



Naim NAC-N272 and NAP-250

Cutting edge



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ith a history stretching back more than four decades, Naim Audio isn't only one of the UK's oldest and most respected hi-fi brands, but also

one of its most successful. And yet, while it's clearly a marque steeped in analogue tradition, there's nothing staid or old-fashioned about its extensive product range.

The company's foundations may have been built on a line-up of amplifiers, but in many ways, the stars of its

current line-up are the network-enabled pre-amps, streamers and all-in-one systems, all of which are very much at hi-fi's cutting edge.

Under scrutiny here are two Naim components that epitomise both the tradition and the innovation underscoring the brand. The NAC-N 272 fuses the functions of network player and pre-amp in a single, full-featured component, while the NAP 250 is the latest, significantly updated version of a stereo power amplifier that has been part of the Naim product gallery since 1975.

Both components benefit from the significant research and development that

went into the flagship Statement NAC S1 and NAP S1 pre/power combo — an ultra-high end pairing with a price to match, created to spotlight the technological capability of the Salisbury firm. Some of that tech has now filtered down into the duo reviewed here.

Externally, the NAC-N 272 and the NAP 250 feature the trademark Naim aesthetics, which combine all-metal enclosures finished in a discreet black with a stepped fascia that places the green-illuminated Naim logo in the centre.

In the case of the NAP 250, the only switchgear is a power button on the right-





hand side, but the NAC-N 272 features a high-res alphanumeric display lit in the same green hue, as well as a nine-button control panel on the right. The left offers a rotary volume control, as well as a USB Type A port for memory sticks and portable drives, and a headphone jack.

Both components are identically dimensioned, which means they can be stacked. The combination is compact and aesthetically pleasing, while also facilitating easy connection

between pre/amp/streamer and power amp.

The NAC-N 272 is an exceptionally versatile piece of kit, offering both digital and analogue inputs and outputs that span several different interfaces. It can hook up to a network via either 802.11 Wi-Fi or Ethernet, which then allows it to exercise its UPnP talents to access music files stored on a network-attached storage (NAS) device, or a computer on the same network.

The N 272 also offers Bluetooth connectivity using the high-quality aptX code, and is equipped with vTuner 5 software to access literally thousands of Internet stations. The Naim also features integrated support for the Tidal premium music streaming service.

A nicely proportioned remote control handset is standard, but most users will probably opt for the iOS or Android app, which provides a convenient and intuitive way to control the N 272's rich feature set.

Naim fans will already know about some of the marque's idiosyncrasies — in particular, its predilection for semi-proprietary connectors. Thus, you'll find four-pin DIN connectors with screw-down collars on the 272's rear panel as alternatives to the more common stereo RCA input and output sets.

While Naim contends that the DIN plug is more resistant to mechanical vibration, and thus musically preferable, those wanting to mix and match Naim gear with more conventional components will find this irritating.

The good news is that the NAC-N 272 does offer both DIN and RCA input and output sets, so you don't have to throw out those RCA-to-RCA interconnects just yet. You could also have DIN-to-RCA cables made up, although remember that these are four-pin, screw-down versions, and not the more common five-pin plug-in connectors.



The NAP 250 has a stereo-configured single XLR input, and thus, the cable required to link the NAC N-272 is a proprietary four-pin DIN to two-channel XLR one. And instead of conventional binding posts, the power amp gets recessed sockets that will accept bananas only. There are adapters for bare-stranded wire, but if you have spade-terminated cables, you'll need to fit spade-to-RCA connectors.

The NAC-N 272's on-board DAC will cope with digital signals of up to 192 kHz/24-bit via SPDIF and UPnP, while the latter will also allow access to DSD64 files.

Broad functionality is only one of the N272's positive traits. Under the covers, the hand-built intricacy of the internals becomes apparent. Hand-wired analogue

input sockets, closely matched resistors, optimised signal paths and separated digital, analogue and power sections all speak of maintaining signal integrity and combating noise.

The hybrid volume control is based on the Statement NAC S1 attenuator, while the headphone socket gets a dedicated Class A headphone amp that can drive the demanding loads presented by many high-end headphones.

Digital signal processing is derived from Naim's top-end NDS network player, complete with proprietary digital audio buffering and filtering.

Compared to the densely populated front and rear panels of the N 272, the NAP 250's enclosure is almost impossibly

plain. As mentioned, the front panel has only the Naim logo and a power button to break the stepped expanse of metal, while the rear panel is only slightly less sparse, thanks to those recessed binding post jacks, the XLR connector, and an IEC power socket.

