

## Naim NAC-N 272 & ATC SCM40A

by Jason Kennedy

It seems that we live in an age where less (in the way of audio equipment) is seen as more (in the domestic acceptability sense). Linn has been using this approach and has honed almost all its systems down to one box and a pair of speakers. The key to this is powered loudspeakers; you are never going to cut down on boxes unless you start combining them, and active drive does this in one fell swoop. It also brings with it the undoubted advantages of eliminating passive components between amplifier and drive unit, conferring a considerable advantage in driver control in the process.

It seems that the good burgers of Salisbury are interested in whether this approach has legs because the idea for this system came from those quarters. Now that they have a not entirely un-Linn-like streamer/preamplifier in the NAC-N 272 (albeit not their first, there is a NAC-172N as well) all that is required is a decent active speaker with onboard amplification. But, this is not something you can find in the Naim speaker range, nor in sister company Focal's wide selection of domestic speakers. There are a couple of pro Focal models, but they are not the prettiest things and have domestically problematic elements like upward firing drivers.

So a call was made to a company with an unrivalled reputation in active speakers, ATC, and its SCM-40A active

floorstanders were chosen as a suitable partner. It's not the first time the two brands have been combined, but I doubt there are many dealers who stock both, which is where we in the reviewing fraternity have our uses. I am a fan of ATC, and feel that its range of speakers and electronics offers tremendous value in the general scheme of things, and I haven't found many power amps that match ATC's for sheer grip either. But the company has never been all that fashionable with the pace, rhythm, and timing brigade that holds Naim as the epitome of its creed. So the question is; can the addition of a Naim preamplifier give ATCs what it takes to boogie?

First, though, the hardware: the NAC-N 272 inhabits Naim's Classic series aluminium casework and comes in standard or DAB+/FM tuner versions. It has analogue and digital inputs, plus USB for sticks or iPods, offers Spotify Connect and Tidal music services, and will also receive Bluetooth aptX from your smartphone or tablet. The primary source however is the built in streamer; connect the RJ45 socket to your network and it will stream material stored on nearby drives or internet radio stations. The 272 was the first Naim product to stream DSD, a feature that has been applied to the rest of the range since its launch a year ago but one that must have sent ripples around the flat earth at the time. ▶



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- ▶ Naim’s marketing department is ‘Man’ enough to admit that it doesn’t convert DSD natively, but at present it’s not clear whether there are any streamers that do. Instead it resamples it at 40-bit/768kHz prior to conversion. DSD conversion is limited to DSF and DFF 64 formats, so not the higher-rate options found on dedicated DACs.

As one might hope, the analogue and digital sections of the 272 are isolated to keep noise to a minimum, communication being achieved with opto-isolators. There is only space for one transformer in the box so power supply isolation comes down to four separate secondaries supplying the analogue section, DAC, and two digital rails. Like most Naim preamplifiers it’s possible to upgrade the 272 with an outboard power supply, and there are three options to choose from. When this product was first launched a demonstration of what could be achieved with an XPS supply left me in no doubt as to the benefits of such an upgrade, but that would undermine the fewer boxes theme so it has no place here.

The ATC SCM40A is the latest addition to the company’s range of active floorstanders. It is an attractively slim speaker with curved sides that not only make it look more elegant but provide stiffness and avoid parallel surfaces on the inside of the box. It stands just under a meter high and comes with a curved bar that can be bolted to the underside to provide extra stability, making it better suited to the presence of children, animals, and EU regulations.

All three of the drive units are made in house by ATC, which has been building cone and midrange dome drivers for some time, but only developed its own tweeter in the recent past. The 25mm soft dome with an aluminium wave guide on the SCM40A is an example of this new breed. The mid is a 75mm soft dome, while the bass unit has a 164mm cone with a short coil in a long gap, and a very meaty motor system. All three units are capable of sustaining high sound pressure levels if required; power handling has always been a strong point thanks to ATC’s pro audio heritage. The power amps are contained within a remarkably compact and heavily heat-finned block on the back. This has legs in red anodised aluminium that are presumably there for servicing purposes, but make useful grab handles and add a touch of colour to its otherwise conservative styling; we like ‘em. The class A/B power amplifiers break down to 32 Watts for tweeter, ▶





▶ 60 Watts for the mid, and 150 Watts for the bass; a total of 242 Watts per channel. To get this much power out of Naim amplifiers will cost you more than these active speakers.

