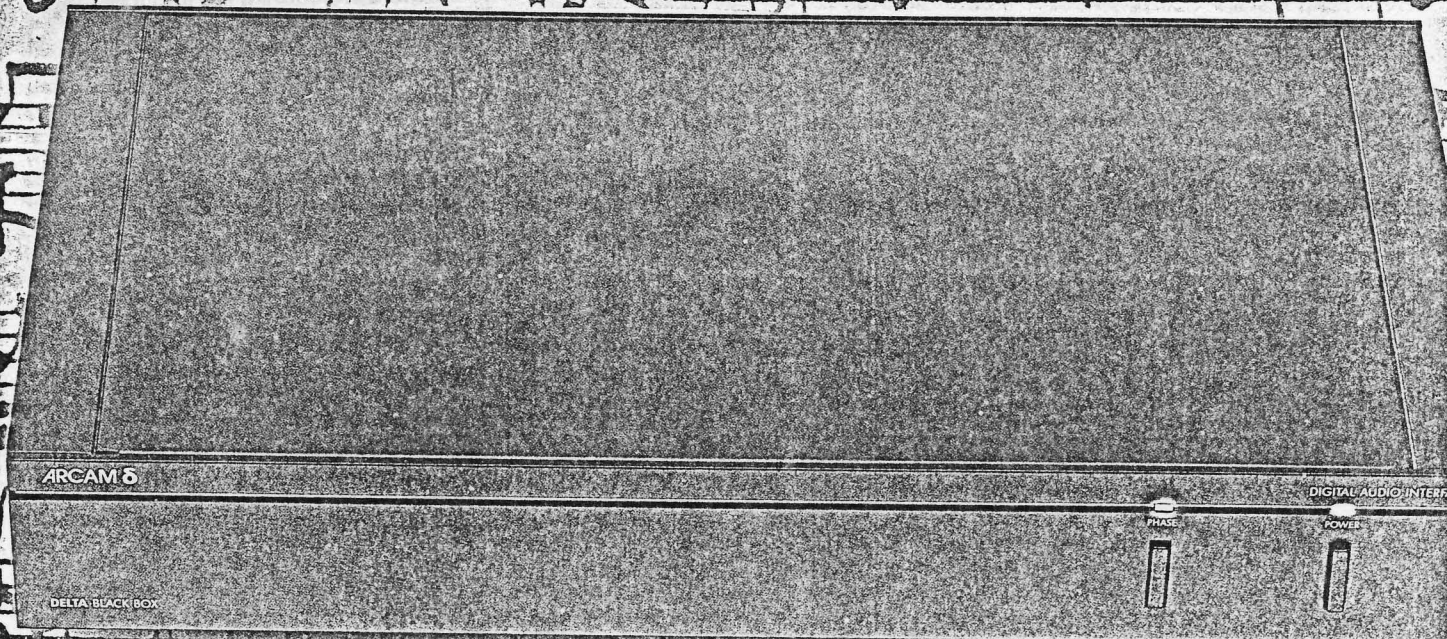


# Hifi Heretic

number ten

\$5.00



## Equipment Reviews

# Naim SBL

The SBL is a significant, ground-breaking product in a number of ways — not the least important of which is the fact that it's the first loudspeaker to come from the Salisbury, England-based electronics specialists in over a decade.

But more important is the fact that the SBL embodies unique — and, in my opinion, *practical* — solutions to at least three problems common to a great many dynamic, box-type loudspeakers.

Two of these solutions are somewhat related to one another, as both have to do with why the SBL is, indeed, a Separate Box Loudspeaker.

The first problem: Consider what happens when a typical two-way dynamic loudspeaker system (one woofer and one tweeter in a box — i.e., a monkey coffin) is called upon to reproduce both low frequencies and high frequencies at the same time, the former involving comparatively large cone excursions, throwing significant amounts of energy back into the cabinet, while the latter depends on much smaller (and, if you will, "delicate") cone movements. Now, of course, both the woofer and the tweeter are bolted to the same baffle, itself (presumably) rigidly fixed to the cabinet. Thus, heroic powers of imagination aren't required to see how the action of the woofer can have a very real and undesirable effect on the performance of the tweeter; it's a little like the problem illustrated in the old Lincoln commercial in which a jeweler attempts to cut a diamond in the back seat of a Continental while traveling over

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rough roads at high speeds. (Was it SNL or SC-TV that re-did this spot with a Mohl in place of the Jeweler?) The effect has a name, and the name is *Intermodulation*.

How do Naim get around this? Simple: They put the tweeter and the woofer on separate baffles, themselves the fronts of separate boxes (Ta-da!), themselves acoustically isolated from one another by means of a sophisticated skeletal frame — which nonetheless provides strong "mechanical referencing" for each box (i.e., they won't move).

Okay — that's ample explanation for there being two separate boxes. Why, then, are there three?

