

T3

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Premium multiroom speakers

Transform your listening environment with
the best in house-wide wireless audio

Words: Alex Cox Photography: Neil Godwin



Multiroom audio used to be a pipe dream. Then Sonos, Pure and friends came along and made it a reality. Now things have moved even further. We're in a new era of Wi-Fi connected versatile devices, and everyone's getting in on the act – including some of the finest names in audio technology. And if you want the best sound and the classiest hardware, Bang & Olufsen, Naim and Devialet have to be on your list.

There's no one room for listening, though, and a stock speaker isn't going to work for every situation. So we've not just tested one candidate: we've brought together a massive selection from each manufacturer. B&O's interconnected BeoPlay and BeoSound ranges, which span the spectrum from

bookshelf to self-contained furniture, work together in harmony; Naim's Mu-so and Mu-so Qb are inextricably linked both in style and sound; Devialet's Phantom line, while packaged the same, goes all the way up to 4,500W and all the way down to 14Hz. Going multiroom doesn't mean doing it all at once, but you'll need to pick a brand and stick to it – so the ability to expand is crucial.

We've also paid special attention to the apps and connectivity of each of these lines, a crucial factor in making the purchase of a multiroom setup worth considering. All three ecosystems are pleasingly capable, and firing a single speaker is usually a trivial affair that doesn't need any special software, but you're heavily reliant on that app if you want to do multiroom right.

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WHAT'S ON TEST...

- 1 **Naim**
Two units on test: the wide, serious Mu-so and the smaller (but not tiny) Mu-so Qb. These are compatible with the rest of Naim's hi-fi line, including its music streamers.
From £649
naimaudio.com
- 2 **Bang & Olufsen**
A top-to-bottom range of multiroom-capable speakers of all shapes and sizes, with something for every budget and room. Some are plain, some are artistic pieces.
From £269
bang-olufsen.com
- 3 **Devialet**
The ultra-engineered Phantom line, a potent combo of extreme amplification, premium components and the most animated woofers we've ever seen.
From £1,290
devialet.com

TEST 01: DESIGN

Speakers have to sit prominently, so which fits best in the home?

High-end one-piece speakers are an opportunity for designers to go absolutely nuts. Thus our three systems feature a host of innovative, unusual and plain barmy form factors. We'd be remiss not to start with Bang & Olufsen's stunning BeoSound 1, a conical aluminium number with a cap that seems to float in mid-air. That top piece, not just a smooth rotary volume control, actually contains the main driver, firing downwards over a diffuser, which sends sound flying in all directions. A second bass driver fires downwards in the base. B&O is also responsible for the bonkers BeoPlay A9, a wooden-legged item of sound furniture which, in another life, might have picked up Sky TV. It's a statement maker, all right. You're not forced to chuck out an armchair to go multiroom, though: the M3 is compact and calm, and the wool-covered boomerang of the A6 is striking and convenient.

Devialet, bar slight differences in colour, doesn't vary design from one Phantom to another, and they're an acquired taste. The unit design – which, looks like a shiny vacuum cleaner in the right light – is unique,

Naim's Mu is equal parts sexy and serious, with its cool aluminium casing

but it's the internal design that shines, with a Class A and Class D amplifier mixing analogue and digital amplification, a heavyweight aluminium frame, and a sealed twin-woofer combination that positively animates when it's chucking out bass.

It's come to something when Naim's gorgeous Mu-so is the most normal-looking piece of equipment on test. Its wide footprint, cool aluminium casing, floaty Perspex base and undulating grille are equal parts sexy and serious; the smaller Qb strikes the same design notes in its dense cube. The Mu-so range is also the only one on test that offers any reasonable visual feedback, displaying the source you're playing on the volume knob – B&O favours RGB LEDs that are usually only useful for troubleshooting, while Devialet offers no lights, no controls, and just a single button, utilising audio cues instead.



