

HIFICRITIC

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DESIGNING OUT THE ROOM

The very complex and radical BeoLab 90 might well be a major step in room-proofing loudspeakers

REQUEST THE BEAST

An SSD audiophile server/DAC/pre-amp, conceived in the USA and built in Switzerland.

BOWERS & WILKINS 803 D3

Andrew Everard reports on an all-new model that joins a re-invented flagship speaker range

A NEW WORLD ORDER?

Julian Musgrave's polemic suggests that the very nature of change in high end audio has changed.

NAIM NAP 300 DR

Chris Binns tries one of Naim's recently revised power amplifiers

MUSIC & MORE

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Metrum Pavane
Audio Note KegoN Balanced
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Naim NAP 300 DR
Bowers & Wilkins 803 D3
Constellation Inspiration
Entotem Plato
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Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 800
Chord Mojo
Ophidian Mambo
Ophidian Minimo
Ophidian Mojo
G9 Audio NERO MkII





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I think we at *HIFICRITIC* may well have a little local difficulty, which probably comes down to our various and sometimes very different lifestyle choices. I recently purchased a Naim *NAC S1*, as I've always used Naim's top pre-amp. Now that it's installed I'm well pleased with the sound quality, but find myself a trifle discombobulated by a couple of its features.

When I looked back at MC's review I found that he described the fact that the *NAC S1* has eight line-level inputs of various kinds, but failed to mention that only five of the eight are actually available at any one time. My previous *NAC 552* (and its '52 predecessor) had six inputs and even then I found myself struggling (and could happily have used seven). I then discovered that the new pre-amp didn't have any form of 'record out' option (the '552 had three!), which is a feature that I occasionally find useful too (admittedly usually when reviewing amps without remote control!).

The third demerit concerned the handset, which MC described as: "a superbly engineered, illuminated milled alloy remote control". Although I like the button illumination, I would have described it as pretentious, too heavy and too bulky. My ultimate handset is the dinky little device used to control Apple TV. It measures just 120x30x5mm (LxWxD), weighs next to nothing, and has just seven buttons (arguably only five are really needed for a pre-amp).

Don't get me wrong. I'm not in the least unhappy with the new pre-amp. It sounds quite lovely, but its arrival does mean that I'll have to make some adjustments to my lifestyle. I reckon I can live with the lack of 'rec out'; I may well be able to find a way round the handset problem too; and the acquisition of a couple of leads will probably sort out the input limitations.

However, the latter has drawn attention to a point that I've been pondering since I reviewed the excellent Audio Music *R-T1* two-box valve pre-amplifier (distributed by LW Audio) for another magazine a year or two back. That device certainly sounded very good indeed, but because it had just three line inputs it was quite impractical from my point of view.

But not from everybody else's perspectives it would seem. A couple of our contributors tend to use just one input on their pre-amps, at least partly I believe because they have a dedicated 'music room' which is separate from the rest of the house. One even told me that a single connected input is the route to the finest sound quality, which may indeed be the case, but is it real-world relevant?

Now that tone controls have lost their audiophile credibility, the only real point of having a pre-amp (or one that's built into an integrated amplifier) is to change volume and switch between inputs. I guess we'd all like to be able to have a separate music room in our lives, but to omit one of these functions purely for audiophile reasons does seem uncomfortably close to suffering from an OCD.

Paul Messenger
Editor

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Naim NAP 300 DR

CHRIS BINNS TRIES OUT ONE OF NAIM'S RECENTLY REVISED POWER AMPLIFIERS

Is it just me, or does it happen to us all with increasing regularity as we get older? Those moments of bewildered reflection triggered by an event that reminds us of just how unbelievably swift has been the passing of time. On this particular occasion the glum process was triggered by the realisation that it is over thirteen years since I first encountered and reviewed the *NAP 300*. Back then it was part of a new generation of Naim Audio power amplifiers that had kicked off with the long awaited *NAP 500*, a range flagship that was only recently deposited with the *Statement* launch.

Although considerably less powerful than the *500*, something about the *300* got under my skin and stayed there. Sure, I've had amplifiers with more grunt and possibly some that have been a little more open in a 'valve/tube' kind of way. But very few that I have listened to can match its sheer musical coherence and an ability to maintain a fine balance of very positive attributes across a wide range of music and partnering equipment.

