

AUDIOTRENDS

LEARNING CENTRE

Real Hi-Fi

NAD Masterful CD And Amplifier

The Smarthouse Team - Friday, 2 February 2007

We take a look at the NAD Masters Series CD player and amplifier duo to see if it lives up to its name.

NAD Master Series M5 | \$2499 | ★★★★★☆

For: Does a fine job with SACD.

Against: CD replay needs sparkle.

Verdict: Sound has superior dynamic range and fine authority.

NAD Master Series M3 | \$3999 | ★★★★★★

For: Complex and flexible.

Against: Timing is not for beat-mongers.

Verdict: Solidly built with fine detail, goes very loud.

These two gorgeous hi-fi components simply ooze class, even before you risk spinal injury by trying to pick them up. Play 'guess the price' and we reckon even experienced observers will over-estimate the actual \$3999 and \$2499 price tags by two or three times. That's provided the maker's name has been covered up, of course, because the little NAD logo, top left, is a dead giveaway that these units are probably less expensive than you



might expect, as NAD has been the doyen of budget amplification, going right back to the late 1970s.

For many – possibly even most – hi-fi enthusiasts, a NAD amplifier or system was a first step onto the hi-fi separates ladder. NAD has an interesting history. It was founded in 1977 by an international consortium of hi-fi dealers, who saw the opportunity to combine European hi-fi sensibilities and design expertise with low-cost Far East manufacturing.

The company really hit the jackpot in 1979, when the legendary 3020 amp comprehensively smashed the price/performance barrier. It proceeded to dominate the budget amplifier market for several years, bringing audiophile values to the budget arena at a time when the market was just waking up to the importance of amplifier sound quality.

The designer responsible for the 3020 was Erik Edvardsen. Although NAD has gone through a number of changes of ownership over the years – it is currently owned by the Canadian Lenbrook operation, but is very multi-national in the way it operates – Erik has remained at the heart of the engineering side. He is also a key individual behind the Masters Series components, two of which are the subject of this review.

These represent an important new direction for NAD; they're the most expensive components the company has ever produced, pitched well above its traditional entry-level hunting ground and without the shackles on component quality imposed by tight price constraints. This really reflects the dynamics of the shrinking hi-fi separates marketplace, which has seen a drift away from the budget sector in recent years, and steadily increasing interest in more upmarket components.

This isn't quite NAD's first foray into more costly territory – the Silver Series came first, launched in the late 1990s – but the Masters Series stretches further upmarket and features both two-channel and multichannel products. The initial line-up comprises five components: the M15 AV preamp/processor and M25 seven-channel power amp are strictly for those seeking top-quality AV surround sound, while the multi-role M55 universal disc player is also more home



cinema than hi-fi oriented. However, the \$2499 M5 CD/SACD player and \$3999 M3 integrated stereo amplifier, the joint subjects of this review, are much more interesting for the hi-fi fraternity. That said, the M5 does support multichannel SACD, though naturally our review will concentrate mainly on regular stereo replay, in combination with the M3 stereo amp.

At these prices, the M3 and M5 components slot comfortably into the wide gap between the budget sector and the true high end. In terms of build and finish they certainly look and feel very much part of the high-end scene. Philosophically, however, the company's regular consumer electronics roots are still visible in the very generous feature count in both products. Inevitably the extra complexity brings improved flexibility,

but in so doing compromises the easy-to-use simplicity that is often a feature of today's 'high-end' components.

Both units have proper vibration-isolating feet and chunky, two-part cast alloy fascias in silver and gunmetal. Massive heatsinks with kind-to-fingers edges and corners help cool the amplifier, as does the ventilated top cover, and the 2mm steel casework of both units is much more substantial than usual.

The styling of both the units and their accompanying remote handsets is nicely coherent, though the similarity of the two handsets may cause minor confusion. Both components have informative central fluorescent status displays and the M3's main handset also provides basic operation of the M5, though not vice versa; the M3 also comes with a second smaller and simpler ZR3 handset, which can be used to control various functions in and from a second zone. Although most users will probably use the M3 handset most of the time, the front panel offers a similarly wide range of features using seven pushbuttons and the solitary (default to volume) knob.

Seven separate handset buttons select the all line-level inputs – six phonos plus one balanced (AES/EBU) XLR pairs – and other buttons supply muting, cycle between stereo/mono/left/right modes, and adjust balance. There are comprehensive tone controls – bass, treble and also a 'spectral tilt' option – and an electronically controlled discrete-resistor matrix is used to adjust volume across a wide range without compromising noise performance. Other features include an adjustable high pass filtered output, which can be used to protect small main speakers from low bass signals when used alongside a subwoofer or two.

