

Decidedly Big Loudspeaker

NAIM'S GIANT DBL IS A MUCH OLDER, LARGER AND LESS ROOM-FRIENDLY DESIGN THAN THE SL-2, BUT JON HONEYBALL IS STILL ENAMoured BY HIS BIG NAIMS

JON HONEYBALL

One can never trust Internet rumours, but the one that circulates about the naming (naming?) of the *DBL* is too delicious to pass over. The official line is that *DBL* stands for Double Box Loudspeaker, or something equally boring. The rumours suggest the prototype name was *FBL*, where the F was rude and decidedly Anglo Saxon, while BL stood for 'Big Loudspeaker'.

However the naming came about, the *DBL* is something of an enigma. As is common with Naim's overall philosophy, the company doesn't tinker with an established device, having the confidence that what it releases is right for the market and is the best it can manage at that price point. Few other manufacturers have such inner strength, the Peter Walker-era Quad being one that comes most obviously to mind. Others prefer to go for annual upgraditis, releasing Second Editions, Supers, References, Mk 2s and other such nonsense, all designed to make you feel uncomfortable with last year's purchase and its worryingly plummeting residual value.

The *DBLs* are enigmatic because few dealers have them on demonstration, lacking both the space and financial commitment to keep such a system together. To take a pair out to a house for a true in-room demonstration is the thick end of a man-week of effort by the dealer. The speakers come in six huge cases, each of which is a two-man lift. Assembly takes two, preferably three people and polishes off a day. Then there are the amp upgrades that might well be necessary, together with a general bolting down of the electronics to attempt to resist the vibrational onslaught of the large bass drivers. Give the punter a day or so to listen, then strip and remove: it's not hard to see that a man-week is probably on the low side.

Opinions vary about the looks – you are either kind and consider them daunting, impressive and actually not as room destroying as you might have thought at first, given that their preferred location is hard up against the back wall. Then the Wife Factor kicks in and words like 'ugly', 'monolithic' and 'what was wrong with the *SBLs*?' start getting muttered in protest.

But that matters not at all once you have listened to them. And at this point the enigma takes on positively mythical proportions. The only place where most people have heard *DBLs* is in the confines of a demonstration at a hotel suite, and a worse location would be hard to imagine. Once you have lived with them, it is clear that



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these are extraordinary devices, which can fill a huge listening room, or cosy up to your pinnae like giant headphones in a smaller space.

Driven appropriately, a topic I shall return to shortly, these are speakers that can quite easily go ‘concert loud’. And do so with real headroom too, and no sense of holding back. The temptation is to write them off as a pseudo-domesticated version of a rock monitor – all beer-gut, beard and tattoos. Nothing could be further from the truth, however.

The *DBL* was designed to be like an *SBL*, but rather more so. That small and innocuous speaker is one of the benchmarks for clarity – not in plastic-filmy electrostatic way, but in terms of timbre, note playing and shaping. The *DBL* adds three more things to the mix: a bass extension that will ripple a solid concrete floor; a headroom which is beyond naughty and could be quite neighbour-unfriendly; and a sheer lack of distortion, intermodulation fog and general

mushiness that is absolutely extraordinary. The way the drivers are mounted, each sub-enclosure on its own sectional part of the inner metal framework, contributes to this immensely of course. But even the tweeter and mid units have mechanical filters cut into the surrounding wood and mounting plates. And the physical construction and veneer quality is beyond reproach.

A piano note sounds like a piano. A xylophone has the right ‘crack’ and timbre. A singing voice will haunt you with its clarity and ghost-like ‘in the room’ reality. These are some of the most revealing speakers I have ever heard, and in many areas are up with the world’s best.



Unfortunately, they need the best upstream set of sources, and it would mad to drive them with anything other than Naim electronics. They have been voiced as a set, and unquestionable work best that way. In my system, I have *CDS1*, *NAC 52* pre-amp with *Supercap* power supply, *SNAXO362* active crossover with supercap, and then the classic ‘6-pack’ of a half dozen *NAP 135* monoblock power amps, each directly connected to its appropriate driver by Naim’s own cable. Vinyl comes from a recently re-built Linn Sondek *LP12* with Naim’s own *ARO* arm and *Armageddon* power supply. Built into the deck is the Naim *Prefix* moving coil headamp, with a *HiCap* power supply en route to the *52*. Cartridge is the extraordinary Dynavector *XV-1S*.

Some *DBL* users prefer to go with the more modern Reference-series range of electronics – the *NAC 552* pre-amp and the *NAP 500* power amp (or *300* for smaller budgets). Almost all of them drive the speakers passively through the optional crossover that Naim will sell you if you insist. I have no issues with this arrangement – providing you are gathering the necessary funds to get two more of your chosen power amps into the system as soon as possible.

Passive crossovers are a nonsense in any system claiming to be serious – they introduce distortion, nonlinearities and make the amplifier’s job much harder. Rip them out and put a properly designed and tuned active crossover in place, and then buy power amps to fit your budget. The *135* is a classic from Naim’s history, and they still fetch upwards of two thousand pounds a pair. I’m quite sure I would prefer my system with a *552* replacing the *52*, and three *500* power amps replacing the six *135s*. But there is the small matter of the near sixty thousand pounds required for the upgrade, a cost which makes, for me, an uncomfortable comparison with another Aston Martin, or half a helicopter. If ‘olive era’ Naim is what the wallet stretches to, then feel no shame in three *250s* or six *135s* – the latter is bigger, bouncier, clearer and more fun than the former, but all things are relative. And some claim that *135s* are the equal of *500s*, but that’s a quasi-religious argument for another time.

If I had to name the biggest problem with the system, it is not the lack of electrostatic-esque imagery, although it projects just fine for both depth and height, and has no problems defining the acoustic space around instruments. No, the biggest problem is that whole days disappear when listening to the system. One LP becomes five, three CD tasters become four box-sets. And suddenly it is 4am.