



Naim Uniti Atom

WE'VE HAD TO WAIT FOR NAIM'S 'NEW UNITI' SERIES, BUT THE ATOM NETWORK MUSIC SYSTEM INDICATES THAT THIS HAS BEEN WORTHWHILE, SAYS ANDREW EVERARD

There are two ways to launch a new range of products. One is to hold off any announcement until production is well underway, and the pipeline from factory to retailer is full of product ready to go. But as with all full pipelines there's always the possibility of leaks just where and when they're not wanted, therefore diminishing the impact when the taps are actually turned on.

The other approach is to whet appetites (and hopefully start opening order-books) by announcing what will be coming a month or two down the line. The manufacturer, can therefore get two bites of the cherry, with the initial news stories and then the reviews and (provided the product is exciting enough) get potential buyers slaving to acquire the product. (Or, in the case of Apple, sleeping in the streets ready to be applauded into the store on launch day; then frantically blogging to all their friends and the world in general about the wonder of their new acquisition.)

In other words, a successful product launch is a matter of managing expectation while still building it up into a frenzy. Get it right and one has the 'must have' product of the moment flying out of

the warehouse, in the position of 'only just' meeting demand for the new and highly covetable toy.

In the past it would be fair to say that Naim Audio has announced some products prematurely, then seeing delivery dates slip back a bit simply because the engineers were determined to get them right before actually launching them. However, even with this track record, the launch of the re-invented Uniti series has been something of a cock-up, with the slick and somewhat breathless marketing campaign launched when the products were first announced – I'm still not sure what 'Go Deeper' signifies (let alone 'Purposeful Materiality') – failing to be backed up by the arrival of real product for many months.

Looking back through my diary, I see that the press launch for 'new Uniti' was held in Salisbury on October 28th 2016. Admittedly I've now had a sample of the *Uniti Core* ripper/server for a month or two, but it's only at the time of writing (a couple of weeks into August 2017) that I received a *Uniti Atom* system for review.

The reasons? It seems that Naim's ambitious plans to have the new range in production and hurtling out of the door at the end of last year were scuppered by a minefield of technology licences and

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compliance issues. The engineers therefore struggled to get approval for elements of the packages, and ensure that these requirements didn't impinge on the sound. Indicative of the way modern audio components are designed and operate, the physical and electronic design of the new range was all in place last autumn; shortly thereafter, the hardware was being produced.

The problem turned out to be getting all the software sorted to load into the products being made. This in turn slowed production as the incompletely programmed units began to build up. So did Naim 'go too soon' with the announcement of 'new *Uniti*'? Or, having spent several years developing the hardware for its 'platform for the future', did it underestimate the task of what must have seemed like the easy bit?

Whatever, the new *Uniti* models are here, and the £1750 *Uniti Atom* we have here (£1850 with the optional HDMI input) is the smallest and most affordable of three 'just add speakers' systems in the range. Above it sits the *Uniti Star* (from £3300 depending on configuration), and the *Uniti Nova* (from £4100).

Features and Facilities

The *Atom* is effectively the '*UnitiQute*' of the new line-up, but I'm sure Naim wouldn't thank me for regarding it thus, as the new model offers so much more than the predecessor with which it (roughly) shares a footprint. And that's as true for its performance as it is with the spectacularly comprehensive specification.

Whereas the old *UnitiQute* was a child of its time: its capabilities were mildly updated during its life, but slowly fell behind some of the more recent competition. The *Atom* has been designed not only to be bang up to date, but also to have the wherewithal to stand up to future challenges. Not only does it come with network music playback built-in all the way up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD128, but as well as integrating Tidal and Spotify Connect, it also has Chromecast built-in. That allows it to play music directly from a portable device or computer, running any one of almost 500 Chromecast-enabled Apps, not the least of which is the hi-res music service Qobuz. Almost 500 Apps? "Well, 463 actually", says Naim, adding "We counted them".

The *Uniti Atom* also has both Apple *AirPlay* and Bluetooth with aptX built-in, along with both Wi-Fi and Ethernet network connectivity, and comes complete with an excellent new bi-directional radio frequency remote handset that's not only able to operate without line of sight to the unit itself, but

also provides a degree of feedback of volume levels and the like.

It's also possible to control the *Atom* using a combination of the front panel buttons with that new, large and extremely clear display, and the top-mounted volume control, with its smooth-running action and precise adjustment, is just as convincing here as it is on the company's *Statement* pre-amplifier and *Mu-so* products (unless you want to slot the *Atom* into close-spaced shelving).

Although it may seem wasteful to hide this feature under a bushel (well, under a shelf, anyway), the *Atom* shares with other Naim products the excellent Naim App, which can be used to control single products or a whole multi-room system. It's slick, fast and flexible, and allows a whole range of detail adjustments to be made with a click and a tap, not to mention making music playing from network sources, whether storage or streaming, a pleasurable experience.

The *Atom* also has another trick up its sleeve: as well as the ability to play music from USB storage, it can also make content on attached USB drives available to other players on the same network, acting as a streamer. So users with, say, an *Atom* and one of the *Mu-so* systems could rip music to a USB drive, and then share it across the network between the two. Furthermore, the unit can stream a source connected to its line input (even including a turntable with a phono stage), to up to five zones simultaneously.

Neat tricks abound: with the optional HDMI input module it can take sound straight from a TV using the Audio Return Channel system; those with an AV receiver will be pleased that the *Atom* has a set of analogue inputs to take the front left and right channel pre-outs, complete with a fixed gain option for just this purpose. Input trims and renaming options are also available on other inputs, and RCA pre-outs can be fed to an external power amp. A dedicated headphone amp with its own volume control is built-in, feeding a 3.5mm output.

