

NAP300DR Review

By Martin Colloms

FOLLOWING CHRIS BINNS' NAP300DR REVIEW IN VOL9 NO4,
MARTIN COLLOMS PROVIDES A SECOND SOUND QUALITY OPINION

HIFICRITIC
AUDIO EXCELLENCE

Just before Naim's amazing NAC S-1 and NAP S-1 *Statement* amplifiers left my premises, a revised version of the *NAP300* turned up, now with a *DR* suffix. Long term *NAP300* owner/reviewer Chris Binns reviewed the new *DR* version in our last issue, but as I've had recent experience of the musical capabilities of the Naim *Statements*, and also recently tried some impressive Constellation monoblocks, I'm in a good position to offer some timely supplementary observations on using a *300DR* in my reference system. In particular, even though it was at an early stage of running in, I was able to drive the *NAP300DR* from the *Statement* pre-amp, and also compare it directly with the *Statement* mono power amplifiers at twelve times the price. (Such opportunities are not to be missed.)

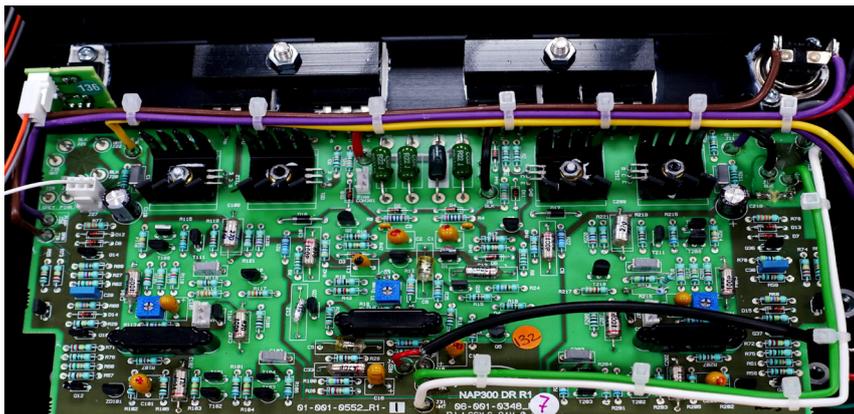
The *NAP300* is already very familiar to me, having reviewed it twice for *HIFICRITIC* over the years (*Vol11 No4*; *Vol7 No3*) and also recently adopted it as a medium power amplifier reference for longer term review comparisons. Brand new amplifiers can sound a little raw and may appear brighter, coarser, grainier and more two dimensional than when nearer to the end point of their running in. Despite a week of pre-delivery use, first impressions of the *300DR* were of a fast, upbeat quality, but one which was also somewhat disconcerting, as it sounded rather bright, forward and excitable.

I certainly liked the sense of speed but was

rather concerned about the lightened timbre. By comparison, a well run in *NAP300* is perceptibly dark, mildly two dimensional but well focused. It is somehow old fashioned in tonal colour, yet continues to satisfy with very good detail and focus, plus excellent dynamics, bass definition and rhythm. If well driven and supported, it remains musically infectious and involving, punching well beyond its weight. While I considered that the *DR* version was more open, brighter, faster and clearer at this early stage, the obvious differences were also disconcerting. Surprisingly perhaps (given the large price difference), direct comparison with the big *Statement* power amps showed more similarities than differences, and the *300DR* was clearly a sizeable chip off that bigger block.

Furthermore, even at this early stage, it was good enough to show off much of the performance of the *Statement* pre-amp, revealing exceptional image depth plus matching detail and focus, to the point where one could conceivably regard a *300DR* as a junior partner for this remarkable pre-amplifier, perhaps before moving up a power amp grade or two. This was a most promising beginning, but we ultimately found it necessary to operate the new *NAP300DR* for a further three months before it really settled down.

Now fully run in, the auditioning process was like being pulled onto a musical roller coaster. The now largely stable amplifier performance grabbed hold of my listeners, powerfully shaking them in close synchrony with the beat. Several old hands were quite shocked by the experience, suggesting that this magnitude of performance gain over the earlier model was simply not credible. But there it was, this revised stalwart was now exhibiting some sort of hyperactivity, and in a good way. Pace rhythm and timing were always a very dependable aspect of the *300*, but these qualities were not only enhanced, it also showed greater dynamic definition and contrasts, crisper, clearer transients, and rather greater dynamic energy and expression.