Top: Naim's flywheel volume control feels awesome and displays the source
Above: The undulating curves of the Mu-so speaker grilles are a nice touch

SPECS

BEOPLAY A9: PRICE £1,999 POWER 480 watts
CONNECTIVITY Wi-Fi, AirPlay, DLNA, Bluetooth 4.0, Line-in, USB, Ethernet SIZE/WEIGHT 701x908x415mm, 15kg
BEOPLAY A6: PRICE £729 POWER 150 watts
CONNECTIVITY Wi-Fi, AirPlay, DLNA, Bluetooth 4.0, Line-in, Ethernet SIZE/WEIGHT 536x298x144mm, 6kg
BEOPLAY M3: PRICE £529 POWER 120 watts
CONNECTIVITY Wi-Fi, AirPlay, Bluetooth 4.2, Line-in, Ethernet SIZE/WEIGHT 112x151x14mm, 1.46kg
BEOSOUND 1: PRICE £1,085 POWER 60 watts
CONNECTIVITY Wi-Fi, AirPlay, Bluetooth 4.1, Ethernet SIZE/WEIGHT 162x162x327mm, 3.5kg

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TEST 01: WINNER

NAIM MU-SO / QB

Naim's visual restraint is commendable. The Mu-so duo is slick and sexy, but really only takes over the room when it's chucking out the sounds.



Top: The floating cap of the Beosound 1 contains its main driver
Above: The A9 is highly impressive and dominates any room it's in

Top: Woofers don't come much sexier than Devialet's high-pressure cones
Above: The Phantom's driver, placed at the front, is either made from aluminium or (in the Gold version) titanium

SPECS

NAIM MU-SO: PRICE £995 POWER 450 watts
CONNECTIVITY Wi-Fi, AirPlay, Bluetooth, Line-in, Optical, Ethernet
SIZE/WEIGHT 122x628x256mm, 13kg

NAIM MU-SO QB: PRICE £649 POWER 300 watts
CONNECTIVITY Wi-Fi, AirPlay, Bluetooth, Line-in, Optical, Ethernet
SIZE/WEIGHT 210x218x212mm, 5.6kg

SPECS

DEVIALET PHANTOM: PRICE: £1,290 POWER: 1,200 watts
CONNECTIVITY: Wi-Fi, Airplay, Bluetooth, Optical, Ethernet
SIZE/WEIGHT: 350x430x582mm, 12.7kg

DEVIALET SILVER PHANTOM: PRICE: £1,690 POWER: 3,000 watts
CONNECTIVITY: Wi-Fi, AirPlay, Bluetooth, Optical, Ethernet
SIZE/WEIGHT: 350x430x582mm, 12.7kg

DEVIALET GOLD PHANTOM: PRICE: £2,190 POWER: 4,500 watts
CONNECTIVITY: Wi-Fi, AirPlay, Bluetooth, Optical, Ethernet
SIZE/WEIGHT: 350x430x582mm, 12.7kg

SUITS YOUR ROOM, SIR

WHAT'S THE BEST CHOICE FOR A SPECIFIC ROOM?

You want the best listening experience, you want the ability to go loud, but you also don't want to overpower a room with a loudspeaker that's completely unsuitable. Aside from the dinky BeoPlay M3 (and, perhaps, the Mu-so Qb, which kicks out a serious din for its size) everything here has enough grunt for a room in excess of 1,500 square feet – there's no bad choice. The Phantom selection and the BeoPlay A9 may be too much, realistically, for a bedroom or study, but as long as you can position your unit close to a non-reflective wall and away from obstructions it's not worth worrying any further. The rounded BeoSound 1 is designed to offer 360° sound, so is suited to situations where you want less directionality.

TEST 02: SOUND

The true test of a speaker:
how does it make your ears feel?

