

# hi-finews GROUP TEST

The latest generation of mid-price integrated amplifiers offers a wide variety of features, power output and styling – but what about the sound? We try five of the best...

## INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS £1500-£2000

### TESTED THIS MONTH

EXPOSURE 3010S2	£1495
NAD C 390DD	£1999
NAIM NAIT XS2	£1595
REGA ELICIT-R	£1600
SIMAUDIO MOON NEO 250I	£1890



Cutting-edge gear, cherry-picked by the *Hi-Fi News* editor



The pinnacle of sound quality within its peer group



Great sound, great value and a cut above its rivals

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It's remarkable how many changes the humble integrated amplifier has undergone over the years. Like a buoy on a rough sea, it has been pushed one way and pulled the other, as the tides of fashion and buyers' needs change.

Once, integrations came replete with a profusion of knobs and switches – a filter or two here and a tone control or three there. Then the 1980s arrived, and suddenly the breed was stripped bare: less was more, and the pricier the product the sparser it was.

The Exposure, Moon, Naim and Rega tested here are essentially '80s children, offering relatively few features and Class AB power that produces a fair punch from a compact package. However, the NAD is a modern reinvention of the more traditional integrated amplifier – it is packed with features but everything is now done in the digital domain, right down to the Class D power amplifier section. It even has digital inputs and an integral DAC with USB connectivity – in contrast to, say, the Exposure which is little more than a power amp with a volume control.

So, *HFN* readers looking for a sub-£2000 integrated need first to decide what they want from it. If you're already kitted out with a good digital converter and just need a high quality all-rounder then all bar the NAD fit the picture. Conversely, if you want future expandability, digital inputs and basic room EQ, then the NAD is the obvious choice. Sonics differ dramatically too – even between the four similarly priced conventional designs.

Each has its own family sound which is quite distinct. Meanwhile the fifth amp here uses Class D to achieve its sound, but still comes over as recognisably a NAD. All of the integrations here sound good in their way so, ideally, prospective purchasers should audition them in their own systems to determine the best for them. However, this test should prove a great tool to help draw up your shortlist.

#### BENCHMARK RECORDINGS

A wide variety of source material was used, but four songs became particular benchmarks during the listening period. First was Peter Gabriel's 'Humdrum' from *Peter*

*Gabriel 1* [Virgin PGCD1], which is a clean, even and dry 1977 rock recording transcribed from the analogue master tape with care.

Randy Crawford's 1981 'You Might Need Somebody' [*Secret Combination*, Warner 256 904] is a beautiful soul recording, where she displays her amazing voice to great effect. It's a warm and inviting cut with plenty of air, the musicianship is superb and its production is refreshingly devoid of gimmickry.

4hero's 'Universal Love', from *Parallel Universe* [Selector SEL3], is a powerful slice of drum and bass music that blends deliciously warm sounding analogue synthesisers with powerful electronic beats and a pile-driving sub-bass. It's an exhaustive workout for any integrated amplifier.

Kate Bush's 'Snowflake' [*50 Words For Snow*, Fish People FPCD007] is a beautiful, brooding and subtle modern recording that is done to extremely high standards, with breathtaking depth and great intricacy to the lead vocals and piano alike. ↻

REVIEWS BY NICK TATE  
LAB TESTS BY PAUL MILLER

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# Exposure 3010S2



Most famous for its big black pre-power amplifier combinations of the 1980s, Exposure traditionally sold to people who wanted punchy solid-state amps that sounded smoother and creamier than rival Naims. Nowadays, the sound hasn't changed much but the size has and most of its wares are more affordable products such as this – Exposure's top integrated.

It's a nice device, with a decent finish and clear ergonomics – unlike the fiddly Rega, for example. Styling is pretty conventional; its fascia is a thick slab of brushed aluminium and the knobs have a smooth and silky action. Like most others here it has six inputs, but is unusual for having an MM/MC phono module option.