It has therefore become the amplifier that I go back to in my main system more often than not, and it has also proved a superlative tool for monitoring during some difficult recording and mixing sessions, where its capability for accurately driving near- and mid-field monitors has been greatly admired by several high profile record producers.

Whereas the performance and reliability of Naim's first generation of amplifiers relied heavily on working within the confines of an all Naim system, the *300* has proved highly successful running outside that envelope (with a degree of common sense) and would seem to

be much more universal in its use. My respect for its capabilities has not diminished over time.

In the wake of the first *Statement* amplifiers to come out of the factory, rumours of updated versions for some of the existing line up of classic power amps were confirmed earlier this year, with the *250* and *300* being the first in line, and now they're here. Given my high regard for the original, I was intrigued by the opportunity to listen to a new *300 DR*.

Visually, there is nothing to distinguish the new amplifier from its predecessor, apart from the addition of DR to the label on the back. It's still a two-box design, locating the transformer, rectifiers and reservoir caps in one enclosure, and the regulation and amplification in the other, connected by two heavy-duty Burndy cables. This helps isolate the more sensitive circuitry from the potentially noisy environment of large power supply components (no doubt increasingly significant as we become aware of the influence of mechanical interference and vibration on performance). The power supply unit has not undergone any changes, so I was able to slot the new amplifier in with my original PS.

First impressions of the *DR* version were both enlightening and informative, and within seconds it had become obvious to me this was a very different sounding amplifier: more upfront in character but with a very natural and open performance that was both intriguing and genuinely exciting. A slight hardness or 'glare' was apparent in the upper mid, which ironically had nothing to do with the amplifier at all; a small phase error in the crossover of the loudspeakers I was using had gone unnoticed with the original *300* but was ruthlessly exposed (and easily resolved) by the more lively *DR*.

While the *300 DR* that arrived had already had a certain amount of use, it has continued to evolve and settle down over the last few weeks. While I'm not one to overstate the importance of running in, it has been fascinating to hear the performance unfurl and become more cohesive as a whole.

Well nearly: everything seemed to be slotting into place just fine except the bass performance, which lacked some of the precision that could be clearly heard in the midrange and top end, and didn't seem to gel with the rest of the music. The decision was made to replace my original power supply unit with a new and suitably run in unit, as it was possible that the smoothing capacitors might





have gone a little soft after thirteen years. And so it was. By doing so my reservations regarding the lower registers were all but dispelled, and the performance was considerably elevated.

DR Technology

Although they share the *DR* designation with an earlier pre-amp power supply upgrade, this is something of a misnomer when applied to the new power amplifiers. Discrete regulation (*DR*) has to date involved replacing the longstanding *LM317* integrated circuit used to power the circuitry in pre-amps (and active crossovers) with a new board of discrete components. While this might be applicable to Naim's smaller power amps, the regulation used in the bigger amps from the *NAP 250* upwards is something different altogether. Capable of delivering tens of Amps when necessary, these are (and always have been) made up of discrete components, with not a single integrated circuit in sight.

Research carried out for the massive *Statement* amplifier led to a redesign of this circuit, resulting in far lower noise and superior current delivery. It now supplies current to the amplifier section *via* a complementary pair of power transistors, whereas the earlier version used NPN type devices for both the positive and negative rails. (The actual output stage still has a quasi-complementary configuration using just a single pair of identical devices, remaining true to the original circuit and company ethos of avoiding multiple pairs as far as possible.)

Naim has a history of collaboration with specialist semiconductor manufacturer Semelab that dates back to the early 1980s and the introduction of the *NA001* output transistor (as a more reliable and robust replacement for the generic *BDY56/58* used in the original *NAP 160* and *250*). Such a long association underpins the development of

very specific and finely tuned devices for use in the *Statement* electronics, namely the *NA009CN/P* that is now incorporated in the new *DR* series (with the exception of the *NAP 200*). (I can't easily think of another amplifier manufacturer that has the scope or ability to control design right down to the component level.)

Alongside new semiconductors, improved mounting techniques and materials allow better thermal stability and lower capacitance at a crucial point in the circuit. [Martin Colloms explained all of these aspects in some detail in his review of the *Statement* pre-/power amplifier (*Vol9, No2*), so I need not go into too much detail here.]

