

GoogleCast

FOLLOWING DISCLOSURE AT THE NEW NAIM UNITI LAUNCH, ANDREW EVERARD DESCRIBES AND DISCUSSES THE £30 PUCK THAT COULD REVOLUTIONISE AUDIO

Sitting in the boardroom at Naim Audio for the recent launch of its new *Uniti* range, I was surprised to hear the words ‘Google Cast’ mentioned as one of the main planks of the design of the new products. Until then I’d had little exposure to this Google-developed platform beyond awareness that it was something approaching the search giant’s equivalent of Apple’s AirPlay, and that it was available in a little puck-shaped player, one of which I’d bought ages ago in one of those huge electricals sheds, purely to see what all the fuss was about.

That little *Chromecast Audio* device, selling for £30 but on a special half-price offer when I bought it, seemed interesting enough at the time: I bought it when I’d been playing with various devices of that kind, including the Gramofon multi-room player and Apple TV. It’s compatible with Windows, iOS, Android and OSX, and lets you stream (or ‘cast’) audio content from computers and portable devices to the audio system to which it’s connected. That means you can play music stored on those devices, or simply stream the likes of Spotify, Google Play Music, internet radio and the like.

It even comes with a short – and very bright yellow – 3.5mm-jack-terminated audio cable to feed the hi-fi system, and is powered by a plug-top USB adapter. I tried it for a while plugged into the front panel audio input on the original Naim *Uniti* I have sitting on my desk powering a pair of Neat *Iota* speakers, controlled it with an inexpensive Android tablet, and found it entirely pleasant and entertaining (not to mention quite a bargain). (In fact, I was thinking of buying more examples while that half-price deal was on, and connecting them to all kinds of speakers and things around the house.)

Chromecast Audio is just one of three similar devices sold under the *Chromecast* name: there’s also the *Chromecast* itself, which sells for the same money but is designed to access streaming TV services, such as BBC iPlayer, ALL4, Netflix and NOW TV, as well as allowing the user to mirror the display on a smartphone or tablet to the screen of a swish new large-screen TV (for better or worse).

Just released is the new *Chromecast Ultra*, replacing the old *Premium* model and selling for £69. This takes the original proposition and upgrades it to 4k (ultra high definition) TV capability, making

it possible not only to access the 4k content available on Netflix and YouTube, but also to stream any 4k content they may have on their computer or mobile device to the TV. It will even optimise standard definition and HD content for viewing on 4k TVs, completing a very impressive-sounding package for the money – doubly so at less than 6cm in diameter and just over 1.5cm thick.

So far, then, the whole *Chromecast/Google Cast* thing is an example of a growing trend in consumer electronics; companies better known for software and services (Google, Amazon, etc.) moving into offering hardware designed to seize some of the market from the established manufacturers.

What, however, has all this to do with the price of fish, in the context of a specialist audio manufacturer such as Naim Audio? And why does the latter’s MD describe the inclusion of Google *Cast for Audio* in the new *Uniti* range as being a significant part of what he’s calling the company’s ‘platform for the future’? After all, Naim says it has spent more than three years, and as many millions of pounds, developing the new hardware and software on which the new models run, so why would it include something seemingly designed to bring easy streaming to the mass-market, sold in the electrical sheds and designed to be plugged into micro-systems and TVs?

Well, delve a little deeper and you discover than there’s rather more to Google *Cast for Audio*: it’s also available embedded into a range of active and powered speakers, as well as other audio devices, as an alternative to Bluetooth. Google plays up its benefits over the near-ubiquitous Bluetooth wireless system, not least of which is that it works over Wi-Fi rather than as a direct point-to-point connection like Bluetooth. That means multiple Google *Cast* products can be connected to a single receiving device, or indeed multiple active speakers to a single ‘sending’ device. Moreover, Wi-Fi means it’s easier on the battery in portable devices than Bluetooth would be, and also allows higher-quality music streaming.

A number of manufacturers are already onboard with Google *Cast Audio*, including Bang & Olufsen’s *Be&O Play* brand, LG, Philips and Sony, and others such as Harman, JBL, Polk and Onkyo are expected to join the party soon.

Sony, for example, offers Google *Cast Audio* in

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a range of its Wi-Fi/Bluetooth-enabled wireless speakers, starting with the £170 *SRS-ZR5* model, as part of its *SongPal* system, which offers phone connectivity, multi-room capability and more. Advantages in that market extend to the ability to take calls or play games on your smartphone or tablet while simultaneously streaming music. True, that's unlikely to trouble the average *HIFICRITIC* reader too much, but it does show how Google *Cast* manages to combine network streaming with wireless connectivity.

For Naim, the advantage of including Google *Cast Audio* is that it enables the company to break free from the current 'arms race' in offering services to its customers. The company has had to work hard and invest heavily in order to satisfy customer demand for streaming services such as Spotify Connect and Tidal, having to work out dedicated firmware solutions to include them only to have customers say: "Very nice; now can we have..."

Freeing itself from that treadmill, while still offering its users access to the latest thing, was a major part of future-proofing the new *Uniti* range, which now runs on a modified version of the Linux platform. Adding Google *Cast*, which will work with apps available on the usual platforms for smartphones and tablets, will make it easy for users to access streaming services such as Qobuz, or play the soundtrack of a favourite YouTube video, straight from a smart device to the Naim *Uniti Atom*, *Star* or *Nova*.

And you can be pretty sure that with all that development money spent on building the platform on which those models operate, and the expanded programming resources now available to the Salisbury company – at one point it had 25 developers working on the new *Uniti* products – the reinvented *Uniti* range won't be the last products to offer this capability. After all, the company's *ND*-series range has been around for a while now, and in some respects is lagging behind the facilities offered by the company's *Mu-so* line-up, let alone the new *Uniti* models.

The rise of Google *Cast* is perhaps a sign of just how much the audio world is changing these days – although perhaps we're not too far away from the heyday of CD, when many manufacturers would buy a kit of parts from one of the big-name developers of the format, and then build their own audio section around it to deliver the required sound quality.

As Naim Audio's example shows, manufacturers can still spend a lot of money developing and refining products, but it would seem churlish to try and solve problems entirely alone when off-the-shelf solutions, in the form of developer kits and



the like, are available. In taking on board Google *Cast for Audio*, Naim has made its new range as near to 'open source' as any manufacturer is likely to without giving away the whole shebang. As MD Trevor Wilson puts it: "I was just counting the other night, and there's something like 50 music services out there, all Google *Cast* enabled. Buyers of the new *Uniti* models will be able to pick and choose between them, and add them as they wish."

And as new services come along, there's a very good chance that these too will be compatible with Google *Cast*, and therefore with the new Naim models, simply because the developers will want them to work with the widest possible range of those hundreds of millions of smartphones and tablets out there. So the next time anyone says that the smartphone revolution has done nothing but damage to the hi-fi industry, there's a very good answer!



Naim Uniti Nova 3