Like the HDMI input and Ethernet connection, the co-ax digital input is galvanically isolated to keep electrical noise at bay. There are also two optical ins, plus a ground lift switch for analogue sources with their own earth. The speaker outputs have the usual Naim sockets, requiring the appropriate 4mm-based plugs.

Besides a standby button, the front-panel allows direct access to inputs and internet radio presets. The *Atom* also has an adjustable automatic power-saving standby facility, waking up if accessed by the App, the remote handset, or if somebody approaches the main unit (thanks to a proximity sensor). Do that when the unit is in 'sleep' mode and it springs to

Manufacturer's Specifications

Model	Naim Uniti Atom
Type	Network music system
Network connectivity	Ethernet; 2.4/5GHz Wi-Fi
Sources	Network music streaming; Internet radio; Spotify Connect; Tidal; Built-in Chromecast; AirPlay; Bluetooth with aptX
Formats handled	WAV (up to 32bits/384kHz); ALAC, AIFF and FLAC (up to 24bit/384kHz); MP3/AAC (up to 48kHz, 320kbit/s); OGG and WMA (up to 48kHz); DSD42/128 (2.8/5.6MHz).
Audio inputs	2xUSB type A; 2x TosLink optical; S/PDIF co-axial digital; 1x analogue
Outputs	Speakers; Headphones (3.5mm); Pre-outs.
Power output	2x40W (8ohms).
Supplied accessories	Power-Line Lite; Remote handset.
Size (WxHxD)	24.5x9.5x26.5cm (9.7x3.7x10.4in)
Price	£1750 (£1850 with HDMI input)

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life, lighting its white Naim logo, the ring around the volume control, and switching on the display.

And what a display it is: a bold, bright LCD panel with big, clear input and volume legends, station logos when on internet radio, and album artwork when playing music from network storage, USB or streaming services. It's all a very long way from the simple green display panels we got used to on the previous *Uniti* models and the Naim *ND-* players, and means that the *Atom* both looks striking and is a joy to use.

Add to that the clean lines of the new models – even the Wi-Fi antennae are integrated in the space between the heatsink fins, so no need for stubby rubber add-ons – and the new *Uniti* series presents a thoroughly modern face to the world. And with a greatly improved Wi-Fi implementation, and a greater buffer memory in the signal-processing section, the *Atom* is a lot less prone to drop-outs (it's able to store about a track's worth of music, against around a minute in the old models). Certainly this seems to work: I was surprised to discover I could stream tracks at up to 24-bit/384kHz wirelessly, whereas I'd usually resort to Ethernet for anything above 24-bit/96kHz.

Internally the system uses I²S transmission of data, its separate clock signal reducing the chances of jitter, while the Low Voltage Differential Signalling delivers high accuracy with a very low radiated field, minimising any chances of interference.

The new *Uniti* range allows the direct updating of firmware over the systems' network connections, so at last the faffing around with laptops and leads involved in keeping earlier *Uniti* and *ND-* models up to date will become a thing of the past.

That promise of future-proofing seems to be already bearing fruit: Naim is yet to announce formal support for Roon, but attempting to point my usual Roon control point on my laptop to play

out via the *Atom* was met with success: up popped the album artwork on the system's display, and off we went. Even track-skip was available from the Naim App, which bodes well for more formal integration in the near future.

Furthermore, the performance of this junior model in the new *Uniti* range bodes well for the more upmarket *Star* and *Nova* models: the *Atom* may 'only' have 40W/ch into 8ohms, but in that usual Naim way it manages to sound much bigger than the 'on paper' specifications would suggest.

Sound Quality

I tried the Naim with my usual duo of speakers: the little Neat *Iota Alpha* floorstanders and the much larger (and considerably older) PMC *OB1*s I have been using for a very long time and know inside out, and was consistently impressed with the sheer enjoyment of music-making that this tiny system delivered.

As I write this, it's playing Stan Getz's *East of the Sun: The West Coast Sessions*, and is charming me with the smooth, effortless and snappy sound on offer. It makes the most of Getz's tenor against a tight, metronomic backing of drum and bass, as the music goes from lazy afternoon sounds to a more purposeful drive.

This ability was continued with the easy intimacy of Willie Nelson's *God's Problem Child* operating at 24-bit/96kHz. The Naim delivered a persuasive view of Nelson's voice, which sounded rather better than it has more recently, alongside the stripped-back instrumentation.

Even when playing the big PMCs at appreciable levels, the *Atom* has remarkable grip and rhythmic drive, allied to a gutsy bass and a sweet-but-clean midrange and treble. It makes one wonder whether any more power is really needed, even for tackling large scale orchestral works with some enthusiasm on the volume control. Playing the dramatic opening of Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony* (Pittsburgh SO/Manfred Honeck on Fresh! in 24-bit/192kHz), the Naim does a fine job with the tension of the music, while still delivering excellent insight into the orchestral forces, and handling the strings especially well.

This combination of weight and insight is also captivating on the Dena Piano Duo's *Hommage à Grieg* set (2L-094 DSD128). On Brahms' *Variations on a Theme of Joseph Haydn*, the two performers interweave in a manner that rivets the attention by filling the room with lovely music, set in a realistic-sounding acoustic. This would be good going for an amplifier alone at the price of the *Atom*. That this baby Naim does it so well and so much more makes it a conspicuous bargain. And yes, it has to be said – one worth waiting for.