Like the N 272, the power amp benefits directly from technologies and techniques developed for the flagship Statement pre/power combo.

Most telling is the use of the same, purpose-built NA009 transistors originally developed for the Statement. It also gains the Statement's low-noise, ultra-stable Discrete Regulator (DR) power supply technology, again created for the cost-no-object Statement, and thus promising a smooth and stable supply of power.

The single, large power transformer itself is a completely new design with the ability to provide more than 15 Amps, and to swing up to 400 VA on transients. Other key improvements include a new circuit design with improved earthing, and an anti-resonance main circuit board.

In this new-generation execution of the NAP 250, power output is a claimed 80 watts per channel into 8 ohms, and more at lower impedances — the amp is stable all the way down to 2 ohms. Gain is a quoted 29 dB.

The Naim duo was installed in the Audio Video listening room, powering at first the Sonus faber Principia 5s reviewed elsewhere, but later also our KEF R500 reference floorstanders. I used the UPnP capability of the N272 to source music files directly from a Synology DS216e NAS via Ethernet, but also used our resident

Associated Equipment

Marantz SA-KI Pearl Lite CD/SACD player
Olive One network player/streamer
Synology DS-216e NAS
Sonus faber Principia 5 loudspeakers
KEF R500 loudspeakers

Software

Norah Jones — Feels Like Home (Blue Note 192/24 FLAC)
Emilie-Claire Barlow — The Beat Goes On (Empress CD)
La Segunda — Será Una Noche (Ma 176,4/24 FLAC)
Alexis Cole — A Kiss In The Dark (Chesky 192/24 FLAC)
Leonard Cohen — Ten New Songs (Columbia 44,1/16 WAV)
Schumann — The Symphonies — Robert Ticciati, Scottish Symphony Orchestra (Linn 192/24 FLAC)

Marantz SA-CD KI Pearl Lite CD/SACD deck for physical media.

It's been a while since I spent some time listening to Norah Jones, but 'What Am I To Do', off *Feels Like Home*, reminded me just why I enjoy her music so much. Her relaxed vocal style draws the listener right into the heart of the music, while the sparse arrangements allow the contribution of each instrument to be presented with honesty and clarity.

The Naim pairing did the track full justice, revealing micro-details without compromising the integrity of the overall performance, and creating a sonic image that portrayed the intimacy of the session and the cohesion of the band, yet afforded each instrument its own air and space.

A real sense of ambience and nuance added significantly to the presence and realism of the sound. While Jones' vocals commanded centre stage, the fuzz-edged electric guitar, the richly timbred bass and the plaintive, slightly melancholy organ could all be enjoyed to the full.

The Naim duo was able to paint a layered, multi-dimensional music picture that accurately placed the players on the transparent, accessible soundstage. The expansive tonal range ensured that each voice, each instrument was rendered with just the right presence and stature.

Alexis Cole's 'Ain't We Got Fun' (from her *A Kiss In The Dark* set) has a big, wide, almost cinematic stage that seemed to stretch beyond the boundaries of the listening room. It's also a recording with enough low-frequency energy to challenge the authority of even beefy amps, but the NAP 250 didn't sound at all intimidated.

It kept a firm grip on the music, but without constraining its flow or energy. The bass was rendered with just the right level of muscular intensity, forming a dark, brooding backdrop for Cole's almost off-hand, sweet-edged vocals, while the hi-hat driven percussion kept perfect pace.

The saxophone was allowed to swirl to the right and slightly behind the centrally focussed vocals, while the delicately strummed guitar on the left was delivered with deft clarity. This is a recording that can sound almost disjointed on some

systems, but the Naims held the musical action together well, while creating an immersive listening experience.

On Argentinean outfit La Segunda's *Sera Una Noche*, the intricacy of the recording, the broad tonal range and timbre of the acoustic instruments, the inherent power of the percussion, and the generous, wide-open soundstage will reward a sonically adept, truthful system, but can as easily reveal shortcomings in

tonal range, headroom and impetus.

The Naim system suffered none of those handicaps, however, and the set sounded gloriously immersive, with the N 272's close examination of fine detail never allowed to become too analytical, but always benefiting the immediacy and the sheer thrill of the music.

