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THE BEST CLASSICAL CD EXCLUSIVELY AVAILABLE TO BUY FROM HI-FI+

Naim NAC-N272, NAP-300DR, Focal Sopra No.2, Chord Sarum Super ARAY

by Roy Gregory

It's fair to say that the announcement of the Focal/Naim merger in August 2011 caused more than a few raised eyebrows, not least amongst the owners and aficionados of these two seriously established and readily identifiable brands. Hardly natural partners (at least in the narrow, audio/sonic sense), even in global terms the number of existing dealers stocking both brands wasn't going to tax the capacity of an Excel spreadsheet, while the number of systems out there actually pairing the products from the now partners was probably smaller still. It was a harsh reality born out by the results of the partnership's initial co-promotional efforts – show systems that merely served to demonstrate the challenges involved in getting the Utopia Series speakers and 500 Series electronics to gel into a whole that matched, let alone exceeded the sum of the parts.

Well, we're nearly five years into the Focal/Naim adventure and how times have changed, a fact underlined by the system being reviewed here. The advent of Naim's Statement amps and Super Lumina cables mark a significant shift in both the company's position in and relationship to the traditional high-end market. Meanwhile, Focal has experienced its own learning curve, with driver developments (first seen in the

Scala Utopia V2) improving out of band performance, dynamic coherence, and overall integration, all of which have played directly into the PRaT (Pace, Rhythm and Timing) sensibilities so deeply embedded in Naim's existing product line. Instead of Statements and Utopias, what we have here are more affordable products from further down each company's line; products that clearly reflect converging developmental arcs and the rapidly shifting nature of the current audio landscape.

The first thing you'll notice is the absence of any apparent front-end components. I say "apparent" because, add a network connection to the £3,300 NAC-N272 and you get direct access to streaming services like Tidal and Spotify, internet radio, and even (via an optional internal module) DAB and FM. Throw in Bluetooth connectivity and you get to use that source in your pocket, your smart phone or media player (and anybody else's too). Of course, that just makes the N272 another of the increasing number of digital control units now flooding the market. What sets it apart is that rather than simply adding additional digital building blocks to core DAC circuitry, the N272 is a genuine composite component, combining digital to analogue conversion functionality with a streaming front-end (derived directly from the flagship NDS)



and a high-quality, optically isolated analogue line-stage and switching. How seriously does the N272 take its analogue responsibilities? As well as offering six digital inputs, the unit also provides three line-level inputs (on a mix of RCA and Naim's traditional Din connectors), two Din and two pairs of RCA outputs and a multi-pin Burndy socket so that you can add an external power supply, the XP5 XS, XPS, and even the 555PS all being compatible. In this instance, the system arrived complete with an XPS, a second box that matches the N272 in terms of dimensions and considerably exceeds it in terms of weight. Replacing the internal power supply completely, this not only adds considerable capacity and lower source impedance to the mix, it removes the mechanically noisy power supply components from the sensitive audio chassis. It also uses the DR regulators, similar to those found in the latest version of the NAP-300 power amplifier, derived directly from the circuitry developed for the Statement amps. These significantly drop the noise floor, transforming the performance of pre and power amp alike. In the case of the NAP-300, which was arguably already Naim's most neutral and musically expressive amplifier (pre-Statement), throw in the Statement's NA009 output devices and you've got a major step up in performance, one that makes the £7,295 NAP-300DR a genuine, universal contender, an amp that's just as happy outside of Naim systems as it is within the fold.

No surprise then that it works so well with Focal's latest Sopra speakers. Embodying many of the technological and aesthetic touches that have previously defined the Utopia series, but in a more compact, affordable, and arguably more modern looking package, the £9,599 Sopra No.2 is a surprisingly potent addition to Focal's range. Its slim frontal aspect and 'smaller than it actually is' appearance belying real dynamic and musical authority, directly related to its 91dB sensitivity and 34Hz to 40kHz bandwidth. Unmistakably spawn of the Utopia DNA, the Sopra offers a new take on the flagship line's segmented cabinet, the separate mid and bass enclosures linked (but isolated) by a moulded polyurethane wedge that mounts the tweeter, and provides it with a loosely



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▶ stuffed, flared profile rear termination that offers rear-wave absorption without creating back pressure. With a range of bright, lacquer finishes, the main cabinets use a massive 69mm thick front baffle coupled to tapering, variable thickness walls to create massive structures with evenly spread resonant dissipation, minimizing standing waves in both the structure and the enclosed volume. Throw in considerable work applied to the midrange driver's suspension, which uses Tuned Mass Dampers to eliminate resonant modes that would otherwise feed back into the cone (a distinctly Naim-esque solution) and sophisticated Faraday rings on the motors of the 180mm bass and 165mm midrange units to help stabilise their magnetic fields, and you have what is currently Focal's technologically most advanced conventional loudspeaker system, tying their familiar sandwich cones to superior mechanical and motor elements.

The end result doesn't just look like an updated junior Utopia, it offers the same uncluttered, unfettered dynamics and clarity that make the flagship speakers so popular, but in a package that's easier to accommodate and considerably easier to apply. Each Sopra's plinth bass is penetrated by a quartet of large diameter threaded spikes, topped by knurled adjuster knobs. Neat if not exactly elegant, these provide precise control of speaker attitude as well as the height of the speaker off the floor (an often overlooked yet critical facet of speaker set-up). Add that to the improvements in the drivers' out-of-band performance and thus overall integration and you have a speaker that isn't just inherently more integrated and linear, its reaction to room placement and attitude is more linear and predictable too. The Sopra No.2 isn't just capable of remarkably impressive performance, it's far easier to extract that performance than it ever was from the notoriously demanding and critical Utopias. Combine them with the rejuvenated NAP-300 DR and you have the makings of a potent musical combination.