The manufacturer says much attention has been paid to squeezing the best sound out of the circuitry. To this end, special capacitors feature in the signal path and the circuit topology has been mapped with a view to keeping signal and power supply paths short. Cascode circuitry is used for improved power supply immunity, says Exposure, and there's a fast bipolar transistor output stage with high quality relays fitted in the preamplifier section.

## A NATURAL EASE

Right from the off, the Exposure proved a highly impressive performer, offering a well rounded tonality that sat bang in the middle of the group. Others like the Naim were rather a lot brighter, whereas the Rega sounded appreciably warmer. As well as its lovely even balance, it was big-hearted and bold; the stereo soundstage was



spacious and the amp had lots of easily delivered power on tap. The result was an expansive rendition of Peter Gabriel's 'Humdrum'. But it wasn't all about size, because the 3010S2 had delicacy and detail in spades. The rich, sonorous timbre of the piano was lovely, the instrument coming across in all its ringing glory.

The all-electronic 4hero track didn't change this impression; here we had a crisp and open midband able to throw up every element of the mix into sharp relief, but it didn't sound edgy or forced in any way. Rather, the music flowed with a natural ease that most of the others here lacked.

By comparison, the clear and explicit Nait XS2 didn't gel as well, sounding a little less natural, while the Rega made the recording feel slightly opaque and veiled.

The Exposure went on to showcase Randy Crawford's beautiful vocal chords, and conjured up a wonderfully relaxed yet stirring performance dripping with feel. Indeed, this amplifier has no weak points at all – and is also very strong in most areas. This makes it a truly satisfying way to play music, much more than its price would suggest.

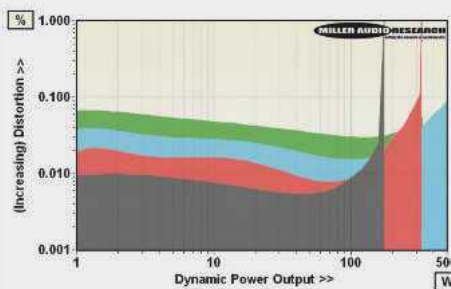
Sound Quality: 85%



**ABOVE:** One of the more minimalist amps here, source selection and volume knobs are your lot. However, they have a fine, silky action and the brushed alloy fascia looks sleek

## HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Distortion really does decrease as the 3010S2 is left to warm up – from 0.015% to 0.010% over 30 minutes at 10W/8ohm. Once toasty, the 3010S2 holds to ~0.01% from 1-100W/8ohm although THD in our sample did increase more sharply through the treble via the right channel (0.020% vs. 0.10%, L/R). As for power output, the 3010S2 beats its rated 110W at 2x135W and 2x225W into 8/4ohm with sufficient dynamic headroom to accommodate 175W, 325W and a huge 555W into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads [see Graph, below]. Output is short-circuit protected to 335W (18.3A/1ohm) but it's still the beefiest amp in our test and very tolerant of difficult speakers. Output impedance is also usefully lower than with previous-generation Exposure amps at 0.017ohm while the frequency response holds true to within ±1dB from 8Hz-23kHz. The 80dB S/N ratio (re. 0dBW) is a little lower than average but this is white noise rather than hum and likely to have a flattering subjective influence. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)



**ABOVE:** In addition to six RCA line inputs, the Exposure's back panel offers two sets of preamp outputs for bi-wiring, and two pairs of speaker outputs, plus IEC mains in

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	135W   225W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	175W   325W   555W   30W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.017-0.032ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	-0.16dB to -12.7dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/110W)	25mV   265mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/110W)	80.4dB   100.8dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.005-0.027%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	23W   265W
Dimensions (WHD)	440x115x300mm

# NAD C 390DD

A good number of readers will have started their hi-fi systems with NAD's superb Class A/B 3020 integrated amplifier back in the early '80s, but now it's 2014 and the growing number of digital sources makes a good case for a Class D amplifier that keeps the signal in the *digital* domain all the way up to the speaker outputs. The breed's low power consumption also reflects the way the world is turning, and it's also able to serve up high levels of output power with relative ease.

