and complex the music becomes, the Naim always sounds completely in control and unflappable.

Similarly the great growl of the organ in the final movement of Christopher Jacobson's recording of the Saint Saëns *Third Symphony*, in DSD from Pentatone, is magnificent. So is the delicacy with which the sound of the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande under Kazuki Yamada builds in drama and tension, that great instrument always lurking, as it were, in the background ready to be unleashed again in an explosion of brass, percussion and finally the organ. It's a thrilling sound, right to the moment when the last note disperses into the acoustic.

Equally enchanting is the way the Naim delivers the fluent, precise playing of Isata Kanneh-Mason on her *Romance* set of piano works by Clara Schumann, unravelling the slightly lush recorded sound to make every note crystal clear. It's a trick it also pulls off with O'Hooley & Tidow's *The Fragile* set – this Naim, far from the old stereotype of the company's products being best suited to driving rock, does the small-scale and intimate just as well as it does the big and brash, as is clear from the duo's tight harmonies on 'The Last Polar Bear'.

That clarity is also heard to great effect on the *Truth, Liberty & Soul* live set by Jaco Pastorius, his bass grumbling deliciously through a free-form take on 'I Shot The Sheriff', while the way the Naim powers out ZZ Top's 'La Grange' or the fuzzy guitar solo in the middle of 'Cheap Sunglasses' from the *Goin' 50* compilation shows the amp's just waiting to turn on the swagger when required.

It's pretty clear that this new *Supernait* is much more than a Mk2 with a phono stage bolted in: all the other changes Steve Sells laid out in our interview about the design thinking have clearly paid dividends, keeping the *Supernait 3* firmly in place as a domestically acceptable way of achieving the best Naim can do, without filling the room with multiple black boxes.

### Specifications

Inputs	5 line on DIN inc aux with 24V power, 4 line on RCAs, moving magnet phono
Outputs	One pair of speakers, preamp outs on DIN ('Biwire') and RCAs ('Subwoofer'), headphones on 6.35mm TRS jack
Other connections	Preamp out/power amp in (for optional power supply), remote in, USB mini-B for firmware upgrades
Controls	Input selectors, mute, volume, balance (all duplicated on NARCOM 5 remote handset supplied), AV bypass switch
Phono input	47k parallel 470pF input impedance, suitable for 5mV cartridges
Power output	80Wpc into 8ohms, 130Wpc into 4ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD)	432 x 87 x 314 mm
Weight	14kg
Price	£3499

naimaudio.com