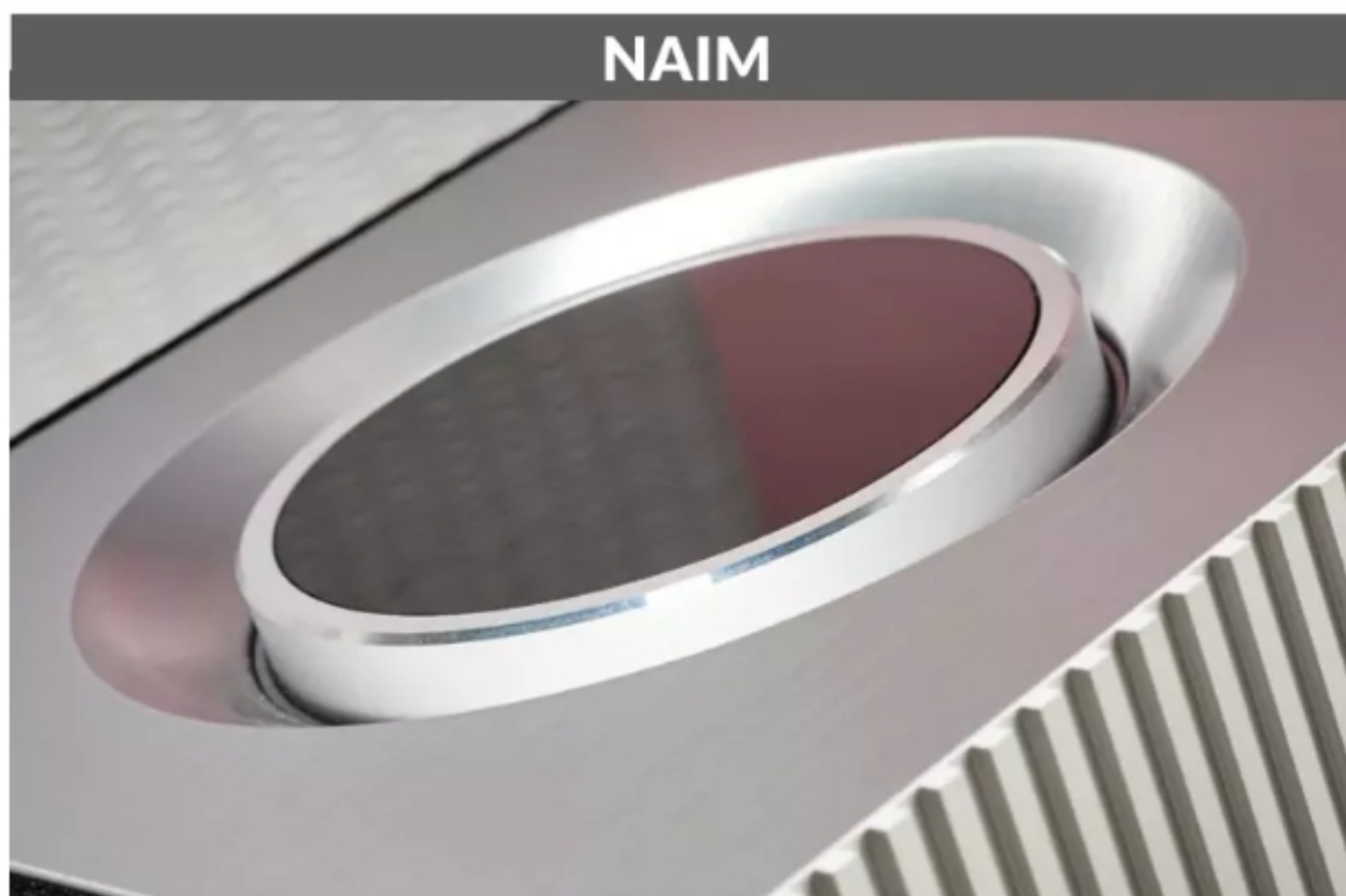
Devialet's enthusiastic engineering has, without a doubt, paid dividends. The Phantom range, from top to bottom, is astonishing to listen to, both at low levels and when driven to neighbour-bothering volumes. No distortion, no loss of clarity and no adulteration – the Phantoms manage a pure, clear, focused sound with a driving intensity that effortlessly fills every inch of the available space. Whether you need to go any further than the base-level Phantom, though, is debatable; each is more than enough for a whole room, even if placed in the corner. The infrasound capabilities of the Gold Phantom, in particular, are wasted in a standard multiroom setup. As part of a luxury home cinema setup, they might feel more at home.

B&O's massive range of multiroom speakers leads to a predictably massive range of sound. The BeoPlay A9, in all its enormous glory, is by far the most pleasing of the bunch, a clear stereo set with subtlety at low volumes and massive punch when pushed. The smaller M3, much more convenient and portable, is far from disappointing, with a wide, powerful output, though it's a bit mucky in the middle.