The two-channel power amp section is strictly double-mono in construction, even down to the special twin custom-wound transformers, and has a very generous 180 watts per channel of even conservatively rated power, along with considerable dynamic headroom.

The matching M5 drawer-loading disc player is deliberately more audiophile-oriented than its M55 stablemate, and wasn't even an instruction manual, so the description is inevitably a little sketchy. Besides its prime stereo task of replaying stereo CDs and SACDs (via separate signal paths), it also supports HDCD encoding and handles CD-R, CD-RW, MP3 and WMA type discs. Multichannel SACD phono outputs are also fitted, accompanied by a useful set of digital bass management options.

The stereo outputs are available on either phonos or balanced XLRs, and digital PCM is available electrically (phono or XLR) or optically. All the usual controls are available on handset or player, though our sample did seem reluctant to skip backwards through



tracks.

SOUND QUALITY

The M3 amplifier is a thoroughly impressive component. It takes a little time to get used to the ergonomics, but that is usually true of any feature-rich device, and the remote handset has rather a lot of buttons, with labels that could have been easier to read. But their layout and shape is intelligent and varied, which does assist navigation. The volume control is a joy to use, either on the fascia or the remote, though right-handers might have found the up/down rocker easier to use if it had been positioned on the left hand side of the handset.

Hooked up to a pair of B&W 800Ds, it was easy to appreciate the M3's exceptionally low noise and wide dynamic range. It also shows fine consistency throughout that dynamic range, the more so because this amplifier's loudness capability is quite prodigious.

The bottom end is solid and powerful – a shade too assertive at times, perhaps – but it always provides a firm foundation to underpin the musical architecture. However, the real strength of this amp lies in a midband that is both explicit and highly informative, delivering voices with warmth and involvement.

The overall sound is pleasantly restrained and relaxed, due to a degree of time-smear through the midband and top. This does somewhat restrict the vividness and tension in the musical dynamics, but also makes for a very well mannered sound that's easy on the ear yet robust and powerful across a wide range of music sources. The extreme top end is also restrained and lacks some incisiveness, muting consonants and sibilants.

A live Albert Hall Prom of the Halle orchestra, performing an occasionally rather hectic rendition of Sibelius' Symphony No1, provided good evidence for fundamentally classy stereo imaging, with notably precise lateral focus and positioning, but slightly limited depth and transparency that constrained the full acoustic signature of this large reverberant venue.

Assessing the M5 disc player must inevitably involve some discussion of the merits and prospects of SACD. This 'super' CD format uses a very different digital coding system from regular CD to offer a significantly wider dynamic range and bandwidth. While a case can be made out for a better-than-CD optical disc format, a major problem arose when an alternative and again incompatible 'high-band' format called DVD-Audio launched at around the same time. Without a united front, growth in both these formats has been painfully slow, and although there are more titles on SACD than DVD-Audio, the numbers for both formats are still small and largely consist of 'classic' back catalogue music.

While the future for SACD must remain somewhat uncertain, there's no denying the M5 does a fine job with the limited software that is available. Most SACDs are hybrid two-layer discs, capable of replaying both SACD or CD layers, and there was no question that when listening to these discs, the SACD layer has the significantly sweeter and more open top end.

But the comparison is not necessarily valid, as the mastering processes are quite different, and those responsible for the hybrid discs naturally have a vested interest in promoting SACD. When compared to vinyl originals, SACD's advantage was less clear-cut. Obviously the digital disc had a pristine clarity and freedom from noise, clicks and pops, but it also seemed more sterile and less interesting from the point of view of musical textures.

With normal CDs, which will probably represent the M5's regular diet, the player's character seemed very like that of the amplifier. Once again the bass showed fine authority and drive, and the dynamic range was impressively wide with good low-level resolution and fine consistency.

The overall balance favours midband projection, because the upper registers are cautious and restrained. And although one might wish for more sparkle and 'edge', the innate politeness of this player makes long-term listening both relaxing and inviting.

That very much sums up this player/amp combination as a whole. It looks and feels much more costly than the price tag might suggest and is easy to use yet usefully flexible. It also delivers a solid yet relaxing sound, with considerable power and poise.

Neither component delivers the sort of 'pace, rhythm and timing' that would turn a Naim fan's head, but there are plenty more who will enjoy their more easy-going sonic style.

Considered separately, the amp is marginally the stronger component – perhaps no surprise given the brand's heritage in the amp department. But the impressive thing is that NAD has succeeded in taking its talents upmarket, producing two products that look, feel and sound 'expensive', and that work well together, too. On this evidence, NAD's foray into 'affordable high-end components' should be judged a considerable success.

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