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Naim NAP 250

LET'S SAY YOU'VE DECIDED to buy a new amplifier, and you are lucky enough to live in a town with a decent hi-fi store—that is, a dealer with good listening facilities and a selection of respectable equipment, plus sales personnel who are patient, accommodating, and intelligent enough to guide you toward the right buying decision for your own musical tastes and expectations.

And let's say that, based on reviews, personal recommendations, advertisements, or what-have-you, you've narrowed your choices down to two or three amps in your price range, and you've made an appointment to visit the store and listen to them. So now comes the hard part: choosing which records to bring with you.

You've all been faced with this or a similar decision, I'm sure. So tell me: What would you choose to listen to in an effort to evaluate a new amplifier? Would you check through your collection for those two or three discs you remember as having, er, *prominent* bass guitar or organ pedal lines, to see how the amp handles deep, loud bass passages? Would you bring in a recording known for its wide dynamic range—especially inasmuch as it contains a few outstandingly loud and supposedly "demanding" sounds, like the striking (or upending) of large percussion instruments? Would you make it a point to bring in one of those "depth of image" playtime records, so you can hear if the amp will uncover such critical musical information as the number of coats of paint on the wall behind the performers? Or

Those readers whose only exposure to the \$2795 Naim NAP 250 has been reading a review in a magazine don't know what they've missed/Art Dudley

will you just go the route of impressing upon the salesperson what an enlightened and wily guy or gal you are by bringing in the rarest-of-rare imports or out-of-print treasures?

Well, some of the above have their place, I suppose. But if selections such as these are the first things on your mind for this little shopping excursion, then you're starting off on the wrong foot. In fact, people who make those sorts of choices would probably be better off driving past the hi-fi store and going straight to Toys 'R Us: What they're looking for is a plaything—not a device for reproducing the kick, the fun, the serenity, the pathos, the majesty, the anger, or the sheer beauty of music.

Now: Unforeseeable clunkers aside, it's safe to assume that just about *all* of the music in your collection gives you pleasure of one sort or another. But I imagine it's equally safe to say that there are at least a handful of pieces which, over time, have proved to be *uniquely* effective at really moving you in some way—whether moving you to tears, to joy, or to new heights of air-guitar virtuosity. And that is where you should begin when choosing material for a critical audition. The type of music, the

range of frequencies and amplitudes portrayed, and even the quality of the recording and/or pressing—though of some importance later on—aren't terribly critical at this stage of the game. In fact, to help prevent your being distracted early on by characteristics of secondary importance, I recommend that you begin with as simple a piece of music as you have that still fulfills the primary requirement of being, let's say, emotionally transfixing. An a *capella* voice or simple vocal with acoustic guitar, perhaps, or a solo violin or piano work—this is where to start.

From there, all you have to do is put the record on, relax, and listen to the music. Forget the sound for a while; don't fret over colorations, imaging, or the like. (That can come later.) Just loosen up and appreciate the performers as if you were actually listening to *them*, instead of a stereophonic high fidelity recording of them. And the real test is now a simple question of how that new amplifier lets the music affect you. If you find yourself absorbed in and moved by the music, then the amp (and presumably the rest of the system—which under ideal circumstances would be a "known" quantity) has to be good; the more involving the recreation, the

better the amp.

And if you bring two or three such never-miss recordings to the audition and none of them get you at all involved—and if you find yourself bored or distracted while listening—then the amp isn't worth a penny, whatever its other strengths may be. And, no, good musical performance and impressive "sound" do not always go hand in hand; that is, an amp that "correctly" recreates the ambience of the room in which a recording was made isn't necessarily any more adept at reproducing real music than a toaster oven.

So back to the test: In my experience, a perfect song to throw at a new amp is the live version of "Crucifixion" by the late Phil Ochs, available on the collection *Chords of Fame* (A&M SP-6511). The arrangement is simple—just a voice and a steel-string guitar. The melody is haunting and evocative, and the lyric never ceases to amaze me with its sheer power. By the end of this fairly long (roughly eight minutes) song, Ochs sounds drained, the guitar is more than a little out of tune from the ferocity of some of his playing, and the listener (me) is dazed, in the best sense of the word.

That was the first thing I listened to after installing the review sample of the Naim NAP 250 in my system. (For what is reviewing if not playing the role of the shopper, time after time?) This song works for me in gauging a component's music-playing ability, although I frankly wouldn't dream of relying on it—or anything else—on a regular basis; I know of no better way to get "burned out" on a piece of music than by turning to it for every review. And if you wear out a song to the point where it doesn't move you as well as it used to, what good can it be for evaluating a piece of equipment?

