

NAD 521i and 320BEE

An introduction to entry-level hi-fi

By John Groom

NAD C521i CD player (\$599) and
C320BEE integrated amplifier (\$799)

With the life-style systems available, reasonable DVD players and inexpensive receivers why bother buying an entry-level hi-fi system?

The answer of course has to be sound quality. Over the years NAD has so often been the name that comes to people's minds when looking for good value, reasonably priced gear that is well engineered and with a great sound.

All of the above qualities are in fact true, and to jump to the conclusion, if you are in the market for a hi-fi system in the \$2000–\$3000 dollar range then combine the NAD equipment with an efficient speaker and good quality cables and you will have a sound that can't be beaten in this price range.

What is it that has given NAD such a loyal following? Well we can start with the CD player. It has lovely sleek elegant lines, it has controls that feel good to use, the draw opens smoothly and solidly and the display can be read clearly

without being garish. It weighs in at a substantial 4.1kg, in part because of the power supply, which includes provision of separate power supplies to the digital and analogue sections. Internally there is a 20-bit Burr-Brown Digital to Analogue converter chip, good quality resistors, capacitors and op-amps, features not usually expected at this price point.

The amplifier has a similar elegance, weighs in at 6.5kg and is a gem to use. There are a whole seven line level inputs and the preamp section can easily be separated from the main amplifier, which makes the upgrade path very easy. Flexibility is the word here with the provision of a headphone socket for quiet personal listening, a tone defeat switch and a built in "soft clipping" circuit to protect speakers.

Rated at 50 watts per channel, this amplifier comfortably drove moderately efficient speakers in a 6x5 meter room. The volume control has a good firm feel and the amplifier is quiet in operation.

The shared remote control is a little gem. It will operate from anywhere in the room, it is very clearly marked and is quite intuitive in use. For those of

us with stubby fingers there is plenty of room between the buttons.

All of the above is all fine but will mean nothing if it



doesn't sound any good. This system is a much cleaner sound than my own "lifestyle" JVC set-up I use as a secondary system. It is certainly better focused with a deeper sound stage than any DVD player that I have heard. The sound is sweet without being over the top. On the Ry Cooder recording *A Meeting by the River* there was a realistic space created around the instruments and the tabla was captured with remarkable tonal accuracy.

The system is fast with a good sense of musicality that kept this recording bouncing along with sensitivity and kept drawing the attention back to the melody. On Patricia Barber's *Companion* we are taken well into the smoky night club and the expressiveness of her husky voice is well captured.

It is at the extremes of the frequency range where the limits of this set-up are more apparent. On the *Companion* recording while the bass line is well captured and easy to follow we can't plumb the lowest notes in the way that a more powerful system will. Similarly the brushwork was not given the full sense of 'air'. With the well-known Nora Jones album her voice is without obvious colouring but the rendition falls short of bringing her fully into the room.

Over time this showed itself to be a low fatigue sound. There are inevitable compromises in designing hi-fi; here the compromises are very sensible. There is no attempt to extract the last digit of information or to force the sound where it is uncomfortable to go. This is not gear for a headbanger.

At this price it is more like owning a good reproduction of an artwork when we couldn't possibly afford the original. This reproduction however is a lot more satisfying than any lifestyle system, receiver or DVD player could give us even if we spent twice the money.

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