The SCM40A only has XLR inputs, while the 272 offers RCA phono or DIN outputs, so Chord Co were commissioned to build a suitably terminated and appropriately long pair of cables to hook up the system. The cables supplied were Chameleon VEE 3's, relatively low priced models in the scheme of things. These are of course the only pure audio cables in the system and all that the system needs, apart from Ethernet and power, which helps on the budget and aesthetic fronts. Power supply to the various elements needs to be treated with as much care as speaker set up in some respects; I started with the speakers plugged into one outlet and the 272 into another but got a significant upshift in musicality when I brought the three mains plugs together. This is a ground thing, something Naim has always been aware of, hence the alternative ground settings on this pre/streamer. Data sources are also critical. I used a Melco N1-A and Naim UnitiServe; the former gave the greatest perceived detail level and the lowest noise but the UnitiServe was, unsurprisingly, bang on the money when it came to timing and engagement.

Putting on ZZ Top's 'Jesus Just Left Chicago' [*Tres Hombres*, Warner Bros] prompted me to utter "have mercy", so smokin' was the sound of Billy Gibbons' guitar. This system gave me the heat and all the image depth and width that the track requires in the context of a funky groove. It's the latter that's hardest to achieve, the interplay of drummer and bass player has to be spot on and this can only be achieved if the system presents the entire bandwidth in time.

It's easy to make a lean system sound coherent because the leading edges are so obvious but this is not what we have here; the ATCs are full bandwidth speakers that have grip in the bottom end and a total absence of ventilation on the cabinet. The bass is deep, solid and, thanks to the active operation, tactile. It has a degree of solidity that makes everything feel like it's in the room, that and the ability to play at the sort of level that approaches that of live sound you get in a studio control room.

High power systems are still relatively unfashionable in British audio circles, because there is a deep seated notion that power equates to ponderousness. It's out of date: the rewards are palpably obvious in the form of speed combined with genuine gravitas where it's required, and if the speaker can handle the power you end up with a thrilling result. When amp and speaker are made for one another, you get control without bludgeon or excess. This is both a powerful and revealing system; Joni Mitchell's voice on 'The Man I Love' [*Gershwin's World*, Herbie Hancock, Verve] is breathy and limited in range, but this takes nothing away from its allure. Combined with the pitch perfect backing of Hancock's band, you know you are enjoying a fine wine at its peak.

This system can, like most, be improved. Bypassing the preamplifier in the 272 and dropping in the Townshend Allegri brings a clear increase in transparency and speed. But the slight warmth of the existing preamp makes it more tolerant of lesser recordings, yet more than sufficiently revealing of differences between them; as a pair the Naim and ATC reflects well on modern studio practices. By this I mean that newer releases tend to sound better than older ones, (albeit not the highly compressed examples, as they still sound, well, compressed). But a Mobile Fidelity 192kHz version of Patricia Barber's 'Summertime' [*A Distortion Of Love*, Antilles] is spectacular, with epic spaciousness, a beautiful voice, and a solid bass line. I was pleasantly surprised at how good a result the combo produced with Snarky Puppy's *Sylva* [Impulse!]; this large scale ensemble can sound congested but here the prodigious low end provided a great foil to the blasting brass. There's lots of space on the drum kit and the way that the mix is presented makes it very easy to get carried away with the moment. A 96kHz version of *Regatta de Blanc* [The Police, A&M] on the other hand sounded small and messy, but its origins are suspect and I imagine that the standard version would fare better.