The new C 390DD sees NAD developing its M2 Direct Digital Amplifier into something more mainstream, with all preamplification done digitally. This should eliminate phase shift and analogue noise and distortion, says the manufacturer, and it also offers the prospect of room correction.

Inside it sports a powerful 35-bit architecture with a 108MHz master clock. The C 390DD comes standard with optical and coaxial digital inputs, plus one digital interface module – a 96kHz/24-bit USB input, but you can add HDMI and analogue phono inputs at extra cost. NAD's Digital PowerDrive circuit is designed to sense the speaker load and alter the amplifier characteristics accordingly. The C 390DD feels nice to use, although doesn't rival the other four here in the style or build quality stakes.

### KEEPING A GRIP

After the great start out of the blocks for the Exposure, it was interesting to hear the NAD putting in a feisty performance too. It's quite different to the 3010S2's, but is still very enjoyable to listen to. This amp



**ABOVE:** Dumpy looking fascia has a large volume control and display, but source selection buttons are fiddly. Navigation buttons to the left give access to advanced functions

sounds polished, tonally even and rather svelte-sounding; there are no stand-out peaks or troughs. Bass is strong but not boomy, midband open and treble nicely finessed.

The Peter Gabriel track showed how – on the densely layered end section – the amp was capable of keeping a good grip on the individual elements of the mix, with the cymbals sparkling out with wonderful delicacy. Vocals lacked some body and sounded a little too smooth, but were always pleasant.

However, the bass disappointed. It proved clean and satisfyingly fulsome but was also a tad wooden. For example, the bass guitar work appeared to be a little 'slowed down' and lacking in passion.

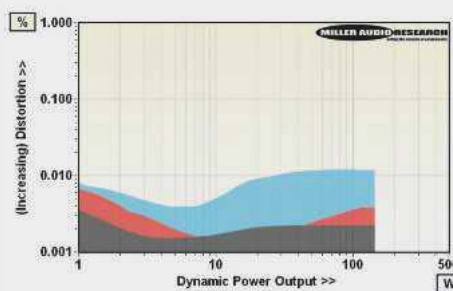
The Kate Bush track sounded nice enough, but again the NAD failed to quite get into the groove of the music. Things seemed to plod along a bit, lacking the magic that the Rega conjured up with this song, for example. 4hero was the same; a lovely hi-fi sound with wonderfully accurate image location and lots of low level detail, but still it failed to move me. And that's the NAD's problem – it's a classy sounding amplifier but just a bit too polished.

Sound Quality: 75%



### HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

While the C 390DD offers some +10dB of digital gain, I'd not set the volume higher than -2.0dB as this represents the maximum 150W/8ohm output for a peak level (0dBFs) digital input. Into 4ohm the maximum volume is -5dB and the output also 150W. Because a digital amp is more linear with increasing digital signal level (and output) its profile of THD versus level is typically the reverse of an analogue amp – distortion decreases here from 0.011% at -30dBfs (or 0.15W/8ohm) to 0.0022% at 0dBfs (or 150W/8ohm). [See Graph below.] Requantisation noise from the PWM stage forces THD (and noise) up to 0.22% at 20kHz/1W (all sample rates) and 3.4% at 40kHz/1W (96kHz/192kHz) so beware supertweeters! Frequency response(s) show a brightening into 8ohm loads of +0.7dB/20kHz (48kHz media), +4.5dB/45kHz (96kHz) and +6.8dB/85kHz (192kHz). Jitter is low enough at 700psec (24-bit/96kHz) but disappointingly high at 5775psec with standard 48kHz inputs. PM



**ABOVE:** Power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red) and 2ohm (blue). Max o/p is fixed at 150W



**ABOVE:** MDC expansion card slots sit far left, with digital inputs (AES/EBU, USB, optical and coaxial) adjacent. Two pairs of speaker binding posts take centre stage

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	150W / 150W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	150W / 150W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.035–0.045ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–90kHz)	+6.8dB to -0.56dB (192kHz media)
Digital jitter (48kHz/96kHz @ 10W)	5775psec / 715psec
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/150W)	92.3dB / 113.4dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.0018–0.22%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	34W / 358W
Dimensions (WHD)	435x132x388mm





# Naim Nait XS2

The original Nait was one of the first ever 'super integrated' amplifiers. Before its arrival in 1983, anyone serious about sound was generally expected to buy a separate preamplifier and power amp combination. This, its distant descendant, is an altogether more powerful and refined product, but retains the brand's distinctive styling and love of DIN socketry on the back panel – although thankfully RCA phonos are now provided too!

