

Naim's ND555 network player revisited — with two power supplies



It may well be confusing to some readers that Naim's network player may be purchased in three price stages: in the UK prices these are £13,500, £20,999, and just under £28,000. The lowest price is for the ND555 only, without power supply, as it can be operated with older 555 power supplies Naim owners may already possess; the higher prices reflect staged power supply improvements.

Reviewed in depth by Andrew Everard and myself in the Jan-March 2019 issue, the time has come to revisit the Naim ND555/ 555PS DR after 12 months' intensive use, but also consider it in 'maximum upgrade' form, with dual 555PS DR power supplies. This comes to a total of £27,998: inescapably high-end audio territory, but then this three-box configuration is also aimed at compatibility with Naim's flagship NAIM Statement amplification, with its price just shy of £179,000. The Statement pre/power combination was reviewed in Vol 9 No 2.

Readers may recall an early difficulty encountered during the original ND555 review: during the auditioning a subjective shortfall in musical timing was felt to be present when in direct comparison with my well-used and thoroughly run-in NDS, which had recently also benefited from an upgrade to the latest low noise 555PS DR supply.

Unlike most audio systems, which tend to associate signal and chassis grounding in a semi-random manner, Naim long ago adopted hierarchical grounding where the primary signal source, especially the phono preamplifier, but in its absence, the tuner or CD player, was defined as the main ground and that following components were referred back to this more critical component.

This is a linear grounding concept where there cannot be a harmful ground loop. If present a loop can in some cases induce hum into the sensitive

LP phono section where signal levels are very low. Secondly, for higher level signals, e.g. tuner and CD, even where the presence of a ground loop may not be directly audible, it can still upset the designed hierarchical grounding and thus subtly degrade the performance. This aspect is frequently an element of the ability of a connected audio system to fully reproduce rhythm and timing in music.

Where appropriate, higher end Naim signal sources have a rear panel switch which may be set to 'ground' if that unit is the primary source, or to 'float' if it is another source further back in the chain, such as a phono preamplifier, thereby optimising the system grounding connections.

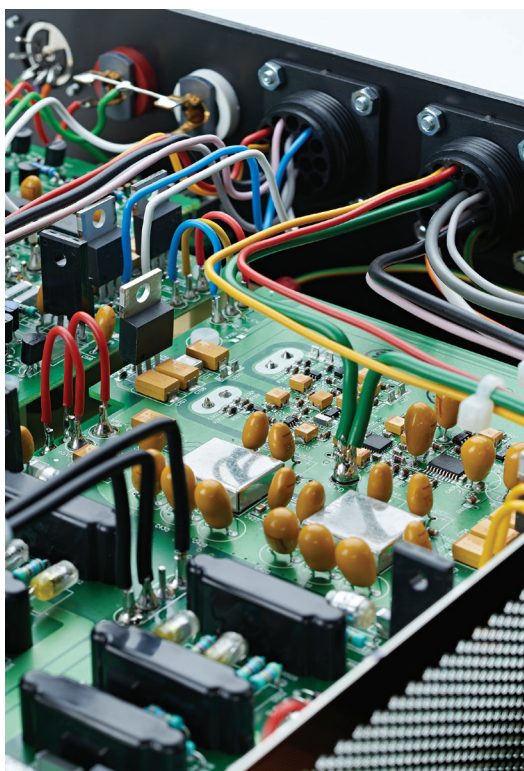
In my ND555 review a year back, I noted that:

At this point we noticed that the signal grounding switch on the back panel of the 555 was set to the 'left' when the unit is viewed from the front, noting at this point that my system didn't have the otherwise source grounded Naim Superline Phono pre-amplifier connected. As such, without another source, the correct setting for the ND555 was for the alternative 'to the right' position, making this source dominant.

Previously, changes to this setting with other equipment had certainly been helpful to sound quality, but not transformational; now they most certainly were for the ND555, with still further improved image scale, perspective, richness, micro detail, depth, weight, plus a strange and appealing psychoacoustic impression that

The System

Constellation Inspiration 1.0 pre, Townshend Allegri Plus and Reference control units; Naim NAP500DR power amplifier, Constellation Performance Centaur II 500 stereo power amplifier, Naim SuperLine phono pre, with Linn LP12 player with Keel chassis and Radikal motor control, Naim ARO arm, Lyra Delos cartridge, Naim UnitiCore network server and S/PDIF source; Linn Klimax Katalyst streamer-DAC; Naim ND555 network player, 555 PS(DR) Dual supply, Wilson Audio Sabrina and Sasha DAW, Magico M2-MPods and Magico S511-SPods, Quad ESL63, BBC LS3/5a (15ohm) speakers; Naim FRAIM racks; Transparent XL MM2, Naim NAC a5 speaker cables, Naim Super Lumina, Transparent MM2 and van den Hul Carbon TFU interconnect cables.



the soundstage was indeed properly 'grounded', while before, if only by reflection, it seemed to be mildly floating off the floor.