The Phantom manages a pure, focused sound that fills every inch of a space

The A6 does much better with its range, coming very close to the A9 despite a big drop in amp power. And the BeoSound 1? Credit to B&O for trying a unique 360° design. It works: the loud, bassy sound has absolutely no dead spots. But that diffusion makes the BeoSound 1 misty and vague at times, particularly at low volumes.

And so to Naim's efforts. The only way we were able to tell the difference between the Mu-so and its cubular Qb cousin was to look at them – in sound, each is precisely as strong as the other. Naim's unique mix might not suit everyone, with a lean toward bass and bounce, but it's inarguably exciting. Positionally the Qb has the edge – with three of its edges equipped with drivers, you can be pretty free with where you place it – but the regular Mu-so has no problem filling a room when placed at the edge of it.



NAIM



BANG & OLUFSEN



DEVIALET



TEST 02: WINNER

DEVIALET PHANTOM

The Phantom range's sound is still uniquely exquisite. Premium sound, outrageous amplification and the hardware to make it happen flawlessly.

TEST 03:

FLEXIBILITY

Which are the most easy to set up, and versatile for your musical machinations?

Whatever your multiroom aspirations, Bang & Olufsen's range has you covered. However absurd the flying saucer of the A9 might be, it's a living room centrepiece with bite. There are plenty of options in the middle, and the M3 in particular is perfect for tucking away. The standout BeoSound 1, a true 360° speaker, works anywhere in any room, and it's imbued with a decent battery too. It'll provide a realistic seven or so hours of music for that garden party, and you can take it in the bathroom if you dare. It's a shame that B&O's apps make multiroom a little tricky – you'll need several to get everything hooked up with your network. All of the devices work harmoniously, but setting up a group isn't the most intuitive task and there was a little desyncing over the course of our testing.

Equipping an entire home with Phantoms is a costly affair, and one which requires planning – they're not rough-and-tumble units, they're immensely heavy, and they demand respect. There's a noticeable dead spot on the rear, which isn't unusual (the driver fires forwards) but this means they'll need a fixed home in just the right place.

It may look absurd, but the A9 is a living room centrepiece with bite

The app, Devialet Spark, provides regular seamless firmware updates to the units, and adequately manages audio from a range of sources. You'd hope so, too, given that it's your primary method of speaker control. They're Bluetooth and AirPlay compatible, but be warned: if you're planning to go properly multiroom, you'll also need to pick up Devialet's Dialog hub (£249).

Naim's app is probably best of the bunch, offering unfussy, uncomplicated access to the many sources that each Mu-so can manage, and the addition of physical controls and feedback through that gloriously silky illuminated volume dial is a real plus. It was also, in our tests, the most synchronised multiroom setup, though groups aren't sticky so they need frequent redefinition. And while it's not hard to find room for a Qb, you'll need an entire sideboard to house the main Mu-so.

NAIM



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BEST FOR FLEXIBILITY

BANG & OLUFSEN



DEVIALET



T3

TEST 03: WINNER

BANG & OLUFSEN

You can't argue with choice. B&O's huge range, which offers physical controls and extreme portability, literally takes multiroom audio to new places.

T3 VERDICT:
THE OVERALL
WINNER IS...

Bang & Olufsen

From £269, bang-olufsen.com

WE'RE IMPRESSED B&O's wide range of options wins it this test. Expanding your multiroom setup is easy when there's the perfect addition waiting, and the ability to instantly add any room to the party with the BeoSound 1 is incredibly useful.

WE'D IMPROVE Although there is plenty of enthusiasm and good looks packed into B&Os apps,