There was also a change in the perceived frequency extremes. These had been considered just a little curtailed with the standard model, but the *DR* version subjectively suggested a noticeably wider bandwidth. It was more open and better focused, with a more extended and sparkling treble, plus a bass that was substantially deeper, faster, more powerful and better textured. On the face of it such a result is quite impossible, since the usual measured frequency response is essentially the same for the two versions: so much for the usefulness of established measurements, even for qualifying perceived tonal balance.

The substantial sound quality improvement had many facets. For example, reproduced soundstages were on a significantly larger scale, and it also demonstrated deeper images with more sharply focused layering. Indeed, the stereo image performance was close to the state of the art. Both on- and off-stage images were tightly focused, and this welcome behaviour was apparent throughout the audible frequency range.

Another surprise was a significant increase in the subjective power available, and hence useable loudness, as the *DR* version could play substantially louder before the onset of hardness and listener fatigue, despite the fact that output power, current and voltage are essentially the same. Finally I have to report that it also continued to sound just a little brighter and lighter textured compared with the earlier model (or for that matter a D'Agostino *Momentum Stereo*), but was actually quite similar to a well-run-in Constellation *Centaur* or an *Inspiration Mono 1.0* (which was on hand at the time to help assess tonal quality).

We tried a number of loudspeakers with the 300DR including the review ATC *SCM11*, and with fine results, but it was the Magico *S5* which really revealed its virtues. This combination provided upbeat pacing and clarity, very good timing and rhythm, and impressively large and well focused soundstages, winning over numerous listeners including myself.

Reaching well beyond its price, especially if driven by state of the art sources, this *NAP-300DR* power amplifier achieves a massive 275 points for overall sound quality, dropping some 25 points below the magic 300 because of that mild, albeit very clean, touch of brightness

which is nonetheless a slight departure from absolute neutrality.

Test Results

I measured the *300DR* on the same test rig used for the standard *NAP300* three years ago. Most results were similar (if not identical), including output power, maximum peak current and output impedance. This is a powerful amplifier despite its modest claims, and will do 165W/ch into 4ohms, 244 pulsed into 2ohms and 325W pulsed into 1ohm, all of which is pretty impressive. It's fully protected against shorts and high frequency overload, and if driven really hard offers intermittent and almost silent fan cooling. The fine peak current result remains at about 25A.

A few decibels of distortion improvement at low and mid frequencies are seen at 1W power: -88.5dB falling to -95dB at 1kHz, for example. However, a bigger gain is visible at 20kHz where the new transistors have more effect, with a 15dB improvement to -85dB from -70dB or so. At rated power the distortion improvements were smaller, but still improved by 9dB at 20kHz. High frequency intermodulation distortion also showed an impressive improvement, from a very good -98dB to an exceptional -105.5dB at 1W.

Signal-to-noise ratio was a little poorer, at 100dBA from 105dBA, though the psychoacoustically weighted result CCIR (2kHz), was actually unchanged. There was a little more DC offset on the new version, but this is still insignificant. That small reduction in distortion particularly at higher frequencies is welcome, but the measured differences between the two versions are still too small to indicate a change in sound quality. This amplifier remains neutral, powerful and load tolerant, providing very good test results, but with nothing to suggest it would have any particular 'sound' at all.

Conclusions

The standard *NAP300* did so well that it became one of my long term references, with a performance reaching beyond price and power. And now there is the *300DR*, sounding significantly different, with a tonality moved from a hint of darkness to one of a sparkling illumination, offering effortless transparency, focus, grip and timing. The *NAP300DR* easily qualifies for the *HIFICRITIC* Audio Excellence rating.



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AMPLIFIER TEST RESULTS (300 DR amendments in brackets) N/C no change

