



Qb-ism

The Mu-so Qb is Naim's most affordable system yet. **Ed Selley** finds out if its small dimensions can produce a big sound

It's fair to say that Naim's product development over the last few years has taken the company in directions it would have been hard to imagine back at the start of the millennium. One of the most radical of the recent offerings is the Mu-so all-in-one network music system (HFC 391). This broke new ground by integrating the speakers into the main chassis and introducing an aesthetic that has more in common with the

flagship Statement pre/power than the classic black and green livery of the rest of its familiar range. Mu-so appears to have been a considerable success, and it doesn't come as too much of a surprise that the company has been working on a smaller version. The Mu-so Qb takes the same functionality as the original, but reduces the size of the chassis down to a cube, hence the name. Naim believes that the Qb will serve to attract new customers to the brand

– something the original Mu-so has done very well – and also allow existing customers to get up and running with multi-room. New customers are certainly going to feel like they're getting a fair amount of bang for their buck. The Mu-so Qb offers UPnP streaming over wired and wireless connections (the latter being limited to 48kHz), AirPlay, apt-X Bluetooth and optical and line-in connections. It also natively supports Tidal and Spotify and offers internet radio services including the BBC's listen again and HLS streams. The new amplifier and speaker arrangement differs radically from its big brother. There is no room for the slot port arrangement, which means that the Mu-so Qb uses a pair of passive bass radiators on either side of the unit to augment and tune the bass response. These are then joined by a single bass driver, two midrange drivers and two tweeters, each with its own Class D amplifier. This is a considerable collection of drivers to

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mount in a relatively small space and as the smaller dimensions of the Qb preclude the use of MDF, Naim has developed a glass-filled polymer chassis that mounts the drivers. This looks a little like the severed head of Marvin the Android from *Hitchhikers Guide To The Galaxy*, but is immensely strong while taking up little room. With three sides of the cube being devoted to drivers and covered by a hinged grille, the rear is both the heatsink and the mount for the amplifiers, power supply and decoding hardware as well as the relevant network and input connections. The top features the same rotary control as the Mu-so, which places a white-on-black touchscreen display inside a wonderfully weighted volume knob. The revised dimensions of the Mu-so Qb result in a more elegant-looking product than the original and design features like the acrylic plinth are carried over and work superbly. In low lighting, with its illuminated plinth and volume control, this is a fantastic-looking product and one of the best pieces of design on the market at or anywhere near this price. The fit and finish is also extremely good. Everything feels solid and

carefully assembled and the materials involved are of an excellent quality and look and feel entirely contemporary. The setup process is simple and the effective Naim control app is extremely easy to use, well laid out and completely stable on both Android and iOS platforms. Even so, the volume dial on the unit is sufficiently tactile that you find yourself coming up with excuses to walk over and use it. Like the larger Mu-so, Naim offers customers the choice of a variety of different coloured grilles so that it will blend into its surroundings. The only slight detractor to the Qb's spec is that no remote handset is supplied as standard (one is available as an option, costing £9.99). The app is excellent and manages to tie the extensive functionality together extremely well, but there are times when frantically unlocking your phone to access it you miss a more conventional handset. Happily, if you already have a Naim streamer, that remote will also operate the Qb.

Sound quality

Once up and running on a network – a process that as noted is simplicity itself – the Naim does a great deal right. First and perhaps most importantly, it retains the same impressive ability to gently subvert the laws of physics as its predecessor.

With some punchy tracks from Nothing But Thieves, it sounds bigger and more spacious than you'd reasonably expect. It also avoids sounding over processed. Given its size and the bass extension it produces, it's fair to say processing is always present but it never draws attention to itself over the music. This effortlessness is also apparent further up the frequency response. The presentation is full and open with a more commendable stereo spread than might be anticipated from a single-point source. It isn't perfect, of course – there is a very slight graininess to the upper midrange that is apparent across all sources, but this is never overly pronounced – but even at higher levels it sounds powerful and controlled. Best results come with the Loudness setting switched off, and unless you are listening at very low volumes, it can rob the Mu-so Qb of some of the delicacy and agility that it otherwise possesses. Given that the Mu-so Qb supports a good amount of connectivity options, performance is consistent across the multiple inputs. Admittedly, it can't work miracles – listen to low-bitrate internet radio stations and it can sound a little thin and strained, but higher bitrates via Spotify streams are very listenable. Wire it up to an Ethernet connection and send

high-resolution material to it – in this case the 24/96kHz version of David Bowie's *Blackstar*, and it doesn't really show the leap forwards in performance that the format deserves. For many customers, though, the world of hi-res is likely to be something they'll visit occasionally, and it makes much more sense for the Mu-so Qb to deliver most of its performance with more typical CD-quality material. The HLS streams that the BBC offers are also impressively listenable. Where the Mu-so Qb truly excels, though, is as a partner to an existing Naim system. If it is on the same network as a streamer or Uniti system, it can be selected to become a slave to that zone and play whatever the main system is playing. Up to four rooms can be configured in this way. In practise this works brilliantly with no latency or lag issues and the real testament to the Mu-so Qb is that if you walk out of the room where the main system resides and continue listening on what is a far smaller and less expensive device, the same propulsive force and willingness to get to the musical message is just as present here as it is with more expensive equipment.

Conclusion

And it is this ability to give customers a taste of the more expensive Naim products that really gives the Mu-so Qb an edge at this price point. This is an extremely assured and capable performer that makes music in an effortless and exceedingly enjoyable way. If you buy one, on an immediate level, you will have a system that offers exceptional flexibility and performance. On a wider level, it offers a taster of the brand and for people that want to move further up the hierarchy, it will continue to work brilliantly as part of a wider system. Throw in those lovely looks and you have a real winner ●

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Naim Mu-so Qb
- ORIGIN**
UK/China
- TYPE**
Network streaming music system
- WEIGHT**
5.6kg
- DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**
218 x 210 x 212mm
- FEATURES**
 - UPnP; apt-X; AirPlay; wi-fi
 - 24-bit/192kHz DAC
 - Tidal and Spotify integrated support
 - Quoted power output: 4x 50W; 1x 100W
 - Multi-room functionality
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Naim Audio
- TELEPHONE**
01722 426600
- WEBSITE**
naimaudio.com



A 'top-off' view of the Qb's bass driver, pair of midrange drivers and two tweeters – squint at it and you'll see Marvin the Android...

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Refined but punchy performance; features; build; looks
- VALUE FOR MONEY**
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slightly grainy midrange; no remote as standard
- BUILD QUALITY**
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A brilliantly executed shrinking of the Mu-so concept that is likely to please many new owners
- FEATURES**
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★