

NAITology

If there was ever a quintessentially British affordable audiophile amplifier, the Naim Nait is it. Nearing its twenty fifth birthday and into its fourth incarnation, the little integrated has gathered many myths along the way. To find out the truth, Channa Vithana decided to revisit each successive model, with surprising results...



James Almey of Tom Tom Audio

The original Naim Nait became an instant classic when launched back in 1983 for the princely sum of £253. It sounded quite unlike any other integrated of its day (or now, for that matter), and set a trend for so-called 'super integrations', bridging the gap between basic entry level amps and high end pre-power combinations.

In the intervening quarter of a century, it has been the subject of several revisions, and been a breeding ground for many myths and legends, not least of which was that the only 'red light' Nait was the best sounding of the bunch. In an attempt to get to the truth, we at *Hi-Fi World* decided it was time to take a scientific approach to the subject and audition perfectly

preserved examples of them all, one-after-the-other.

To do this, I enlisted the help of James Almey of Tom Tom Audio, who is fortunate enough to own first-rate examples of the Nait, Nait 2, Nait 3 and current-spec Nait 5i. The listening was done in strict conditions, using loudspeaker cables with Naim-tolerant inductance and capacitance, and top quality phono-to-DIN interconnects, into the excellent Kudos range of loudspeakers. Here goes then – a look at each successive Nait amplifier and a direct A-B-C-D comparison.

THE MODELS: NAIM NAIT 1983-1988

The original, and some say the best, Nait was voiced by Naim's founder



1983 NAIM NAIT

Julian Vereker. I heard a 1986 vintage with red power LED (later models had green LEDs, slightly inferior sounding according to legend). Although this information was never publicly disclosed at the time, I can confirm that the first Nait's factory power output figures were 13W/8ohms and 19.5W/4ohms. The beautifully built half-size (276x205x76mm) box featured an Alps volume-control and linear

power supply that included a 100VA toroidal transformer. The aluminium casework has a shiny edge-on 'chrome bumper' finish. The front-panel has a rotary volume-control and just three inputs, inclusive of 'Phono' MM phonostage. The balance-control is fiddly to operate and source-selector buttons aren't the sturdiest. Currently, second-hand prices for the original Nait range from about £245-£345.

NAIM NAIT 2 1988-1993

Voiced by Naim's Technical Director Roy George, the Nait 2 also came in 'shoe-box' casework. From 1988 – 1989 it was the 'chrome bumper' style and afterwards replaced by the 'olive' version (black aluminium case and green front-panel) - Naim says there was no performance improvement from 'olive' over 'chrome bumper' casework, contrary to the rumours! Naim's Nait 2 power output figures equal the Nait at 13W/8ohms and 19.5W/4ohms, but the 2 was better built and more sophisticated with rotary source selector and mute, monitor, extra 'Aux' input functions, and says Naim, a "traditional balance control" (the original Nait had only gain adjustment on left channel). The 2 is also configurable into a preamplifier but only with a Naim power amplifier, and



1993 NAIM NAIT 3

not upgradeable via external power-supplies. The version I heard was of rare 1988 'chrome bumper' vintage. Second-hand 'olive' prices range from £345 while the 'chrome bumper' costs about £445.

NAIM NAIT 3 1993-2000

Again voiced by Roy George, the 3 had wider 430x300x56mm 'olive' casework which Naim says allowed "for better component spacing to help improve sonic performance." The 3 looks even more minimalist with the power-switch at the rear. From 1995, a remote-controlled

minimise vibration to circuit-improving sonic performance." Power was now fed via a larger 180VA rated toroidal transformer while the preamplifier power-supplies were double regulated in comparison to the Nait 3, though Naim's power figures remained the same at 30W/8ohms and 45W/4ohms. The volume control was a discrete resistor ladder design. The 5 was more sophisticated with six DIN only inputs and the preamplifier source-selection was microprocessor controlled. A remote control was standard, which could electronically



1988 NAIM NAIT 2 ('chrome bumper' version)



2000 NAIM NAIT 5

3R (necessitating separate remote-control board) was released. The 3 could be converted to a 3R or akin to a NAC 92 preamplifier (which shared the same pre-section) thus allowing power-amplifier and power-supply upgrades. It has four DIN line-inputs (including tape in/out) and one set of phonos for optional phonostages. An Alps volume-control was used and the linear power supply's toroidal transformer had a higher 120VA rating. Naim's power output figures were also higher with 30W/8ohms and 45W/4ohms. I listened to a 1998 vintage. Second-hand prices range begin at £245.

NAIM NAIT 5 2000-2003

The first 'modern' Nait was also voiced by Roy George, and featured new all-black 432x301x58.5mm aluminium casework which, says Naim, had a "better chassis and decoupled preamp section to

adjust the balance and output of individual inputs. The 5 was upgradeable with preamplifiers or power amplifiers and featured an IEC mains power input, which Naim says offered "better sound quality" (it also allowed the use of non-Naim mains cables). The 5 costs approximately £445 second-hand.