Make	NAIM					Date:	6/2013	
Model	NAP 300 original plus (NAP 300 DR)						(2/2016)	
POWER OUTPUT	20Hz		1kHz		20kHz			
Continuous 8 ohm 2 channel	96.5	W (94.7)	97.4	W (96.2)	96.6	W (95.4)		
Continuous 4 ohm 1 channel	164.7	W (N/C)	165	W (N/C)	164.3	W (N/C)		
Pulsed 2/1 ohm 1 channel	--		244/325	W (N/C)	--		1:10 duty cycle	
Output impedance	0.27	Ohms (N/C)	0.27	ohms (N/C)	0.32	ohms (0.30)		
Peak Current (2 ohm pulsed)			25.3	A (N/C)				
Distortion, THD inc. noise (1W)	-90.1	dB (-94.1)	-88.5	dB (95.5)	-69.3	dB (-85.4)		
Distortion, THD inc. noise (rated power)	-78.2	dB (N/C)	-78.3	dB (-80.5)	-60.4	dB (-69.3)		
Channel separation	133	dB (N/C)	100.2	dB (N/C)	79.6	dB (N/C)		
Intermodulation Distortion 19.5kHz/20.5kHz 1:1 rated power, 8 ohms					-86.3	dB (-90.5dB)		
Intermodulation Distortion 19.5kHz/20.5kHz 1:1 1W, 8 ohms					-98.2	dB (-105.5dB)		
Signal to noise ratio (ref. 1W)	CCIR Weighted		Unweighted		A-weighted			
	95.5	dB (95.1)	101.8	dB (96.2)	104.6	dB (99.1)		
Channel Balance	0.028dB (N/C)		0.027dB (N/C)		0.002dB (N/C)			
Frequency Response:	-0.12dB @ 10Hz, then flat to 10kHz, -0.22dB@20kHz ,				-6dB @ 100kHz N/C			
Absolute Phase	correct							
Input Data	Socket			Sensitivity		Loading		
single ended (full power)	XLR		950		mV		18k	ohms low pF
DC offset	Left	-3.2	mV (11)	Right	-2.8	mV (12)		
Size:	WxHxD		432mm		87mm		314 mm	
Weight:	NAP300, 300PS		10.7kg, 14.1kg					
Price	£6,690 (£7,295)							

Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

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Martin Colloms, Publisher

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A couple of weeks after a large Schenker lorry had pulled up outside to deliver the G9 Audio valve amplifier set that I reviewed in the last issue (*HIFICRITIC Vol9 No4*), I was staring out of the window when the same thing happened again. No déjà vu, this was the real thing: another enormous Schenker lorry was pulling up, and this time I'd no idea why.

It turned out to be another delivery, again from Estonia, but this time consisting of two very hefty Audes *Excellence 5 AMT* loudspeakers. Unlike the Russian amplifier from G9 Audio, the Audes brand enthusiastically proclaims its Estonian ancestry, and since the loudspeakers weigh some 55kg+plinth each, it's safe to assume that they're floorstanders.

They're not even currently available in the UK, but the reason for reviewing them here is simply that their combination of wood veneers and black lacquer paintwork makes them among the most beautiful speakers I've ever seen. Although I normally try to avoid making aesthetic judgements about review products, there's no denying that these tall, slim, unusually deep and cunningly asymmetric speakers do look exceptionally good, especially their real wood veneered sides.

A pair costs 14,000 Euros in Germany, which translates as a little less than £11,000 in the UK, so they're not exactly cheap, but that's still far below today's 'high end' speaker prices. The bottom line must be to figure out whether they sound anywhere near as good as they look, though some further description must be dealt with first.

In order to keep the front view super-slim, the bass drivers – two paper-cone 8-inchers (200mm) in each speaker – are both mounted on the sides, which are mirror-imaged. The front view is just wide enough to accommodate two 5in (125mm) midrange drivers that are mounted above and below an AMT-type tweeter. The latter has a level control mounted on the rear; this adjusts the output by ± 3 dB, with the impedance here comfortably high.

Although I'd like to have checked my far-field in-room measurements again, the speakers have actually already gone back to Estonia at the time of writing, so that isn't possible. I can report that the claimed 92dB sensitivity is correct, and the midrange and treble responses are very smooth and well ordered. While I cannot carry out further checks on the bass behaviour, the impedance is a real problem, as it drops significantly below 3.3ohms across the two sub-80Hz octaves.

The sound quality of the *Excellence 5 AMT* is smooth, well balanced and essentially free from colorations. I might criticise it for sounding a little too restrained, but this essential tidiness might also be regarded as a strength. One might wish for dynamics that are a little more vivid and expressive, but in other respects the speaker is impressively evenhanded, and its slim front view helps promote fine stereo imaging, with fine focus and good depth.

The bottom line is that this Audes speaker remains among the most beautiful around. Its sound quality is always well behaved, with a superbly even tonal balance, low coloration, and fine stereo imaging. But there is also a problem, as the impedance at low frequencies is very demanding indeed. This will make life very tough for the partnering amplifier, and clearly prevents any formal Recommendation.