

VPI'S PRIME SCOUT BLOWS THE VINYL WHISTLE!

hi-fi+



ISSN 1465-5950



REPRODUCING THE RECORDED ARTS NOVEMBER 2017 • 153

www.hifiplus.com

SUPERNOVA!

NAIM'S NEW UNITI NOVA AND CORE SHINES
NEW LIGHT ON YOUR DIGITAL MUSIC



BRINKMANN NYQUIST DAC
GOLD NOTE PH10 PHONO STAGE
KALISTA DREAMPLAY AND DAC
ULTRASONE NAOS HEADPHONE AMP



CHORD DOES IT AGAIN WITH THE EXCELLENT HUGO2!

Naim Audio Uniti Nova integrated streaming amplifier and Uniti Core music server

by Alan Sircom

This was a LONG time coming! Naim Audio announced the new versions of the Uniti products in the middle of 2016, with a view to rolling out the first products in October or November. And that's precisely what happened, except no-one asked Naim precisely which October or November. Reviewers who had bought products from the previous Uniti line were first in the queue for reviews (so my UnitiServe pushed *Hi-Fi+* up to the head of the line), but even so, we were asking after our Naim products at the Bristol Show in February, Munich High-End in May, and all points between.

Such is the power of Naim in the UK, there have been droves of people who have adopted an "It's OK... I'll wait" stance, when lining up for their new integrated streaming amplifier or server. Although a number of brands (most notably Hegel and Moon) have taken advantage of the Naim-shaped hole in the market for such products, Naim's faithful have remained wholly true to the cause, quite possibly because the products looked as if they were worth the wait.

Oh boy, were they worth the wait!

We received two products from Naim's Salisbury HQ; both in essence direct replacements of what went before. The Naim Uniti Core is a disc-ripping networked music server, directly replacing the UnitiServe that has been providing sterling service in that task for several years in my system, regardless of DAC or streamer. The Naim Uniti Nova is the

top of three one-box streamer/amplifiers from the brand: the Atom is the half-sized pocket rocket integrated (replacing the UnitiQute 2), the Star is the full-sized does-it-all device, complete with ripping or live-play CD drive (which replaces the Uniti 2), and the Nova is the big kahuna SuperUniti replacement. Those who obsess over the Naim catalogue will note the UnitiLite one-box player is not being replaced and has been quietly dropped.

The whole Uniti range has now moved from the traditional matt black livery with green lettering, to the more modern-looking brushed black with the logo laser cut into white back-lit clear acrylic. In the Nova and the other players, it also moves the volume control from the front panel to the top plate. These styling cues are part of a direction that works so well at the super high-end (Naim's Signature amplifiers) and at the entry point (the two Mu-so models). Only time will tell whether a similar stylistic change takes place in the Classic line. Personally, I think it's extraordinarily elegant and brings Naim's designs bang up to date, where arguably green on black is a bit '1990s' in approach.

If the Uniti products were merely reboxed versions of the older designs, gift-wrapped, and given some 2017-era production control techniques, the review could end here and many would still be happy. The legacy Uniti products still perform perfectly well and are as entertaining today as they were half a decade or more ago. But Naim took its time to make the new Uniti so much more.

Starting with the Core, this is a completely new design across the board. Hardware, operating system, ripping software, even the app used to drive it has changed. Any music server is essentially a single-task computer, but in fairness the UnitiServe was slightly more like a computer, albeit one that was built as bomb-proof as possible to survive spending years running in the background. The new player doesn't rely on a laptop power supply, for example, and it doesn't run on Windows! Instead, Naim spent years writing custom code for a Linux-based thin-client that can now support up to 12 streams, play anything up to 32-bit, 384kHz PCM files across UPnP, or act as a transport mechanism with a memory. It also comes diskless as standard, but includes a caddy and rear panel for fitting your hard disk of choice (Naim has a list of recommendations for both HDD and SSD options). It now runs from the standard Naim app, and no longer requires a separate n-Serve app. It even has a sleep mode!



The Core is a fine replacement to its predecessor in its own right, but used in tandem with products like the Uniti Nova it begins to offer significantly better functionality. Which leads us on to the Nova itself.