DSDs in both DSF and DFF formats played very nicely, these included Kraftwerk's *Minimum Maximum* [EMI], where 'The Man Machine' was rendered in expansive and controlled fashion, the bass remaining tight and articulate, a result that ▶

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- ▶ few systems manage because of the prodigiousness of the low end, a good example of where the active advantage is clear. ‘The Mozart Violin concerto in D major’ [Marianne Thorsen, *TrondheimSolistene*, 2L] upped the realism ante however, the quality of string tone being truly tactile and the piece sounding more beautiful than usual. This system’s DSD presentation is much more solid than most, much more palpable, but less ethereal. Those looking for the airiness that is often found with the format might be disappointed, but anyone looking to get a powerful sense of the music being played in a definite acoustic will be thrilled.

The 272 is the first Naim component I’ve tried with the Tidal service built in; as customers get a three month trial, I gave it a go. The service integrates nicely with the Naim control app and in many respects you can access tracks and albums in much the same way as those in your local library. The sound quality is not in the same league (hence Tidal’s forthcoming launch of a higher res service this year) but it’s better than Spotify and good enough to establish which artists are worth investment. It can also swallow up any amount of spare time in a most enjoyable fashion.

One release that I went back to was *Sounds of Life* [Benjamin Taubkin, Discovery]; this combines piano with drums and percussion. It’s only a CD rip, but the power and presence that this system extracts is extraordinary. The Naim’s ability to present a totally coherent, perfectly timed signal allied to the ATC’s power and – thanks to the new tweeter – smooth top end make it a great system for indulging in music’s visceral qualities. I had a lot of fun with this system and it has reignited my enthusiasm for active operation; there really needs to be more speaker systems like this. Now that Naim has realised that less is more perhaps it can persuade the *frères* at Focal to incorporate some Salisbury electronics into Focal speakers. The new Sopra models would be the obvious place to start methinks. But for now the combination of NAC-N 272 and SCM40A is all the system most of us will ever need, and the best sounding three box system I’ve enjoyed to date. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### ATC SCM40A

**Type:** 3-way, four-driver, floorstanding speaker with active drive and sealed enclosure

**Driver complement:** 25mm ATC soft dome, dual suspension tweeter; ATC 75mm soft dome midrange driver with machined aluminium dispersion plate; ATC 164mm short coil bass driver

**Crossover frequencies:** 380Hz, 3.5kHz

**Frequency response:** 48Hz – 22kHz

**Amplifier output:** 150W LF, 60W MF, 32W HF

**Input sensitivity:** 1 Volt

**Protection:** Steel mesh grilles

**Dimensions without spikes (HxWxD):** 980 × 265 × 344mm

**Weight:** 36kg/each

**Finishes:** black ash, real cherry veneer

**Price:** £6,280/pair

**Manufacturer:** ATC

**Tel:** +44 (0)1285 760561

**URL:** [atcloudspeakers.co.uk](http://atcloudspeakers.co.uk)

### Naim NAC-N 272

**Type:** Solid-state network streamer, DAC, digital preamplifier

**Analogue Inputs:** One DIN jack, two RCA jacks

**Digital Inputs:** Three S/PDIF (one via BNC, two via RCA jacks), one TOSLink.

**DAC Resolution/Supported Digital Formats:** 24-bit/192kHz, FLAC/WAV/MP3/DSD etc

**Music services/Wi-Fi inputs:** Spotify Connect, Bluetooth aptX, Tidal

**Analogue Outputs:** Three stereo unbalanced (two via DIN jack, one RCA jacks)

**Digital Outputs:** none

**Frequency Response:** Not specified

**Distortion (THD + Noise):** Not specified

**User Interface:** 2.25 inch display (on main unit), Naim application software for iOS, Android

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 87 × 432 × 314mm

**Weight:** 10.3kg

**Price:** £3,300

**Manufacturer:** Naim Audio

**Tel:** +44 (0) 1722 426 600

**URL:** [www.naimaudio.com](http://www.naimaudio.com)