No, the SBL is not a three-way loudspeaker; the third box contains no drivers, active or passive. It is, instead, a sort of bass-loading chamber — a means of "fooling" the woofer into thinking it's performing in a much larger cabinet than indeed it is. Through a design that very carefully controls the rarefied/compressed air allowed to travel between the woofer box and the bass-loading box, Naim are able to cancel the driver's own fundamental resonant frequency, thus maximizing efficiency and amplitude response in the bottom octave. And thus, the woofer moves a lot of air without having to depend on a large cabinet, the walls of which would be directly excited (and set to resonating) by the driver. (In the SBL, the woofer box and the bass-loading box, though acoustically "connected", are mechanically isolated from one another.) You see: *Big* is better, because *big* means more air to move, and less "springiness" against the backside of the woofer cone; *small* is better, because *small* means more rigid, with resonances that are both less severe and easier to deal with. What Naim have done in the SBL is to solve a slippery dilemma by giving you both.

I did mention that there are three problems addressed by unique solutions in the SBL — and while the third hasn't anything to do with the separateness of Naim's boxes, it is noteworthy nonetheless: The bass driver is designed to eliminate the distortions associated with overheating.

Overheating? Yup, that's right. And while you might note that the concept of liquid-cooled *tweeters* is neither new nor disarmingly original, few if any designers have heretofore addressed the problem with respect to woofers. But the problem seems real enough: Obviously, more current is being dealt with by the bass driver than by the treble driver, and with this increase in current comes an increase in power wasted as heat, which itself stresses the system and prevents the

an appropriately-sized hole at its center, to move in and out along the axis described by the length of the protrusion. The benefits, then, are perhaps clear: Less moving mass (since the "motor" doesn't have to bring a dustcap along for the ride) for better speed and transient performance, plus superior cooling characteristics (thanks to both the "heatsink" properties of the phase plug and the air gap that exists between it and the cone itself), for lower distortion and better power handling.

It's worth mentioning that I was quite surprised when I first saw this speaker "in the flesh" and realized how very small it actually is; from the photos I'd seen, I expected something along the lines of the Thiel CS-3.5 or similar floor-standing speaker, size-wise. (Perhaps it's those King Kong ads that led me astray...) Imagine my surprise, then, upon discovering that an assembled SBL measures only 35" x 10" x 11" (H x W x D, stand included). It is also, by the way, an unobtrusive and subtly attractive speaker, very nicely made and sporting excellent veneer work in particular. I would also suggest, however, that finishes other than black ash be considered, as the total effect of black foam grille on black cabinetry on black metal stand can be a little severe. Walnut is the other standard finish, and rosewood is an extra-cost option.

The Naim SBLs, by the way, absolutely, positively *must* be installed in the buyer's home by an authorized Naim dealer. While siting them isn't much of a challenge (though they must be located with their backs no further than a couple of inches from the rear wall), assembling them is. A Naim dealer knows how to do this, having been trained in person by a factory representative (who in many cases will have been Chris West of Naim North America, who traveled with his wife to New York to set up my review pair — thanks, Chris!); and while men and women of average intelligence and motor skills probably could, with the help of either a good manual or a little practice, do just fine setting up the SBLs, it's not a matter for you to be concerned with. Just relax, open a beer, and pick out a couple of records while someone else does the work.

**Price: \$2895**

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parts from functioning efficiently and accurately. That is, the harder a (typical) bass driver works, the less able it is to do so without distortion.

The SBL's bass driver, which Naim partly manufacture, gets around this problem by virtue of a "self-cooling" design. A quick look at a de-grilled SBL might lead the casual observer to think that its woofer sports an unusually long, protruding dustcap. That protrusion, though (which Naim refer to as a "phase plug", stating it sorts out phase characteristics of the driver), isn't a part of the moving driver at all, but is actually a stationary aluminum fitting intended to draw heat away from the pole piece of the speaker. The cone itself, then, as you can perhaps by now visualize, is separate from this "heatsink" — and is allowed, via

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Sonically, the Naim SBLs are remarkable, albeit in unexpected ways. That is to say, whereas you might be used to the idea of a new loudspeaker impressing you with, say, its good bass extension, or clean, crisp top-end detail, or uncanny imaging capabilities, or whatever such individual sonic performance parameters, the SBLs simply make you take notice of the music in a less analytical (but perhaps ultimately more meaningful) way. In this sense, the strengths of Naim's first loudspeaker are similar to the strengths of the company's electronics. The SBLs have, above all, an immediate, involving sound. They're fun to listen to, period.

On the song "Simple Sister" from Procol Harum's *Broken Barricades* album, for example, the SBLs delivered a degree of musical involvement that, as recorded in my listening notes, was "stunning — truly wonderful! The drums, bass, and piano churn together in perfect rhythmic and melodic 'harmony', and the song builds to a climax that's virtually breathtaking." I noted that the SBLs also did a superb job of making plain the differences between the electric bass guitar and the left-hand piano line in the instrumental section, as the two instruments track each other, note-for-note. And my notes on this song through the SBLs contain an especially important observation (looking back, I see that I'd underlined it twice), one that would be repeated throughout my experiences with these speakers: "You don't have to turn them up to get excited."

No, you sure don't. But I should add that, if you do (and often it was that I did), the Naims never get raggy, harsh, or out of control. They crank, in other words, and they do it with equal parts musical finesse and reckless abandon.