The three new Uniti amplifiers are the result of a four-and-a-half year project to substantially revise and improve upon the original Uniti platform. That says just how good the original Uniti platform was in that it still stands up as a viable 2017 service despite the first models appearing eight years ago. However, it's worth bearing in mind that high-resolution to the original Uniti was 16-bit, 48kHz and (if you could get them) 24-bit, 96kHz PCM files. Today, we are looking at up to 32-bit, 384kHz PCM and multiples of DSD. In addition, streaming was what you did with a bad head-cold, not a legitimate way of accessing high-resolution audio from an online music provider. Uniti appeared before the iPad and the system was essentially ported to the world of tablets and as a result the more text-led navigation of the older system gives way to a more up-to-date GUI. The new Uniti platform is built to live in an app-dominated world. This change also brought new formats into the Naim fold, including Apple AirPlay, Google Chromecast, and improved Wi-Fi connectivity.

This is relatively easy to write out, but the reality is a complete back to the blank page approach from Naim to ensure this latest Uniti platform is as robust and long-lasting as its predecessor. And that means everything right down to developing their own digital signal processing. Normally, that means writing a bit of code to augment the digital filtration of a particular DAC, in this case it meant writing their own unique digital filter.

Nova, however, stands out from the Uniti range as a showcase for the amplifier platform and the changes that can be brought to Naim's old centre of excellence. This 80W Class AB amplifier is very much in line with Naim's traditional power amplifier design, but the platform's front-end is a radical departure because it operates in the digital domain, converting the two analogue inputs into the digital domain, and 'D/A-ing' the preamp outputs. Whether this is a presage for future developments in the Classic line, or simply the best way of handling analogue inputs amid all that digital domain, only time will tell.

The change to the Nova is also a philosophical one. The latest generation of Uniti products play to a very different audience than Naim's classic line, and the physical differences only serve to highlight this. These are not products designed for the Top Trumps player, where every specification is poured over and used to score points off fellow enthusiasts. Indeed, you have to dig deep on Naim's website to even find the specifications of the Nova. Instead, this speaks to a new generation of music lover who enjoys a damn good sound, but doesn't need all the audiophile baggage that so often comes with that sound.

I used the Nova against the SuperUniti on a range of loudspeakers, from the charmingly musical Neat Iota Alpha right up ►



► to the Wilson Audio Duette II (more on that later), and at every turn I kept coming back to the Nova. There are a few of us in the *Hi-Fi+* offices who have used the SuperUniti extensively, and now I have to tell them that it's time for an upgrade. The SuperUniti was and is a great amplifier, but the Nova means you have to add a suffix: ...of its time. The day you compare a bedded-in Nova to the SuperUniti is the day you trade in your SuperUniti. It's almost that simple. The digitised line inputs hold a smoothness and softness that is not matched by the networked or digital audio platforms, but if you use it as a one-stop-shop, it's outstanding!

Used as a DAC/amplifier or better still as a streaming amplifier design, the Uniti Nova is the coming together of the best version of the Naim streaming platform with an amplifier that seems to think itself a miniaturised version of the Statement, or at least a NAC-N272/NAP-200 DR combination. Sonically though, there are elements of Statement in the performance and the way it opens up the soundstage more than many Naim amplifiers do, with the same clean, fast, and tactile bass and a suprisingly lithe and natural midrange. I say 'surprisingly' not because it's a Naim amp "and they just do Pace, Rhythm and Timing, don't they?", but this midrange was surprising from any integrated amplifier that isn't three times the size and four times the price.

I keep coming back to the SuperUniti because for so many listeners, it's an old friend. And for so many of those 'so many listeners' it is their one-stop-shop. They don't hook it to a turntable or a CD player – it's just the amplifier,

a network storage device, and speakers. And those listeners are going to find the Nova more exciting sounding, more dynamic, more detailed, more fluid, more natural, with a bigger, deeper, and wider soundstage, and conveying more of a sense of musical intent by the performers. It doesn't matter one jot whether those performers are singing plainsong or indulging in some Norwegian death metal, it is just so much fun to listen to, and so much fun to be around.