A key Naim design philosophy concerns separating the 'analogue' processing sections from those responsible for digital operations: the latter aspect has become increasingly complex in recent years, not to forget the necessary allowance for connectivity to multiple sources and formats. The psychoacoustics of the differences obtained by such separated design are fascinating, but ultimately our listeners had to get down to assessing the overall performance arriving via the loudspeakers and to ignore the technologies employed

Adding a second supply

The installation of the second power supply for this ND555 review was straightforward, merely requiring all units to be powered down before the changeover is made. The second 555PS DR was here supported in a convenient position on a spare Fraim shelf, also local to the pair of Naim Burndy-connector-terminated power cables already attached to the ND555.

The two power supplies are ideally located on their own shelves of a good audio support: making a triple stack of these three audio components isn't a good idea, as it will partly negate the mechanical and electromagnetic design in which the ND555 is designed to be largely isolated both from hum fields and transformer vibration. Connecting that second 'digital' section supply cable from the

ND555 to the second supply requires the avoidance of crossings or loops of cable, but no settings or blanking plugs are required: the ND555 power input sockets are physically coded and are wired internally for the correct connections.

The putative benefits of the second supply include physical separation of the analogue and digital supply systems, which separation is continued within the ND555 to maximise signal to noise ratio and resolution for the analogue section, and to minimise jitter in the digital circuits. The ND555 streamer with single supply is already very good indeed so this upgrade might be regarded as a finesse rather than as a substantial step.

In any case, whatever level might be achieved there would be little point if the replay system was not capable of resolving it. We were fortunate to have loan of the highly transparent Magico M2 loudspeakers, in for review at this time, and also the latest iteration of the Townshend autotransformer line controller, the new Allegri Reference, both of which products proved to be very helpful in resolving these finer differences in sound quality. The second power supply had been run for in some weeks before arrival and we added a further 5 weeks towards the completion of the review, though some smaller gains may be expected over a further 6 months or so of use.

Sound Quality

From late 2018 the standard ND555/555PS DR set-up had been running in well, slowly maturing in clarity, delicacy and dynamics. Almost imperceptibly, week by week, it improved, and when you look back at the listening notes the gain was plain to see and hear, about 8-10%. That hint of two-dimensionality has fully dissipated and the player has become very coordinated and transparent, with fine timing and dynamics. Each time the system has been upgraded, the ND555 combo has kept up – and this has been most welcome.

Adding the second supply for this review did not provide an immediate and obvious gain but it was left to warm up and kept running for a few days. So initially the improvement was not a 'hit you in the face' effect, more a 'cleaning of the windows', or perhaps one to be gained from a periodic realignment and re-tightening of all equipment supports and spikes. However, on returning to the system after a week or so, it was now obvious that matters had improved. As the new supply continued to settle in, I was better able to appreciate the subtle refinements now on offer, and later on found those which were not so subtle after all.

I began to appreciate that the soundstage was significantly larger, deeper, better illuminated yet

REVIEW



neither heightened, brightened or exaggerated. Accompanying this aspect was a sense of inherent deep quality and musicality, with CD feed sounding more like analogue master sources. That is not to say that the potential for speed, tunefulness and clout from digital programme at low frequencies was diluted, but rather that these aspects were better integrated in the entire sound.

In addition, previously rough, congested and compressed-sounding mixes were unravelled, made clearer, better focused, more dynamic and more deeply imaged. The overall sound quality was now seamless, from the lowest bass to the highest treble. Vocals were obviously more articulate and communicated more satisfyingly.

When the loaner Magico M2 loudspeakers were finally, optimally installed and calibrated, the whole system took off to significantly higher level. Here the ND555-Dual 555PSDR absolutely kept pace with this upgraded system. Later

Townshend's latest Allegri Reference passive line controller joined the party, and this made a further contribution to higher system performance.