Anyway, this performance—and those that followed it over the ensuing hours, days, and weeks—demonstrated that the Naim is more than up to the best test in the world for serious hi-fi gear. Through the Naim, the Phil

Ochs song was more devastatingly powerful, direct, and comprehensible than I'd heard before. Plus, it *sounded* great—about which we can talk a bit more later on. But even then, during its first evening in my apartment, I knew what an utter drag it would be when the time came to send the NAP 250 back

"Vereker's primary concern in designing a music amplifier is preserving the accuracy and integrity of each note's entire, distinctive envelope or shape; do that well, he believes, and you will reap good performance with regard to all-important musical fundamentals..."

to Naim.

Depending on what audio prejudices or preconceived notions you bring to a product's technical background (and let's face it—we're *all* guilty of that to some extent), the Naim 250 may be far enough out of the High End mainstream to fairly offend your sensibilities. Just take a look at the many ways in which this amp's design goes against the grain of current popular wisdom:

- The Naim 250 is a solid-state amplifier—not a tube in sight!
- It operates in stodgy, conservative, reliable old Class B—not even A/B, A-A/B, "Sliding Class A," and *certainly* not Class A.
- The amp uses quite a fair amount of negative feedback.
- The 250's speaker connectors are sockets which accept only 4mm speaker plugs (supplied); bare wire, spade lugs, or even larger (American)

- banana plugs can't be used.
- The Naim 250, instead of being designed with the sort of ultra-wide, "DC-to-light" bandwidth that has become *de rigueur* in audio circles, is actually relatively limited (deliberately so) in its bandwidth, being 3dB down at 5Hz and 40kHz.
- This amp doesn't have handles on the front (or back, for that matter), and it isn't rack-mountable.

While attending this year's Summer CES, I asked Julian Vereker, Naim's Managing Director and chief designer, to explain why he'd made these sorts of decisions in creating the NAP 250. And the concept which he stressed most often in our conversation was the importance of *balance*. For example: Yes, Vereker says, Class A operation can be beneficial in eliminating certain distortions—and, for that matter, chasing down and applying solutions to various other types of distortion can indeed produce benefits in one area or another. But in his experience, such single-mindedness in design has a steep price, as the all-out pursuit of excellence in one performance parameter often means sacrificing or at least neglecting performance in one or more others.

Vereker's primary concern in designing a music amplifier is preserving the accuracy and integrity of each note's entire, distinctive envelope or shape; do that well, he believes, and you will reap good performance with regard to all-important musical fundamentals like pitch and timing. And to achieve what he's after in the 250 (and his other amps, as well), Vereker points to the importance of a number of characteristics—good slew rate or "speed," correct phase or timing performance, the ability to drive virtually any kind of speaker load without instability or distortion—all in sensible proportion to one another, without unduly emphasizing any individual spec beyond where musical benefits cease to be realized. The designer also cites the importance

of very high parts quality; for example, he says, the present-day 250 became a reality only after Naim were able to specify and purchase a special output transistor now made exclusively for them.

Very high construction quality is also stressed as important to the sound of the Naim 250, and Naim's level of achievement here is immediately obvious upon sliding the chassis free of its extruded aluminum case. The sturdy circuit boards sport clean, symmetrical traces, and all solder joints are first-rate. Perhaps more important, all the point-to-point wiring (and there is a fair amount) is done by hand, with a strong emphasis on dressing the wires for proper length, symmetry, and proximity to possible sources of interference. Though he eschews many design practices typical of High End amp builders, Vereker nonetheless believes that an amplifier's ultimate musical performance is influenced by many seemingly insignificant things in the way of layout and construction. In fact, he told me that the main reason for his choosing to work with transistors rather than tubes is that he enjoys working with his hands inside an amplifier while it's operating, to hear what effect this or that "tweak" has on the sound; the dangerously high voltages present in tube amplifiers prevent him from doing this!

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I'd like to tell you how to go about getting the most out of the Naim 250, especially since most if not all of these "tips" are equally effective when applied to any amplifier. But first, let me mention a couple of more unusual facets of the 250's design—things that have to do with how this and other Naim amps *must* be used in any system.

First, Naim strongly recommend that the NAP 250 be used only with one of their preamps. This isn't just because they want the 250 to be driven only with what they feel is the highest quality signal (a concern which they and any other electronics manufacturer are entitled to, I sup-

pose); it's also because preamp characteristics such as operating bandwidth and output impedance (to name only two) will decisively establish the operating parameters for the amplifier. Besides, the distinctly non-standard cable configurations used by Naim preamps and amps—what with DIN and XLR plugs on

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their interconnects instead of RCAs, and liberal use of common grounding—make it difficult to use much other than a Naim 62 or 72 for the preamp.

