

# HIFICRITIC



AUDIO REVIEW JOURNAL

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# Supernait + HiCap

MARTIN LOVED NAIM'S FULLY INTEGRATED SUPERNAIT, BUT HADN'T TRIED IT WITH THE HI-CAP UPGRADE... UNTIL NOW

MARTIN COLLOMS



Expensive accessory power supplies just don't have consumer appeal. They're simply not 'sexy'. Sure, Naim's *Superline* moving-coil phono stage doesn't come with a power supply as such; rather you have a choice of purchasing one of two types, resulting in two phono amps with quite distinct performances and very different prices.

Although Naim has had some success with its various outboard supplies, I have found that with some manufacturers' arrangements the ballyhoo over extra supplies has not delivered much benefit, and have found their prices hard to justify. It's a bit like putting magnesium wheels onto a 1.1litre Ford Fiesta. A self confessed degree of prejudice therefore led to an unconscionable delay in looking at a suggested power supply augmentation of the £2,475 *SUPERNAIT* (which I reckon is already jolly good just as it is, see *Vol2 No4*).

The *SUPERNAIT* has a moulded double connector on the back that links the power amp and pre-amp sections. This enables the former to supply power to the latter, and the latter signal to the former, and is designed to be easily removable to separate the two sections.

Turn off the amplifier, pull out the connector, and take a 5-pin 240 degree Naim cable to connect the *SUPERNAIT*'s pre-amp section direct to a powerful regulated accessory *Hi-Cap* supply (£1,055). Next take a 4-pin Naim cable and feed the pre-amp signal (which has been fed to and is correctly grounded via the *Hi-Cap*) from the *Hi-Cap*, back to the now 'open' power amp section input. This particular signal routing via the *Hi-Cap* supply preserves the integrity of the Naim system grounding method.

*SUPERNAIT* is then left powered up at all times, which is practical thanks to its low standby consumption. Next play some music to warm things up. Listen first, and then again after a day or two. (Note that our *SUPERNAIT* and *Hi-Cap* were already run in. New items need maybe two weeks to fully come on song. I thought that the *SUPERNAIT* was still improving, albeit more slowly, after a month).

How wrong I was to treat such upgrades with condescension. This was very clearly not a small change in performance. No weakling as it stands, the augmented *SUPERNAIT* seemed to have suddenly

put on muscle, and fast muscle at that. There was no argument from my listening companions about the sharper focus, the greater image depth and overall clarity, plus the purer sibilants and the more upbeat tempo which was demonstrated once the *Hi-Cap* was added to the amplifier. It seemed even less coloured than its normally neutral self, and dynamics were improved. Loud and soft contrasts were more explicit, micro dynamic detail was similarly improved, and this generally stronger, clearer character was underpinned by deeper, faster and more tuneful bass. The degree of improvement was quite surprising in context. Would it be rude to ask why the *SUPERNAIT* internal pre-amp power supply was not better in the first place? Nonetheless, what an simple and effective way to turbocharge a *SUPERNAIT* amplifier.

Taken overall, the pairing of *SUPERNAIT* and *Hi-Cap* was a pleasure to audition, seemingly conceding relatively little in general sound quality to a number of similarly powerful and much more costly 'audiophile' references. With *Hi-Cap* connected (and accorded its own shelf on the support furniture) that fine *SUPERNAIT* sound quality rating was lifted from an already fine 48 to a scorching, class leading 64 points. We consider the performance gain is absolutely commensurate with the additional cost, and in our view the combination represents a new £3,530 amplifier 'system' which may be highly recommended.

## PM COMMENT

Exactly one year ago I got the chance to review the *SUPERNAIT* for *HiFi+* magazine. Much as I appreciated the *SUPERNAIT*'s outstanding flexibility, I've long used Naim's top-of-the-line *NAC552/NAP500* pre-/power combo as a regular yardstick, and the subjective gulf between that four-box flagship and the integrated *SUPERNAIT* is probably why I was rather less enthusiastic than Martin and his associates about its sound quality.

I had found the *SUPERNAIT* good but not exceptional. And then I added an old but recently refurbished *Hi-Cap* to power the pre-amp separately – and sorely wished I'd done so a whole lot earlier. To these ears at least it simply transformed the sound quality, immediately bringing a substantial and obvious improvement. *SUPERNAIT*-with-*Hi-Cap* has greater poise and dynamic range, is better at getting feet tapping, has less 'character', a bigger soundstage, and the bass is tauter with less 'thump', and is well worth the £1,055 upgrade cost.

