PLATINUM SOUNDS
Monitor Audio’s hot towers

EXCLUSIVE!
BEATLES VINYL RELEASE, p6

Hi-Res Music
- Naim HDX server
  - new upgrades rated
- Marantz Universal
  - does it beat Denon’s flagship BD player?

‘Your top 12 LP stocking fillers’
Ken Kessler, p76

Linn’s new LP12
Is the ‘Retro’ SE deck its best LP spinner yet?

PLUS 13 pages of music • VINYL RELEASE Black Crowes’ Southern Harmony...
AUDIO MILESTONES Monster Cable • INVESTIGATION Technology that time forgot
ON LOCATION ATC Loudspeakers • HI-FI @ HOME Marriage of music and cinema
Naim HDX (£4500)

With improved hard drives, no fewer than 17 software upgrades plus a plethora of upgrade options, Naim's revamped HDX music server proves a cut above its rivals

**Review:** Keith Howard  **Lab Test:** Paul Miller

Naim Audio's HDX CD ripper and hard disk player might seem like yesterday's news but it has just been rejuvenated by a new software release – version 1.4D, of which I had a beta release for this review. There are two improvements as well. Together these have significantly enhanced its capabilities.

Let's deal with the two hardware upgrades first. Visible from the outside, the switch to a BNC socket for the digital output was by motivated by extensive listening tests that have convinced Naim of BNC's superiority over the more commonly used phono connector. Hidden away inside, just behind the fascia, the twin hard disk drives have been changed to 500GB Seagate Pipeline devices. Chosen, Naim says, for their combination of size, performance and noise, these drives are designed for constant use applications and so promise to be very reliable, in addition to which they feature low noise and vibration levels and low power consumption – all desirable features in an audio product that is tightly packed with circuitry, making thermal regulation as important an issue as noise suppression.

Naim and Seagate cooperated closely over the installation of these drives, and Naim has added rubber covers to help quell noise still further. There is also a small case fan for additional cooling, but this is only energised when sensors deem it necessary. That said, the HDX, even without the fan running, is not silent – the whirring of the drives can be heard as a high-pitched background noise that may annoy listeners who sit close to it.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that, because it has two 500GB drives, the HDX offers about 1TB (one terabyte) of music storage overall – it doesn't.

**SOFTLY DOES IT**

A total of 17 software changes have been made, the most important of which, by my reckoning, are these. The HDX will now play 192kHz files, where previously it was limited to 96kHz, and CDs can now be ripped from the HDX's disc tray to a NAS rather than the internal hard drive. A rescan of network resources can be forced, and the HDX itself will now function as a UPnP server for delivering audio files to other devices on a network. For a full list of the enhancements, see Naim's literature. By the way, you can also play CDs directly via the HDX's disc mechanism – the choice between ripping or playing is made in the System Setup menu.

Control of the HDX is primarily via a small colour touch-screen to the right of the fascia, allied to a remote control handset. In other words, it can be used perfectly well as a standalone hard-disk audio source. But there are many other interface options [see boxout, p63].

The HDX's ability to replay audio from various media begs some important questions, the answers to which have a significant bearing on how the HDX
will be used in systems where the best sound quality is demanded at all times. First, does playing a CD sound as good as playing its ripped tracks from the internal hard disk drive? Naim’s own stance on this is clear; the HDX is a good CD player but not a great one. The design emphasis for the HDX has been on replay quality from hard disk, with CD replay provided principally as a convenience. So the horse’s mouth advice is that replaying a ripped CD will always give better results than playing the CD itself (via the HDX, at any rate).

**GHOST IN THE MACHINE**

This I can confirm having done the comparison using ‘Annie’s Yellow Bag’, from the new Gwyneth Herbert album *All The Ghosts* [naimcd135]. The sound from CD is by no means low-rent but it lacks the iron-fisted grip and control of the hard disk equivalent.

Of course, this is only the first such comparison that needs making. Does a file read from USB stick sound identical to the same file read from the internal hard drive? And how do files stored on a NAS drive fare? I can’t answer the latter question because I don’t yet own a NAS drive (it’s coming) but I performed the USB/internal HDD comparison and preferred the hard disk delivery, again for its relentless control of rhythm and dynamics. Was this due to the USB path being inferior, or to differences in the ripped files? Unfortunately it’s impossible to tell since, CD ripping apart, the internal hard drive is read only, so files cannot be copied to it.

One way and another I did a lot of listening to ‘Annie’s Yellow Bag’, because I also chose it as the first track with which to compare the HDX to an alternative, computer-centric hard-disk audio source comprising my own Mac mini and RME Firewire 800 interface, the former running Windows XP Pro and using Fooobar 2000 as the audio player. Whenever I can I like to mix familiar tracks with one or more new acquaintances when reviewing, on the basis that the former provide a known reference point while the new arrivals refresh the palate and perhaps provide a new perspective. ‘Annie’s Yellow Bag’ played that role on this occasion.

The rest of the system – a DIY passive preamp comprising a DACT stepped attenuator and precious metal wiring, plus a Bryston 4B power amplifier – remained the same throughout. When playing from either source I switched off the computer monitor, which audibly quells at least one undesirable source of RF interference.