The layered, expansive soundstage allowed precise positioning of every sound, every instrument, every voice, and again

VITAL STATS

NAC-N 272

Frequency response	4 Hz – 40 kHz
Signal-to-noise ratio	87 dB
Analogue inputs	1x DIN, 2x stereo RCA
Digital inputs	2x SPDIF coaxial RCA, 1x BNC coaxial, 3x Toslink optical
Analogue outputs	1x stereo line out, 1x stereo pre-amp out, 2x DIN pre-amp out
Digital outputs	Coaxial RCA
Connectivity	Bluetooth, 802.11n Wi-Fi, Ethernet, USB
Tuner	FM/AM/DAB
Audio formats	WAV, AIFF, FLAC – up to 192 kHz/24-bit ALAC – up to 96 kHz/24-bit. Ogg Vorbis, MP3, M4A
Dimensions (WxDxH)	432 x 301 x 87 mm
Weight	10,3 kg

NAP 250 DR

Power output	2x 80 watts (8 ohms)
Minimum load	2 ohms
Frequency response	3 Hz – 50 kHz (-3 dB)
Inputs	Stereo-configured XLR
Outputs	Stereo binding posts
Dimensions (WxDxH)	432 x 314 x 87 mm
Weight	15,8 kg

PRICE

NAC-N272	R99 990
NAP250 DR	R109 990

Verdict

Full, vibrant and satisfying sound from this British duo. Always sounds more muscular and authoritative than the output stats suggest. Full-featured pre-amp/streamer covers all the bases, including Tidal and Bluetooth. Neat app rounds off a top-class package.

Supplied by

Volco Enterprises

011-608-3500

e-Mail

sales@volco.co.za

Website

www.volco.co.za

OUR RATING: 88 / 100





afforded the listener full access to every aspect — from the subtlest bell ring to the most vivid of voices.

I particularly enjoyed the way the Naim combo was able to contextualise the music. As much as the system was able to reveal layer upon layer of sound, detail and ambience, it never compromised the flow and intent of the music itself, always retaining the emotive fabric that bonds the musical elements together.

Leonard Cohen's 'By The Rivers Dark' (from *Ten New Songs*) sounded powerful and almost menacing, with the extremely low frequencies delivered with such impetus and urge that I could feel as much as hear them.

The staging here was compelling, drawing the listener into the core of the music, while the Naim pairing's ability to resolve and present detail revealed fine aspects and subtleties that could easily be glossed over in less adept systems.

The 'Scherzo' from the Linn Records release of Schumann's *Symphony No. 2 in C Major*, performed by the Scottish Symphony Orchestra under direction of Robert Ticciati, sounded light-footed and agile.

The quicksilver strings fluttered across the full width of the soundstage, while the woodwinds were evocatively, richly presented. The brass sounded crisp and joyful, and the cellos and double basses added an articulate yet incisive foundation.

Despite the density of the music, the Naims were able to deliver their musical wares with a clarity and a momentum that allowed full, unabridged access.

When I swapped the benign and easy-on-the-ear Principias for the rather more taxing and critical B&W PM1 monitors, Emilie Barlow's 'He Thinks I Still Care' off her *The Beat Goes On* disc was delivered with impressive composure and transparency, showing off the inherent class of the Naims.

The lucidly recorded music was allowed to flow freely, with a hugely expansive, all-embracing soundstage, and finely resolved focus. The PM1s are tremendously revealing, but also utterly unforgiving — and yet, the Naims were easily up to the challenge.

The Naim duo was able to paint a layered, multi-dimensional music picture that accurately placed the players on the transparent, accessible soundstage.

They presented the subtlest elements — vocal textures, a subtle intake of breath, the harmonica's movement of air, the transient edge of a piano note — with finesse, enriching the listening experience in the process.

In the context of modern audio, which demands the versatility of broad-based connectivity, access to streaming services, UPnP streaming, Bluetooth and more, the

Naim NAC-N 272 is a real Jack of all trades — and, vitally, also a master of all the functions and facets it offers.

For all its complexity, it is easy to set up and even easier to use, with the Naim app adding a further level of user-friendliness. Its wide range of capabilities are intuitively accessed, and the sonic results are excellent across the board: even Internet radio sounds pretty decent.

By the same token, the N 272 does full justice to detail-rich, finely resolved music. It shines with high-res material, extracting the best of what's on offer, yet never swapping musicality for clinical analysis. Expansive staging, fine focus and a rich tonal palette all make this a superb pre-amp and an intuitive network player rolled into one.

The NAP 250 is the 272's perfect partner, delivering its wares with assurance and momentum, and always sounding more muscular and more authoritative than its power rating suggests. It's bold and pacy, but never shirks its sonic responsibilities when it comes to projecting delicate detail, or affording unencumbered access to the nuances and subtleties of the music.

Together, the NAC-N 272 and the NAP 250 make a musically arresting, highly desirable pair, with a spread of capabilities that vindicates their not inconsiderable asking price.

Deon Schoeman