Chord's latest Sarum Super ARAY cables bring the benefits of their second-generation mechanical tuning down to (almost) affordable price levels. Running a complete set of power cords, digital interconnects, DIN to XLR interconnects specifically built for the NAP-300 and speaker cables you soon realize just how 'gated' and restrictive most cables sound. If this system's sense of easy musical expression, expansive

dynamics, and rhythmic flow set it apart, then that is due in no small part to the cables connecting the components getting out of the way and letting them do their job, something which Sarum Super ARAY achieves so effortlessly that you barely notice its contribution – until you remove it from the system and the music simply closes down! Chord can also upgrade older Sarum cables to current Super ARAY status. Sarum is not cheap (£1,899 for a pair of interconnects, £1,699 for a power cord, or £3,300 for a 3m set of speaker cables), but you'll find the same Super ARAY tuning deployed with impressive effect in more attainable Chord products, starting at the around £200 level.

By definition, a successful system is one in which the whole exceeds the sum of its parts – all of its parts. As impressive as the N272 and NAP-300DR, the Sopra No.2 and the Sarum Super ARAY undoubtedly are individually, one thing that makes this system special is the way that used together they raise their collective game. The other thing that makes it special is the way that it plays more than just one game. I could wax lyrical about this set-up's audio performance, its sense of musical clarity, structure, and purpose, the uninhibited life and expressive range it brings to recordings. I could single out the presence and dynamic authority of its mid-bass, so vital to the feeling of instrumental identity, scale, and power, the intimacy it brings to vocals, its agility and poise, its easy sense of tempo, be that relaxed or hesitant, measured, or urgent. This system does all of that – and more. But what it really delivers is access: access to the musical performance (the key to true audio performance), but also access to more performances. Like I said, this might look like a system without a source and, in truth, due to the specific requirements of the review process, I spent a lot of time listening to CD (replayed on a CEC TL-3N transport), but where this system really comes into its own is once you start investigating the full range of musical access it offers. You want to play records? Naim can provide a box for that. You want to connect any other analogue source, the N272 will do that too. But once you hook it up to a network, that's when the musical horizons really expand. Access to not just internet radio stations – which like all radio stations, offer the inherent benefit of someone else choosing the playlist and inevitably taking you to musical destinations you'd not otherwise have visited – but also the whole gamut of ▶



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▶ streamed music services like Tidal and Spotify allow the sort of meandering musical surfing that once made those nascent web-browsers so endlessly fascinating.

Debates over the relative merit of file replay and streamed music sources rage: when is high-res really high-res and what are the potential sonic benefits of virtual as opposed to physical/optical digital source material? Which of the various data rates and file Codecs sound best? Do you really need to stream DSD and if so, which DSD, given the range of formats and promised sample rates. The truth of the matter is, that rather like broadband itself, what it says on the tin isn't always what's inside. For the moment, a robust streaming solution that can handle CD resolution files is a workable target: anything beyond that may (or very often may not) improve things. Don't get suckered by the numbers war: bigger numbers do NOT guarantee better sound. Which brings us back to the N272, a distinctly sensible and highly versatile solution to the issues surrounding file replay founded on the stable base of the Naim eco-system. I used a Naim UnitiServe UPnP server to replay downloads through this system, controlled through Naim's dedicated iPad app, but I could have hooked up any NAS-based storage system. The results are, as with any other source format, variable, especially when comparing stored files and streamed radio sources. However, what is not in question is the sheer scope of the material on offer, or the convenience this system offers in accessing it. The challenge facing any computer-audio supplier is to meet the operational and interface standards set by the benchmark iPhone. To a large extent the Naim streamers meet that goal and do so in a package that is significantly more stable and reliable than much of the high-end competition.

Of course the beauty of any system that allows such wide-ranging access is that, once a track or piece of music has been discovered, irrespective of recording or reproductive quality, then it can be researched or contextualized with other recordings by the same artist or album or from the same composer. It can also encourage the acquisition of a better version of the same piece – be that downloadable, an optical disc, or even on vinyl. Perhaps the greatest strength this system exhibits is its ability to play the music rather than expose the recording, yet at the same time rise to the occasion when required. A recent discovery is the Sony CD box of complete RCA/Columbia Richter recordings, which includes the legendary, collectible (and highly contentious) live tapes from his 1960 Carnegie concerts. Contentious because they depended on the in-house recording facilities rather than Columbia's location kit and crew, the results are extremely variable and littered with audience noise – yet this Naim/Focal system reveals both the sense and atmosphere of the event along with the sheer majesty of the playing. I could ask for a greater sense of acoustic space and dimensionality (but not without bigger speakers). Instead I'm just going to sit back and enjoy the coherence and integrity, the almost preternatural sense of presence in the playing, the performance, and the presentation. Therein lies this system's beauty: it's a network player and an internet radio; it's a distributed music hub and a family music system; all that and a seriously engaging and musically expressive high-end audio system too. Focal and Naim might have started out as strange bed-fellows, but this system is one for genuine music lovers, a marriage made in heaven. +