The Bryston has one of the tightest, most solid bottom ends of any power amplifier I’ve used, and that was relevant because it was in this area – superficially, at least – that differences between the HDX and Mac/RME were at their most significant. The Mac/RME’s stereo image was wider and deeper, and Gwyneth Herbert’s voice floated in a way it didn’t quite from the HDX. But when it came to reproducing the rhythmical interplay of drums and bass, notably in the first few bars, the HDX was in a class of its own, giving the track an impetus the Mac/RME couldn’t match. Put it another way: when I heard this track’s opening via the HDX I immediately thought, ‘That’s a tight outfit’ and went to check the name of drummer and bassist on the CD sleeve.

As a result of this experience I went scuttling to my rack of CDs still awaiting ripping in search of something I haven’t listened to in years but thought would probably cement the HDX’s superiority in this department – the CD EP I guess you’d call it, of Latin Quarter’s ‘Nomzamo (One People One Cause)’ although what I really wanted to hear was the remixed version of the band’s trademark song ‘Radio Africa’. Built on a reggae beat over which are layered familiar remix clichés of the period, it’s a piece that stands or falls on its rhythmic drive. Remove that and it’s escalated.

After ripping the disc to HDX and Mac, my nostalgic interlude proved fully justified. The HDX delivered a sense of irrepressible momentum that the Mac/RME could only half-heartedly capture. I know that the ‘rhythm and timing’ thing is an old chestnut with Naim equipment, and that it’s an aspect of performance which some listeners just don’t get (or don’t want to). But if you do get it, it’s not something you happily live without. By the way, whether it actually has anything to do with bass performance per se is a moot point. All sorts of things seem to affect our perception of bass, and some of them occur at quite the opposite end of the frequency spectrum.

**PLAYING IT SIMPLE**

It was time for some classical music and something as remote from conventional conceptions of rhythm as I could contrive. Having noted on the Gwyneth Herbert track that the HDX’s soundstage wasn’t as expansive as the Mac/RME’s, I was keen to discover how the Naim would fare on what is at once one of the simplest tasks for an audio system and

---

**TAking CONTROL**

One of the mature features of the HDX, which separates it from many rivals, is that the options for controlling it don’t begin and end with the integral touch screen and remote control handset. For a start, the HDX has AVI, composite and S-Video outputs to allow connection of an external monitor – a welcome facility for anyone who sits too far from the HDX to see its own small screen clearly. A mouse and keyboard can be added too via PS/2 or USB. Full control functionality can alternatively be achieved using a USB touch-screen monitor, which can be placed to hand by the listening position. Naim also supplies a desktop client which allows the HDX to be driven from a Windows computer on the same network, and is about to release an iPhone app that I’m told provides the fastest, easiest way to navigate its music library. Nokia N800/N810 phones or similar can operate the HDX via Wi-Fi, and any Flash-compatible browser can be used too.

---

**“The Naim’s performance with James Griffet’s voice was simply more real”**

[The rest of the text is not visible in the image.]
MUSIC SERVER

ABOVE: The busy back panel of the HDX includes a ground lift switch beneath the phono/DIN analogue outputs. Choosing the correct position for this is vital to achieving the best sound quality.

one of the hardest to pull off convincingly: reproducing the sound of human singing recorded in a natural acoustic. One of my very favourite examples of the art of capturing a fine signal in a complementary acoustic is an old recording of Tony Faulkner’s, now available as Scarborough Fair [Regis RRC1112]. Although it’s marred by print-through on the analogue master tape, it remains a compelling compilation of old English songs, masterfully performed and recorded.

SIMPLY MORE REAL
I chose the track ‘Turtle Dove’ – a heartfelt song of departure swearing unshakable fidelity to the lover left behind, which in tenor James Griffett’s expert hands could hardly be more moving. I compared exactly the same ripped file played by HDX from a USB stick and by the Mac/ RME from its hard disk.

Result: a clear win for the HDX, which combined greater dynamic authority with rock-solid location of Griffett’s voice. The performance was simply more real. Likewise when the voices increased to a small ensemble, and the resolution to 24/96, in ‘This Endris Night’ from the first AIX Records sampler DVD.

Upping the forces to symphony orchestra with another favourite – Classic Records’ 24/96 transfer of Rachmaninov’s Symphonic Dances [DAD 1004] from the original analogue recording by Turnabout Vox – also elicited a win for the HDX, but here by a narrower margin. While the HDX again excelled at providing a solid dynamic foundation, the Mac/ RME offered a little more ‘air’ and timbral variety.

As always with Naim kit, the HDX has an upgrade path that allows owners to improve sound quality without selling up and starting again. Until recently this upgrade path for the HDX was purely via the Burnby connector on the rear panel that allows the addition of an outboard power supply – either the XPS2 (£2850) or the PS555 (£4895). I had the opportunity to hear their effect when I visited Naim’s Salisbury HQ in preparation for this review. There’s no question that they deliver in respect of better instrumental separation, wider dynamic range and greater sheer grip on the musical proceedings.

But on brief acquaintance I’d say that the most cost-effective upgrade is the very latest to become available. For just £2000 you can add the new Naim DAC (itself upgradable with outboard power supplies) which lifts the HDX’s performance with supreme bang per buck. I didn’t have the opportunity to hear the ultimate HDX ensemble with both DAC and power supply upgrades in place, but I’ve no doubt the result is more impressive still.

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT
Naim’s HDX is a fine hard disk music source – one that will happily function as a standalone device for users who eschew the trapings of PC audio but which also offers network connectivity and a variety of control options for the more adventurous. Its sound is a clear cut above the hard disk norm, and it provides the reassurance of a well-proven path to extracting yet more from your original investment.

Sound Quality: 80%