NAIM NAIT 5I 2003-PRESENT

The current Nait 5 was voiced by Steve Sells. Without options for power supply and power amplifier upgrades and just four inputs, it is described by Naim as a, "complete redesign over the previous Nait 5, with surface mount technologies and the addition of an Alps volume pot." The 5i's linear power-supply utilises a much bigger 240VA rated transformer and an increased power-output to 50W/8ohms and 75W/4ohms (in the December 2006 HFW, Noel Keywood measured the



1990 NAIM NAIT 2 ('olive' version)



2003 NAIM NAIT 5i

5i at 60w/8ohms and 110W/4ohms). The remote controlled 5i has DIN and phono sockets, and like the 5, has the best Nait build quality overall, as evidenced by the thick front panel and finely damped source selector buttons. Its dimensions are 432x301x70mm and the current list price is £725 or around £495 second-hand.

THE LISTENING

Throughout the audition period, all the Naites were partnered with a £2,950 Naim CDX2 CD player, £495 Hi-Line interconnect, £1,450 Kudos Cardea C1 standmount loudspeakers and £11/m Naim NAC A5 loudspeaker cable. The C1s have a claimed 87dB sensitivity with 8ohms impedance and were sited on £175 Kudos S50 stands.

Kicking off with the very first Nait, 'Car Wheels On A Gravel Road' by Lucinda Williams was pure and clear. The sound was vibrant and alive. It was just as good with the hard rock dynamics of 'Celebrity Skin' by Hole, where the musical timing was impeccable for such a modest device, giving a stunning level of precision. Instrumental phrasing was so clear and enjoyable that I found this an amazingly engaging and fun amplifier to listen to.

Moving to the Nait 2 brought obviously higher resolution to the vocals with both the Lucinda Williams and Hole tracks. Here the sound was also fuller and deeper, and I could hear the timbre of the instruments brilliantly. Bass became wonderfully tuneful and cymbals more expressive, giving the sense of quieter musical backgrounds to all the CDs I'd used. I could simply hear more information, but there was still a slight lack of 'air' compared to the original Nait.

Moving to the Nait 3, and Lucinda Williams sounded even purer. Here her vocals were more natural and expressive, and there was a superb upper-bass and lower-midband quality to the drums, bass and guitar. On Hole's rock music there was more drive and dynamics compared to the Nait 2, and the music sounded more effortless. One of the key differences with the Nait

3 was its ability to open out the sound with greater spatiality. Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme' was more convincingly reproduced – especially the cymbals, drums and saxophone. However the Nait 3's high frequencies could also sound a touch sharp with female vocals at crescendos.

Moving to the current Nait 5i was fascinating. It was very immediate sounding in comparison - here Hole and Lucinda Williams sounded instantly punchier, as if the 5i had grabbed the music with an invisible hand. The sound was highly structured with everything in its place, from cymbals to guitars and violins and violas. Due to its immediacy, the 5i felt more forward than its predecessors but also much 'quieter' than the Nait 3, and more focused but a little less free-flowing as a result. The 5i showed its superiority with the tonal qualities of the music where the viola, violin and cello work of the Kronos Quartet was revealed with greater depth and more convincing timbre than the other Naites. While sheer 'loudness' was never a consideration with any of the Naites in the review system, the 5i did show the older models how it was more powerful sounding, even at the same volume.

CONCLUSION

Like many I suspect, I have often wondered what all the various different Naites would sound like, and here I got a rare first-hand insight into Naim Audio's musical evolution. What I found was that the original Nait had the best musical timing with precision tempos. The Nait 2 had the most tuneful bass with a much quieter musical background in comparison to the Nait. The Nait 3 had clearer sound overall than all the others, and opened out the music superbly by being the most free flowing. The Nait 5i was easily the most refined, yet was more immediate too. It proved superb with



the tonal qualities of instruments, and added a dash of sweetness to higher frequencies also. Personally, I was torn between Naites 2 and 3 - but any of these versions, new or old, would still be my top recommended integrated amplifier in the £500-£900 price range – and don't forget that Naim have an outstanding service back-up with prices from about £145 - £250 for a full rebuild.

A fascinating comparison then, which for me debunked the myth about the first Nait being the best. It's easiest to characterise the first three as being quite similar – think of them as Keith Richards; characterful, with a swaggering tunefulness. The later 5i however is more of a Mick Jagger - still musically virile after all these years but more urbane. Naites have changed for sure, but for me they all remain highly endearing and – thanks to that brilliant Salisbury service back up – brilliant second-hand buys.

Thanks to Doug Graham, Jason Gould and the team at Naim Audio (+44 (0)1722 426 600, www.naim-audio.com).



Tom Tom Audio
 ☎ +44 (0)1727 868 659
 www.tomtomaudio.com

Kudos Audio
 www.kudosaudio.com