On the down side, it must be noted that the Procol track also showed up what many would consider the SBL's biggest failing — their unimpressive stereo imaging performance. Yes, there's at least a decent suggestion of side-to-side placement of instruments and voices (though in the case of the latter, the image is rather too large and "amorphous", not at all well-defined or locked

in place), but there is virtually zero depth, doubtless having to do with the speakers' necessary against-the-wall placement. Just to see what would happen, I did try bringing the speakers further into the room, leaving about a foot between their backs and the back wall. But the small gains thus made in imaging depth were more than overshadowed by

***These speakers allow the fundamentals of music to come through in a very direct, emotive way.***

setbacks in terms of both decreased bass performance and, interestingly, an overall diminution of immediacy, impact, and the sense of involvement.

The next recording I auditioned was the (1954) RCA recording of Fritz Reiner and the CSO performing Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. (My copy is from RCA's "budget" Victrola series, VICS-1265.) I know this is something of a double audiophilism — i.e., a classical "pot-boiler" used to review equipment, not to mention one with an inordinately strong emphasis on BASS performance. But I remain unapologetic in my love for this piece, and, as for using it to assess bottom-octave response — well, er, *guilty*..

Anyway, the SBLs do an excellent job of putting this piece across. First of all, yes — they do indeed "get" the opening low C (carried by the double basses and the organ pedal), and this ominous sound was portrayed not only with full weight and power but with perfectly distinct pitch, as well. (That is, the opening note was, indeed, a *note*, and not just an amorphous noise, as is often the case with other loudspeakers.) But the good performance didn't begin and end

there. The pizzicato string playing that follows the introduction was beautifully portrayed — in terms of *feel* as well as correct pitches and timbres. Through the Naim SBLs it was especially easy to picture the players' fingers plucking the strings, if you see what I mean. Bowed string sounds were also realistic and engaging, with an appealing, texture-y sound. As my notes for this piece read, "The Strauss sounds very lifelike through these speakers, but not because of 'hall sound'/ambience or 'air' (not much here compared to the other speakers) or imaging (again, little more than a suggestion), but because the music itself sounds direct, emotive, and *correct*."

Next, I turned to Tom Verlaine's latest LP, *Flash Light*, and the song "The Scientist Writes a Letter". The most striking thing here was the degree of directness and realism in the reproduction of Verlaine's voice. Tonally it sounded just right, with the right amount of sibilance, and the ultimate effect was to make the performance as moving as I'd ever heard it. On this cut I also noticed that very low level detail doesn't come through as clearly on the Naims as with the other speakers on test; in particular, the congas used in the background throughout much of the song were indistinct and somewhat difficult to identify. This wasn't a grievous failing, though, and the overall level of involvement prevented me from being distracted or dissatisfied by one such shortcoming.

Turning to Marshall Crenshaw's LP *Mary Jean and 9 Others* for his rendition of Peter Case's "Steel Strings" was also revealing. This track is, in essence, a "live-in-the-studio" recording, unusual in that the basic band (plus guest guitarist Mitch Easter) performed the song in one take as an ensemble, with little overdubbing added later on. The Naim SBLs took full advantage of the immediacy and presence this recording offers, turning in yet another satisfying performance. And again, the SBLs' bottom octave performance was noteworthy: The kick drum had a deep, powerful sound, and the drumming and electric bass playing were perfectly in synch with one another, pushing the song forward instead of bogging it down. As my notes

on this one say, "If I ever wanted someone to hear a demonstration of what I consider 'accurate, quick, deep' bass in a hi-fi setting, I'd play them this song on a good system with a pair of SBLs."

In all, it's interesting — and perhaps a bit unsurprising — that Naim's SBLs offer a lot of what has already put the company on the map in the world of amplification: These speakers allow the fundamentals of music to come through in a very direct, emotive way. They are also uniquely untroubled by subtle errors of pitch or timing, the likes of which are evident at least to some extent in most loudspeakers, and thus the Naims are easy to listen to for hours on end. With this level of accomplishment comes a significant bonus, one worthy of singling out if only because it's so rare and — let's admit it — of so much importance to a lot of music lovers: The Naim SBLs have, overall, the most realistic bass reproduction I've ever heard in my living room.

Yes, I do wish the SBLs were better in the department of stereo imaging, a performance area that, while certainly of less significance than the actual music one hopes to put across, is nonetheless valid and can indeed add to the overall sense of realism and enjoyment. But bear in mind that there are many highly touted speakers with stunning imaging performance (plus whatever other hi-fi accomplishments one might wish to highlight) that aren't half as musically involving as the Naims.

At the very least, I think you'll have fun if you bring a couple of well-loved records to a Naim dealer for a demonstration of the SBLs. Yes, at \$2895/pair they're expensive (though not, in my opinion, outrageously so, given the obvious design and construction work that's gone into them), and the SBLs are not without shortcomings. But if you value the true immediacy of live music above all else, and if you can live without great imaging performance (no condescension intended here — I'm not entirely sure I could), then these could be among those rare components that you'll buy once and never, ever replace.