Also of note is Naim's insistence that their amplifiers be used only with their own proprietary speaker cable, and with a minimum run of 10 feet per channel. (Don't worry—it's cheap.) The point here is that the Naim cable is slightly inductive, and the amplifier's output section—which lacks chokes/coils of any sort after the output devices themselves—depends on this characteristic to insure stable operation. The cable, in other words, can be considered as a part of the amplifier, which is a laudable approach in itself.

Now, onto a few suggestions that aren't *required* by anyone—but maybe ought to be...

- Like virtually every other amplifier I've heard, the Naim 250 doesn't sound its best until

it's fully warmed-up. (Interestingly, though, there is much less difference between the sound of the "cold" Naim and the warmed-up Naim than with other amps I've experienced—though why this should be, I haven't a clue.)

- Though certainly not as sensitive as record players, amplifiers will perform their best when isolated from structural and airborne vibrations. And, as with record players, the best way to do this is with as light (read: low mass) a structure as possible, as long as it's still perfectly stable and rigid. There are now a great many brands and models of such platforms to choose from, typically featuring welded frames, carpet-piercing spikes at the feet, and light Medite "shelves" (likewise supported by spikes); I've used both the Sound Factory Tripod stands (distributed in the US by Naim North America) and the Audiotech table (a sexy-looking Italian model, distributed by the Chicago-based Audiophore company) with excellent results.

- The quality of the AC power you "feed" to the Naim has a remarkably pronounced effect on its performance—but Jeez, what a can of worms one opens by saying so! I have Enid Lumley of *The Absolute Sound* and *International Audio Review* to thank for making clear the differences between listening to a hi-fi during daylight hours and listening at night (there is much less "demand" on the utility during the latter period—hence less noise and interference on the line). And the difference in the quality of reproduced music between the two times is truly noticeable—a "man-on-the-street" improvement, if you know what I mean. And I dare say that, with the Naim, this difference is greater than with other amplifiers of my experience—though, again, I am hard-pressed to say why.

That the effect is real, though, shouldn't mystify you at all. Consider: An amplifier isn't some magical "generator" of sound, drawing AC power from the wall socket only to fuel its otherwise-inscrutable workings.

An amplifier (or, more accurately, amplification system, including preamp, and power amp) literally transforms your household electricity into a louder imitation of what is being fed to it by the phono cartridge. (The operation isn't 100 percent efficient, of course; some energy is wasted as heat.) Viewed correctly, then: When you listen to your hi-fi, you are literally listening to your household AC. And when very delicate signals are being thus mimicked (electrically amplified), and when there is some noise or interference in the AC, it should surprise no one that the music suffers.

But what can you do about all this? Not a lot, really—short of the unreasonable. Experimenting with your amplifier plugged into various different outlets in the room, to the extent that this is possible, can have some benefits. (If you live in an apartment, as I do, call your Super; he or she may be able to advise whether different outlets in your home are on different circuits—keeping in mind the idea that you should avoid circuits into which stoves, refrigerators, and other such demanding appliances are plugged.) And, yes—believe it or not—cleaning the AC plugs on your gear does make a slight difference for the better, I've found.

Beyond that, I'm short on useful suggestions—and, again, most of the suggestions in this area do originate with the aforementioned Ms. Lumley, whose good advice cannot be overpraised. No, I do not act upon each and every one of her suggestions, seeing as how her research occasionally leads to measures I would personally consider extreme. (There remains a certain arbitrariness—of which I am certainly guilty—regarding what an audiophile is or is not willing to do in pursuit of good music reproduction in the home.) Nevertheless, I tip my hat respectfully in Enid's direction (West, that is).

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Mike Trei, a friend of mine who works for New York dealer Sound by Singer, recently offer-

ed a good observation on music and Hi-Fi. In his experience, he said, having better Hi-Fi equipment makes it easier to comprehend and enjoy "difficult" music. And with that, Mike neatly summed up what I'd experienced during the couple of months I got to live with a Naim 250: Music that otherwise didn't com-

"In terms of sheer hi-fi sonics, let me assure you that the 250 is no less stellar a performer. The bass is quick, deep, and perfectly controlled—certainly wringing the best performance in that regard I've heard from my ProAcs."

pletely "connect" was now appreciably less inscrutable, more easy to comprehend. This phenomenon was certainly true with a lot of "classical" material in my collection; Berg's *Violin Concerto*, for example, became a much more rewarding and enjoyable experience. (That is, the use of the 250 contributed significantly to my having a "breakthrough" in my appreciation for this piece—evolving from "learning to appreciate it" to "liking it"—and looking forward to hearing it again!)