The XS2 is beautifully presented, in a slim aluminium case with green backlit Naim logo and control buttons. It has the feel of an expensive product and works easily and elegantly. Inside, this latest version gets more power than its predecessor, and superior sound is claimed too. This comes from a redesigned internal layout with constant current source drive electronics, and specially made film-type capacitors at critical points in the signal path. Ceramic heatsinks are used to keep the amplifier cool, and a special toroidal transformer supplies the juice.

As per most Naim amplifiers, the XS2 can be upgraded by the addition of optional FlatCap, HiCap or SuperCap power supply units.

### TRANSIENT PROWESS

One of the most distinctive amplifiers in the group, it has the unusual combination of strong bass and a pronounced upper presence region, which throws a spotlight on vocals, guitars and percussion. It's also one of the most detailed, and very good at separating out the various strands of the mix.

For example in the busy end section of 'Humdrum', the Naim let me hear the cor anglais better than most others here – indeed the



Moon and Rega managed to lose it completely. However, its tonal balance may be a little forward for some tastes, and somehow it didn't quite beguile as much as some of the other amps either.

Bass is nicely judged overall: it doesn't sound especially powerful but is less prone than most to letting go when the volume is loud and the music complex. Kate Bush showed how spacious the midband is by the standards of the group – it pushes very wide, stage left and right, and there's loads of detail inside. Treble is good but a little bright for some, and slightly unsophisticated compared to others here; the Exposure and Moon do better by a fair way in this respect.

The 4hero track demonstrated the Naim's prowess with attack transients, giving a crisp, clearly delineated sound with intelligible gaps between the notes. Unlike the Rega for example, they don't blur into one another, and the result is that it sounds far less congested. All this detail makes for a percussive, rhythmically explicit sound – yet curiously it still lacks the Rega's effortless musical flow. Although the Randy Crawford track was more muddled via the Elicit-R, somehow it proved more tuneful. A fine little amplifier, but still not for everyone.

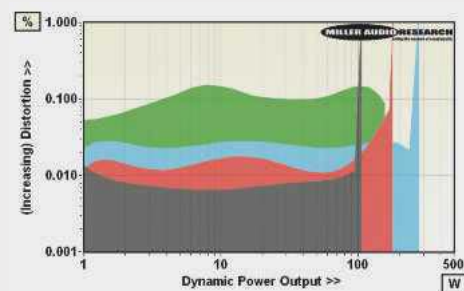
Sound Quality: 81%



**ABOVE:** XS2 fascia is a model of simplicity. Unusually, volume control is far left, with illuminated Naim logo in the centre. The five source selection and mute buttons are also backlit

### HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

This latest version of the longstanding Nait series of integrated amplifiers offers an enhanced 2x83W/8ohm and 2x128W/4ohm power output and very flat distortion trend that holds to 0.006-0.009% over the full 70W rated dynamic range. The same largely unvarying THD trend is also seen under dynamic conditions where the Nait XS2 increases its momentary output to 105W, 178W and a huge 275W into 8, 4 and 2ohm before being limited by protection to 130W/1ohm [see Graph below]. Nevertheless, the Nait XS2 is very tolerant of difficult speaker loads. Overall gain is higher than average – and far higher than necessary to accommodate modern digital sources – at +44.5dB while the A-wtd S/N ratio is just slightly below average at 78dB (re. 0dBW), though it'll never be identified as conspicuously 'noisy'. As with other Naim amps, the output impedance is held high by series resistance to 0.23ohm and the response marginally rolled-off at -1dB/20kHz. PM