Sound Quality

To get the comparisons out of the way, the *300 DR* is a better amp than the original *NAP 300* in every respect. I wouldn't have guessed that these seemingly innocuous modifications could have made such a big difference, but was able to have both versions warmed up and running side by side, and therefore hear the differences directly.

The *DR*'s bottom end had greater extension and better definition, sounding noticeably tighter and with greater control, while at the same time providing more 'kick' and superior dynamics. The midrange definitely felt as though it had greater energy and impact, with a more forward presentation that was both informative and honest, but was still entirely integrated with the rest of the spectrum. And the top end was considerably more refined, open, spacious and more natural in its quality. I use a speaker system that incorporates the spectacularly good RAAL 7020 ribbon tweeter (*HIFICRITIC Vol5 No3*), and the improvements in definition and airiness were quite breathtaking, particularly with violins and cymbals.

HIFICRITIC AUDIO EXCELLENCE

Manufacturer's Specification

Naim Audio NAP 300 DR power amplifier

Analogue Input 2 x XLR
Input Impedance 18kΩ

Gain +29dB

Frequency Response -3dB at 2Hz and 70kHz

Minimum Load Impedance 2ohms

Speaker Outputs L & R, 4mm 'banana' sockets

Power Output 90W/channel, 8ohms

Transient power 500VA

Mains Supply 100V, 115V, 230V; 50 or 60Hz

Size (HxWxD) 87 x 432 x 314 mm (excl. 300PS)

Price £7,295

Upgrade Price (for NAP 300 owners) 300PS, Burndy cable £1,495 (£1,850 inc service)

But by dissecting the performance of the DR I'm doing it a bit of a disservice, as one of its greatest strengths lies in its unobtrusive ability to combine all the above attributes and present a cohesive performance with a variety of different music. The original 300 was good at this, but the 300 DR is much better, sounding unshackled when compared to its predecessor.

This is less a case of greater exuberance (although sometimes it did sound that way) but rather a freedom from the mechanics of 'hi-fi' reproduction, allowing the music to exist on its own terms rather than being dictated by the system. I have found (or maybe I really have grown up) that one of the distinguishing features of a really great system is an ability to play quietly, without the music losing all sense of purpose. It's still great to wind it up on occasion, and I still do, but a number of high-end speakers and amplifiers that I have listened to have a very definite level beneath which they cease to function on a communicative level; the music just loses all sense of life, dynamics and expression.

At these lower levels I was aware that the 300 DR was maintaining the full recorded dynamics of the music, particularly at the frequency extremes, and it still managed to fill the room with music effectively, whereas the old 300 sounded considerably less distinct, more lacklustre and ponderous, with a reduced ability to engage the listener.

Another interesting facet of the 300 DR was the way in which it portrayed the spatial information of a recording. I was very much aware of the music being detached from the loudspeakers, and the portrayal of a more expansive, deeper soundstage. Within this there was sharper positioning of voices and instruments, and elements of background information were also more clearly discernible, due I think to a superior dynamic contrast resulting from a lower noise floor. This was particularly noticeable with the Focal Sopra speakers, and of course the Quad ESL.

Musically, the livelier, unleashed quality of the 300 DR proved engaging, dynamic and ultimately addictive. It might be a bit of a reviewer's cliché, but I was consistently reaching for familiar recordings just to see how they sounded on the new amplifier, and with impressive results.

Possibly more revealing was my desire to dive into unfamiliar music. I do think that a really

good system should encourage you to try music that you've not experienced before, and provide an opportunity to open new doors and broaden your horizons. For example, I'm happy enough listening to the odd Mahler Adagio, but unless I'm actually at a real concert I find it a bit tedious sitting through a complete symphony – quite apart from anything else, they're very long. But I found myself happily listening to the early Barbirolli recordings of both the 5th and the 6th symphonies all the way through over a couple of evenings, using the 300 DR and a DCS Vivaldi front end. I'm not sure I'll ever make it to a full-blown opera – it's never done it for me – but I did feel that now might be a good time to try.

I have a very cool and atmospheric album by Melanie de Biasio called *No Deal*. Her voice is sultry and seductive, but I've never been too sure about the backing musicians, and the drummer in particular. Listening with the 300 DR suddenly made sense; the small timing inflections that I had put down to sloppy playing were in fact subtle but highly expressive parts that contributed to a masterfully laid back groove.