Now back to the Duette II. This is the very model of a 'mullet' system, where the loudspeakers cost several times the price of the amplifier. Sometimes this works surprisingly well, sometimes not so well. It works extremely well with the SuperUniti, but the Nova takes it to a new level. This is one of those combinations that makes you question the need to take things further. Yes, inserting tens or even hundreds of thousands more on a system will improve it, but the joy of the Nova is it will not 'better' it.

In fact, the biggest downside I can think of is the mildly textured solid aluminium top plate of the previous generation of Uniti model ran almost perfectly warm enough for one of ►

“When the main negative is feline disapproval, you are on to a winner!”



► my two cats to spend most of the day neatly curled up asleep. The shiny brushed surface, the control interface and the groove running through the middle of the top-plate gives him less sleeping comfort, and he now spends much of the day giving me that “I blame you” look that cats perfected in Ancient Egypt. When the main negative is feline disapproval, you are on to a winner! Actually, it gets better.

As we went to press on this, Naim served up a beta version of its Roon ready software for testing. This adds an order of magnitude more ‘awesome’ to an already bursting bag of superlatives. Part of the reason Naim’s servers are so robust is the file system is a rigid hierarchy, which you don’t futz around with because it works so well. However, for those who don’t think in quite the same linear way, it can be frustrating (I’ve been told – the truth is once you have used Naim’s hierarchy for as long as I have, other systems seem convoluted and disorganised). Roon allows you to remove such file structures to the ‘forget about it’ part of your brain, and integrate your music into Roon’s music-led jaunt through the catalogue, seamlessly blending TIDAL with your own collection in almost any way you can think of, should you so desire.

This isn’t simply some rebadged product from the last generation. This is a true revolution in performance from Naim, and both come with the highest recommendation possible. If this is the future, it looks and sounds great! Very highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Naim Uniti Core

Type: App-controlled network music server

Audio Inputs: CD-ripper, 2× USB A (front/rear)

Audio Outputs: 1× BNC S/PDIF

CD formats supported: Audio CD (Red Book, including CD-R)

Digital formats supported: WAV – up to 32bits/384kHz, FLAC and AIFF – up to 24bit/384kHz, ALAC (Apple Lossless) – up to 24bit/384kHz, MP3 – up to 48kHz, 320kbit (16 bit), AAC – up to 48kHz, 320kbit (16 bit), OGG and WMA – up to 48kHz (16 bit), DSD – 64 and 128Fs

Network connection: Ethernet (10/100/1000Mbps)

Storage: Up to 100,000 tracks to internal or external Network Attached Storage

Choice of internal HDD or SSD hard drive (up to 8TB)

Network output: Serve up to 12 network-connected players via UPnP™

Dimensions (H×W×D): 95 × 214 × 265mm

Weight: 7kg

Price: £1,899

Naim Uniti Nova

Type: Integrated Network Streaming Amplifier

Power output: 80W per channel into 8 ohms

Digital Inputs: 2× Optical TOSLink (up to 24bit/96kHz), 2× Coaxial RCA (up to 24bit/192kHz, DoP 64Fs), 1× BNC (up to 192kHz, DoP 64Fs), 1× HDMI, 2× Type A USB sockets (one on front panel)

Analogue inputs: 1× RCA pair, 1× DIN

Network inputs: Ethernet (10/100Mbps), WiFi (802.11 b/g/n/ac with internal antenna), Bluetooth (AptX HD), Internet Radio, UPnP™ (hi-res streaming)

Analogue outputs: 1× stereo power amplifier output, 1× RCA sub/pre output, 1× 3.5mm headphone jack

Internet Radio: vTuner premium 5

Streaming options: Chromecast Built-In, Apple AirPlay, TIDAL, Spotify®

Connect, Supported audio formats: WAV – up to 32bits/384kHz, FLAC and AIFF – up to 24bit/384kHz, ALAC (Apple Lossless) – up to 24bit/384kHz, MP3 – up to 48kHz, 320kbit (16 bit), AAC – up to 48kHz, 320kbit (16 bit), OGG and WMA – up to 48kHz (16 bit), DSD – 64 and 128Fs, Gapless playback supported on all formats. All formats to 384kHz maximum over wireless network.

Dimensions (H×W×D): 95 × 432 × 265mm

Weight: 13kg

Price: £4,199

Manufactured by: Naim Audio

URL: naimaudio.com

Tel: +44(0)1722 426000