**ABOVE:** Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	83W / 128W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	105W / 178W / 275W / 130W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.233–0.245ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	–0.1dB to –20.7dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/70W)	17mV / 144mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/70W)	78.0dB / 96.5dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.004–0.022%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	9W / 235W
Dimensions (WHD)	432x70x314mm



**ABOVE:** Crowded back panel includes USB upgrade socket, one set of speaker outputs, link plug for power supply upgrade and five RCA/DIN socket line inputs



# Rega Elicit-R

Of late, Rega has branched out into electronics with not inconsiderable success. The Elicit-R is a recent arrival that's a little different, as it has a built-in MM phono stage that can be switched to a line-level input via a rear panel switch if desired. Rega says it's of especially high quality, so should be used for your best audio source.

Inside, the Elicit-R's power amplifier circuitry is based on a complementary pair of Darlingtons output transistors forming an emulated Class-A driver stage. This is fed by a discrete FET line preamp complete with programmable stepped attenuator volume control. Rega says that polypropylene capacitors are featured throughout the signal path, and the new R version gets improved power supplies which take the power output up a bit over the old model.

This amplifier's ornate aluminium casework is very well made and looks great, but I was disappointed to find the user interface isn't quite as nice; eg, the gain control action was poor and the buttons fiddly.

### SONIC FINGERPRINT

Like the cheaper Rega Brio-R, this is a tonally warm and fulsome performer, one which gushes with emotion and cuts to the heart and soul of the song. But still it sounds a little soft and indistinct in some respects. For buyers using anything less than really sophisticated loudspeakers, this may be no bad thing, as the Elicit-R's distinct sonic fingerprint will complement rather than confound them. Indeed, because it is one of the most euphonic solid-state amplifiers around, it should prove handy for taming forward-sounding systems.



However, the Rega does come over as rather veiled and opaque across the midband, and is a good deal less transparent than, say, the Naim or Exposure. Yet this amplifier always proved great fun to listen to.

'Humdrum' had less space between instruments than with all the other amplifiers here, with a rather dense and foggy quality to instruments at the back of the mix, but the playing seemed to have more passion than with all but the Exposure 3010S2.

Peter Gabriel's singing was wonderfully tuneful, almost as if he had woken up refreshed and revitalised from a deep sleep! The piano and guitar danced with one another and the ending section took on great emotional poignancy.

Randy Crawford also sounded like she was singing from the heart, the Rega pulling the listener's attention from the rich texture of her lovely voice to the emotions it was conveying. 4hero seemed less technically accomplished, but suddenly the sound was painting an amazing picture in my mind with the music. Dynamics were excellent, and the song gelled together beautifully. Yet you couldn't excuse that imprecise stereo imaging and slightly tizzy upper treble.

Sound Quality: 80%

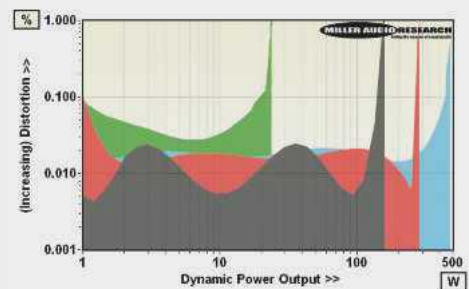


ABOVE: Rear panel sports five line inputs, one switchable between line and MM phono. Rec out, preamp out and a pair of speaker terminals complete the picture

ABOVE: Beautiful finished alloy fascia shows nice use of LEDs, but is spoilt by the volume control knob's imprecise action; silver source buttons are rather fiddly too

### HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Ostensibly a combination of Rega's 50W Brio-R power amp and Elicit II FET preamp circuits, the integrated Elicit-R achieves a substantially higher output of 2x125W/8ohm and 2x200W/4ohm (Rega's rated specification is 105W and 167W, respectively). The revised PSU offers a decent headroom too, allowing the Elicit-R to deliver a full 155W, 285W and 480W into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads [see Graph below]. Maximum current is 15.5A but Rega limits the amplifier's output to just 25W into 1ohm by way of short-circuit protection. Distortion is very uniform at 0.005-0.006% from 1W up to the rated 105W at 1kHz, increasing with frequency from 0.0009%/20Hz through to 0.050%/20kHz. The frequency response is flat from 20Hz-20kHz within ±0.2dB and only rolls away to -2dB/100kHz. Overall gain is high at +43.7dB and the A-wtd S/N ratio just fractionally below average at 84dB (re. 0dBV) but hum and noise is usefully suppressed at just -73dBV (0.2mV). PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	125W / 200W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	155W / 285W / 480W / 25W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.024-0.082ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	-0.2dB to -1.95dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/105W)	26mV / 272mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/105W)	83.7dB / 103.9dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.0009-0.050%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	37W / 270W
Dimensions (WHD)	432x82x340mm



# Simaudio Moon Neo 250i

Canada isn't quite the hi-fi powerhouse that the USA or Britain is, but has some very respectable names nonetheless, one of which is Moon. The brand makes middle to high-end products, and has won many friends for its clean-sounding amplifiers and CD players. The new Neo 250i is one of its cheaper amps, aimed at a slightly less specialist market than some of its products – with the 3.5mm socket on the front hinting that iDevice owners may be in its sights, for example.

That's not to say Moon has scrimped on the ingredients: there's a very large custom-specified toroidal transformer providing the power and the amp is said to operate fully in Class A up to 5W. The rigid all-alloy case cools the specially made bipolar output transistors, which work along with selected audiophile passive componentry, the company says.

The amp comes in a choice of all black or all silver, or you can specially order a mixture of the two. Overall, it feels nicely made, with its controls silky and its casework solid, topped off by a finish which is better than anything else here.

### CRISP AND CLEAR

Although the Neo range is new, it was reassuring to hear that that company hasn't strayed far from its traditional sound. The Peter Gabriel track confirmed the openness and clarity of this amplifier – something I've come to associate with the brand. His distinctive voice sounded crisp and clear, intimate and emotive. There was no haze, fog or general mush, and even throughout the highly modulated and dense ending section his diction



remained clear. At the same time, other elements in the mix were also wonderfully carried – cymbals and maracas glinting through from behind the powerful piano and classical guitar work. Even the accordion sounded authentic.

The Moon also impressed at frequency extremes: bass was quite strong and firm by the standards of the group, and the treble was delicate and detailed, with a good sense of air. The backing synths on 'Humdrum' had a more realistic tonal patina than with the NAD, for example. Kate Bush was a pleasure too, with her fine piano work realistically recreated, sounding like a real instrument rather than a digital sample of the same. Randy Crawford showed the Moon's fine presence region, with a purity to her voice which separated out well from backing instrumentation and hung in a spacious stereo soundstage with consummate ease.

However, the 250i wasn't so convincing in the bass. It sounded soft compared to the others. It was prone to overhang and this tended to slur the bottom end, and slow things down compared to the taut, tight Exposure, for example.

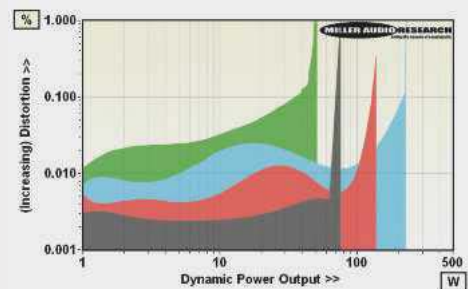
Sound Quality: 78%



**ABOVE:** The sculpted fascia looks great and feels classy in use: input selectors have a crisp action and volume control is silky. Unusually, a 3.5mm input is fitted for an iDevice

### HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Taken on face value, the '50W' Neo 250i might appear the least capable of the amplifiers in this month's test but by achieving 2x65W and 2x105W into 8 and 4ohm, rising to 76W, 138W, 228W into 8, 4 and 2ohm under dynamic conditions it demonstrates a good tolerance of difficult speaker loads. Maximum current is 10.7A although the 250i's output is limited into very low 1ohm loads to 50W or 7A [see Graph, below]. Distortion is low through the midrange at ~0.002% up to 20W/8ohm and 0.005% at the rated 50W – 10x lower than Simaudio's own specification – and increasing gently to 0.03% at 20kHz. The frequency response is slightly tailored with a mild -0.3dB/20Hz bass roll-off and matching -0.4dB/20kHz loss at HF, increasing to -5.8dB/100kHz. Output impedance is a moderate but uniform 0.026-0.05ohm through the audio range but the A-wtd S/N is especially impressive at 91dB (re. 0dBW). PM



**ABOVE:** Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	65W / 105W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	76W / 138W / 228W / 50W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.026–0.050ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	-0.30dB to -5.8dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/50W)	86mV / 619mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/50W)	90.9dB / 107.9dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.002–0.026%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	12W / 175W
Dimensions (WHD)	429x89x366mm



**ABOVE:** Rear has five line inputs and a preamplifier out, plus IR in/out sockets and RS-232 control port, with a single pair of loudspeaker binding posts



# GROUP TEST VERDICT

• CD PLAYERS • TURNTABLES • CARTRIDGES • SPEAKERS • AMPLIFIERS • HEADPHONES • INTERCONNECTS •

Sonically, the NAD C 390DD was never less than pleasing. Open, even and spacious, it proved a polished performer but fell down the rankings thanks to its rather matter of fact, emotionally uninspiring sound. Still, many prospective purchasers will still find it appealing because of its power, operational flexibility and upgradeability – although few are likely to buy it for its looks or finish.

The Moon 250i was a very nice amplifier indeed. One of the best balanced here, it didn't have any breathtaking strengths or glaring weaknesses, appearing instead to do most things very well. In terms of tonal balance and general transparency it was excellent: highly neutral with no quirks or foibles. There was a lot of low-level detail and stereo imaging was good too.

The trouble came with fast, propulsive music where it dragged its feet a little in the bass, which tended to slow things down. If you're a fan of more sedate, acoustic programme material, however, you will rank this amplifier more highly.

## CHARM AND CHARACTER

The Elicit-R was typically Rega – a loveable, charming and rather eccentric product. Beautifully built with interesting styling, it was let down by a slightly imprecise volume control. It was riotously good fun to listen to, but nowhere near as transparent as some of the others. While it sounded emotionally engaging and musically convincing, it clouded out rather too much low-level detail along the way. Some listeners might rank it higher than third place, others lower – it's all down to taste.

Naim's new Nait XS2 was another big character. In a great many respects it is excellent. Firstly, its styling and build quality are undeniably impressive for a product

of this price – it feels like a slice of the high-end that has been shrunken down, rather than the other way round.

Secondly, its sound is distinctive and in many ways superb. Soundstaging is breathtakingly wide and stereo images are served up very accurately within. It has a highly detailed and very propulsive sound that consistently pushes the musical performance with real zeal.

Yet curiously the Naim just doesn't seem able to gel everything together quite as well as either the

Rega or Exposure. The Nait may also sound a little bright with more edgy speakers, so careful listening would be needed for a synergistic match.

And so this month's champion is Exposure's 3010S2. Here is an

amplifier that suffers none of the foibles of the lower ranking amps yet has a special charm all of its very own. Big-hearted, powerful and expansive, every type of music played through the Exposure gets a good airing.

## A COHESIVE BLEND

It's able to communicate very well in hi-fi terms (soundstaging, depth perspective, detail, dynamics, etc) yet blends it all together cohesively. Like the Moon it's a just a fraction on the warm side of neutral, never

erring far enough to impose its character on the music. As such, it sounds great across a wide variety of music and the Exposure will work with a good spread of loudspeakers too. ⏻

'The Exposure sounds big-hearted, powerful and expansive'



**ABOVE:** Rega's Elicit-R (bottom) is typically charming and a sumptuous listen. Naim's Nait XS2 (middle) adds fantastic soundstaging and detail, while Exposure's 3010S2 proves a brilliant, consummate all-rounder and worthy winner

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