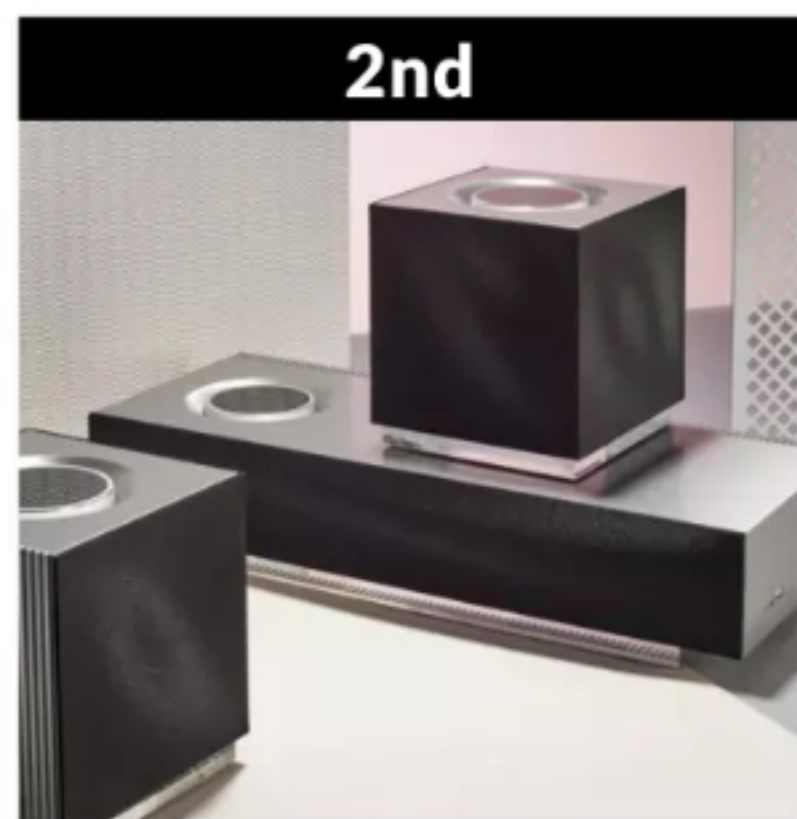
they need combining and refining. The more out there designs might not suit everyone. **THE FINAL WORD** B&O's smart audio range has its flaws, but there are none where it counts. It's a tremendous selection of beautiful and adaptable products for every pocket.

★★★★☆



NAIM AUDIO

From £649, naimaudio.com



2nd

IMPRESSED The bouncy sound of the Mu-so and Qb is highly appealing, and the app, though esoteric, is damn good.

IMPROVE A cheaper option might help, though we'd be happy with a Qb in every room.

FINAL WORD Only the small selection of the Naim speaker line keeps it from the top spot.

★★★★☆

DEVIALET

From £1,290, devialet.com



3rd

IMPRESSED The quality of the Phantoms is peerless, and ever-evolving firmware should mean it keeps improving.

IMPROVE Devialet's design won't suit everyone. They're unwieldy and demanding.

FINAL WORD If a Phantom or three will work for you, don't hesitate to invest.

★★★★☆

SIX WAYS TO MANAGE MULTIROOM MAGNIFICENTLY

01 THINK ABOUT SIGNAL

You'll be placing your speakers where they sound best, but don't forget the importance of consistent wireless signal. If you can wire them all by Ethernet cables all the better, but this isn't an option for most homes.

02 KEEP A SOLID NETWORK

Streaming hi-res audio isn't quite as bandwidth-hungry as sending 4K video throughout your house but, if you're

hammering that router hard, congestion could ruin your tunes. Consider upgrading to a mesh Wi-Fi system, or something equally modern.

03 GO HI-RES

Spotify is fine for most ears, but if you really want to appreciate your multiroom setup you should be listening in the highest quality possible. Grab a TIDAL subscription or download some hi-res files, and choose the highest bitrate possible when streaming online radio.

04 TIE IN YOUR HI-FI

Naim Audio doesn't only produce the Mu-so and Qb – use the Mu-so as the master device and you can tie its Uniti streaming range into your setup, making the most of your existing speakers and keeping your music library at hand.

05 CONSIDER YOUR EARS

Position your speakers where you'll hear them best. If you're kitting out an office room, you may want them slightly higher

than a lounge where you'll traditionally be slumped on the sofa; in a kitchen, place them high and out of the way of any potential food splatters.

06 DON'T JUST MULTIROOM

Pulling apart your multiroom groups just to play a tune on a single device is a pain; if you can, connect by AirPlay, Chromecast Audio, or even Bluetooth to send a signal in a single room. Wireless speakers are generally flexible and malleable.