But the material with which I experienced this effect most, believe it or not, was some of the more challenging music by cult fave Don Van Vliet (aka Captain Beefheart, of Magic Band fame)—perhaps because I'd already developed a love for his more accessible stuff, like the albums *Clear Spot* and *The Spotlight Kid*. With the Naim 250 in my system, even listening to such challenging Beefheart albums as *Trout Mask Replica* (Reprise 2MS 2027)* took on new—and

largely more entertaining—dimensions. I remember putting on that album one Saturday morning right after receiving the 250, and hearing the opening song, "Frownland," literally as if for the first time. All of a sudden—*there* was the beat (with a clearly identifiable—if somewhat eccentric—time signature); *there* was the bass line; and *there* was the melody. The song now meant a hell of a lot more to me, and I was both more drawn into it and more entertained by it than ever before.

In terms of sheer hi-fi sonics, let me assure you that the 250 is no less stellar a performer. The bass is quick, deep, and perfectly controlled—certainly wringing the best performance in that regard I've heard from my ProAcs. An example of this can be had by listening to the song "Mayor of Simpleton" from the most recent album by XTC, the wonderful *Oranges and Lemons* (Geffen GHS 24218). Colin Moulding's electric bass line is revealed here as providing a deep foundation, pushing the song forward rhythmically, and yet still changing constantly, note-wise a different "pattern" against almost each line of the verse. Lesser amplifiers (lesser components, in general) don't even come close to making this detectable, let alone obvious.

The entire sonic spectrum, in fact, is portrayed with a sense of clarity and lack of coloration that would be hard to fault by even the most persnickety High Enders. No, there is nothing here in the way of edginess or hardness (qualities usually associated with the upper midrange through the trebles) or for that matter any of the other ills often ascribed

* It's interesting to note that the still-in-print *Trout Mask...* made the "100 Greatest Albums" list in *Rolling Stone* a couple years back. But do you ever wonder what all the culture-conscious Yuppies who used the guide as a shopping list made of Beefheart once they actually heard the record?

to some lesser solid-state (as opposed to tubed) amplifiers. And egregious problems in terms of frequency response—colorations, if you like—are nowhere to be heard. The de Peyser/Maag/LSO recording of Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto* (Decca JB 48) provides a good example of the Naim's naturalness and, if you will, harmonic "completeness" regarding the reproduction of difficult musical timbres. The solo instrument here is reproduced in all its reedy glory—and with perfect musical intonation.

I would also be remiss in overlooking the Naim 250's stereo imaging performance. I sus-

pect that many US audiophiles, having perhaps heard that Naim themselves place no great importance on "soundstaging" as a hi-fi performance criteria, may assume that Naim's equipment is thus no great shakes in this regard. But let it be said—that just ain't so. My personal reference amp is the smaller NAP 140, and its imaging performance would doubtless surprise those whose experience with Naim electronics is limited to reading magazine reviews.

What surprised even me, though, is the extent to which the 250 exceeds the smaller amp in imaging. If the 140 is "not bad,"

then the 250 is out-and-out "remarkable." Not only is there a surprising amount of depth information uncovered on some records, but the clarity with which the 250 reveals subtle differences in depth between two closely juxtaposed instruments deserves special mention. Try the song "Brilliant Mistake" from Elvis Costello's *King of America* (CBS FC 40173), and listen to the placement of vocal images in the chorus. The harmony voice—which enters after the lead voice—can, through the 250, be clearly heard originating from a spot slightly but distinctly in front of it. This isn't as important as considerations of musical performance, I know—but, when done right, this sort of thing adds a lot to the fun and sense of realism.

Still, though, it's that basic musical performance—the ability to correctly portray the melodic and rhythmic content of the music that sets the Naim 250 apart from anything else I've had the opportunity to hear. Every audiophile is of course entitled to harbor his or her own set of priorities in performance criteria—and, for me, those fundamentals are at the top of the list. And for this, if nothing else, the Naim NAP 250 is the amplifier that has given me the most listening pleasure at home, and is the one I would want most to own. (Sadly, my spending \$2800 on another stereo component is about as feasible as deep-space travel.)

I would not for a moment expect each casual reader to now rush right over to their local Naim dealer, cash in hand and old gear in tow for the trade-in, and I'm not being condescending when I say that the stuff probably isn't for everybody. I would, though, strongly urge you to take advantage of any chance to hear the Naim 250 in a well-balanced system as soon as that opportunity arises. Yes, you may be one of those to whom this amp is "it," and nothing else will do. But then again, at the least, it'll be a true ear-opening experience, learning the extent to which a hi-fi can really sound like music. □

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