The 300 DR was also well endowed with first rate rhythmic qualities, and I suspect would go a long way in attracting back a number of the old school Naim devotees who lost faith around the time the original 300 was introduced. Pull out any of those albums that were doing the rounds in the late seventies, Valerie Carter, Steely Dan, Little Feat *et al*, not only is the rhythm and timing spot on, but you realise just how damn well those records were made. Hell, I even played *Hotel California* and thought it sounded great, and it's a shame I can't say the same about so many current recordings. As for Stevie Wonder on a Sunday morning, he's never sounded so good, and I'm afraid the whole house had the benefit of *Innervisions*. For the record, the 300 DR plays louder and has less inclination to harden up than the older model, while still maintaining its rhythmic agility at high volumes.

Conclusions

The original NAP 300 held a strong appeal for me because of its fine balance of virtues. It's still a very fine amplifier, but the NAP 300 DR is also unequivocally better, while all the trademark equilibrium and coherence in which its predecessor excelled remains intact, and that makes it a truly great amplifier, well meriting an Audio Excellence rating. For a new purchaser, the price increase of £300 is utterly justified. The upgrade program for existing NAP 300 owners has just been announced, and is a rather more costly £1,495 (£1,850 with full service), but would still seem eminently worthwhile.

NB: Colloms will add more information on the upgrade technologies in the next issue

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Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

HIFICRITIC

AUDIO AND MUSIC JOURNAL

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Martin Colloms, Publisher

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It says Thöress on the fascia, with an *umlaut* over the 'ö', hardening it but suggesting the British spelling should be Thöeress. However you want it, this German brand is named after founder and principal Reinhardt Thöress, and is based in Aachen, on the Western border of that country.

I'd not encountered the brand before, but it was brought to my attention by Greg Drygala, our Jazz music reviewer of Polish extraction who runs an import operation called G Point Audio. Since we only live about 30 miles apart, Drygala does have a habit of dumping stuff for me to try, and so it was with the Thöress equipment: a phono stage (which I love); an integrated amplifier (which I never got to try) and a pair of speakers (which I also got to like a lot, even though they were unusually ugly and were actually labelled *Genuin Schallwandler* rather than Thöress).

I therefore wrote to Reinhardt Thöress to find out more about the speakers. It turns out that Genuin Audio is a German distributor, and the speaker was originally intended to be badged and sold that way. Plans have changed, however, and what used to be a *Genuin Schallwandler* will now become a *THÖ 1D8*. At around £6,000/pair they're never going to be cheap (or indeed pretty), but these speakers are amongst the best all round performers I've encountered.

I'm not able to give the *1D8*s a full review right now, as they have gone off to do a show somewhere. However I did spend some weeks listening to them, and also took the trouble to make my usual measurements. As I recall, the *1D8* combined a 200mm main driver (from established German maker LPG) with a 25mm Morel soft dome tweeter, within a rather bulky but quite low mass floorstanding enclosure. The bass/mid driver was apparently 'double transmission line loaded', with an exit through the speaker's base.

Measurements under far-field in-room conditions reveal an unusual combination of a generous sensitivity (around 93dB) alongside a reasonably decent amplifier load that stays above 6ohms at low frequencies, and 4.5ohms above 1kHz. The bad news is that the bass and lower midrange (below 500Hz) is distinctly uneven, and the low bass (below 45Hz) is largely absent (indicating quarter-wave rather than TL line loading perhaps?); the good news is that the output is much smoother and flatter above 500Hz.

What this means in practice is that the *1D8* has a sensitivity that's sufficiently high to give the speaker real dynamic expression and grip, yet it manages to do so alongside decent bass extension and an unusually good overall balance. In fact I'd go so far as to state that it has many of the advantages of a speaker system based on a single full range drive unit, yet manages to avoid most of the pitfalls of that breed. It is, in short, an excellent allrounder (which makes its rather unprepossessing appearance all the more galling).

My system is set up to make loudspeaker listening and comparisons relatively easy, but I was also very taken by the performance of a very elaborate valve-based Thöress phono stage, known as an *Enhancer* (*Entzerrer* in German). I never got around to exploring the numerous equalisation options, which I'll try when it returns, but even with all three set to RIAA it sounded truly excellent, which is the main reason I want it back! (The bad news is a pricetag equivalent to around £6,500.) What is certain is that the Thöress brand is capable of delivering a very serious standard of performance indeed.