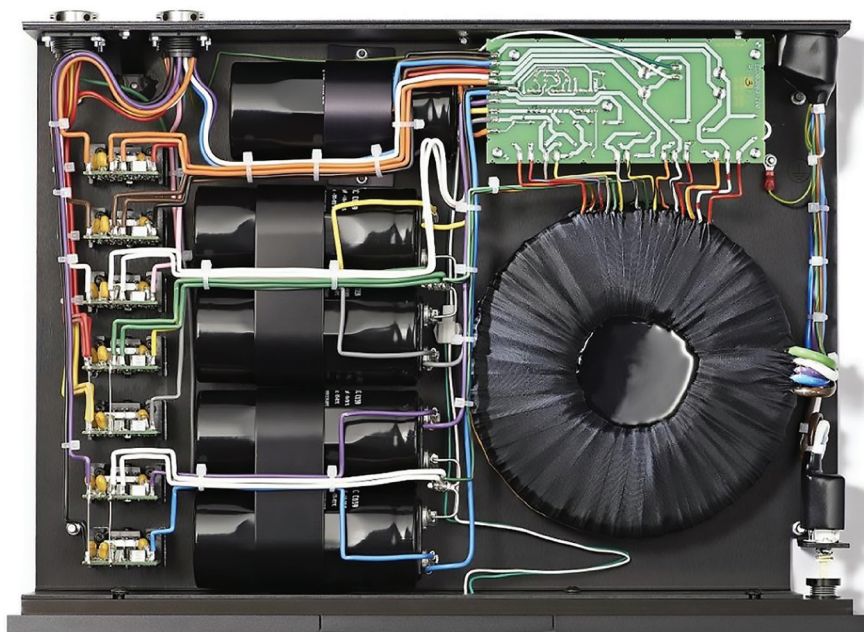
The particularly high level of transparency and definition from the Naim 'three boxer' was now frequently jaw-dropping, and invited listening for hours on end. Following the usual scramble for impressive demo tracks, and having satisfied ourselves that we were experiencing something very special, I then chose a recording that I had used extensively early in my career, the well-reviewed Vivaldi 'Four Seasons' with Neville Marriner conducting in 1970, engineered by Stan Goodall at Decca. Then issued on LP, for reference I was also loaned a 38cm/s copy master by Decca studios, who were just down the road in Broadhurst Gardens, 10 minutes' walk away. With multiple copies of this LP on hand these resources were tasked with supporting the auditioning of numerous turntables and pickup cartridges.



However one particular product review from this time remains vivid in my memory: that of the Goldmund Reference Turntable, which took months to prepare and ended up as a lengthy 24 printed pages. It was commissioned by Harry Pearson at The Absolute Sound and was published late 1988. A truly remarkable product, at that time the Goldmund combo dug deeply into this by now very familiar Decca/Marriner LP recording, with an almost revelatory recovery of detail, imaging and not least performance quality.

35 years later, now replaying the first of the mid-1980s CD transfer of the Vivaldis, uploaded to the Naim UnitiCore server, streaming via couple of metres of Belden Cat6e made up by Blue Jeans, and rendering via the three-box Naim player, I was taken back to my Goldmund Reference experience, so much so that I played the entire work without a break. What had so impressed and entertained me was repeated, no ifs, no buts; no arguments about digital or streaming, simply musical pleasure.

The bass quality and transparency offered by the system, which had now been optimised for the fully installed Magico M2 loudspeakers was remarkable in many respects and this Naim player fully met this challenge. Further, the M2's waveform coherence and minimal colouration provided jaw dropping transparency and image depth; again, this standard was easily met by the review Naim ND555 'triple stack'. This supercharged streamer replay took hold of the Magicos by the neck and shook them like dogs, fully in command of their dynamics, upbeat timing, stereo imaging and sheer performance quality, and the sound quality was still improving, albeit more slowly, during the extended review period.



Dylan's *Man in the Long Black Coat* from *Oh Mercy* in 24bit/192kHz was exemplary, and spell-binding. With careful consideration, and with comparison to previous references the three-box combination ND555/2x 555PS DR attained an outstanding sound quality score of 470 on my controversial open-ended scale – the best yet.

All in all, the player's remaining input and output facilities demonstrated similarly improved quality – including the SPDIF input, and not least the USB-A for stick replay – but with one exception. While experimenting with settings, it was found that the best quality was obtained when the ND555 wasn't processing and serving incoming audio data to send back out over the network in what Naim calls 'server mode'. The Wi-Fi aerials also remained uninstalled.

Tempting as it may have been, we also avoided the internal software controlled digital volume control. This was set to the default setting of fixed and the software switch in the App menu set to 'off'. The sound quality of this internal app-controlled volume control was considered to be significantly retrograde, though it could perhaps be invoked for casual or party use when required, again using the Naim app settings.

Conclusions

Is an investment in the second 555PS DR supply worth it? This will depend on your system and aspirations, but is there a better place to spend this amount of money, or is this power supply addition the worthy completion of sequence of steps up the Naim performance ladder, here to maximise the sound quality of the ND555 network player?

In addition, concerning outright purchase, is this three-box combo a contender as one of the best digital sound sources available? Well, I have heard a good few of the competition and consider that if this Naim offering is properly cabled, with clean power feed, and is well supported on great platforms, it compares well with designs at up to twice the price, and then some.

In particular, the immense grip on bass lines and dynamics, and not least on musical timing, is likely unrivalled. It has also broken through any previous historic company barriers to the reproduction of natural timbres, these virtues combined with massive, sound stages wide, deep and fully focused, imbued with excellent detail.

The overall quality is very similar to that of the exceptional Naim Statement pre/power amplification, and I consider this three-box network player stands as a fitting partner to the Statement electronics – and to many other truly high-end systems.

Audio Excellence, without a shadow of a doubt!