

## Naim CD5x

**Naim CD5x CD Player, \$5000**

October 2004

You may not have heard Naim equipment in action, but only those who believe the pinnacle of sonic achievement is a subwoofer capable of paralyzing household pets can be forgiven for not knowing Naim Audio by reputation. Emerging as a force to be reckoned with in the 1970s, this British outfit is known for (a) its ability to unearth the rhythm and drive in the apparent vacuum of a solo flute recital, (b) dedication to excellence in construction, (c) a pathological hatred of RCA plugs, and (d) a strange fascination with green.

Once upon a time, Naim built the amplifiers that Englishmen of a certain sensibility plugged their Linn turntables into. These days, besides some fabulous amplification systems, they also build speakers, tonearms, home theatre processors, and other weapons of aural seduction. While Naim has retained its

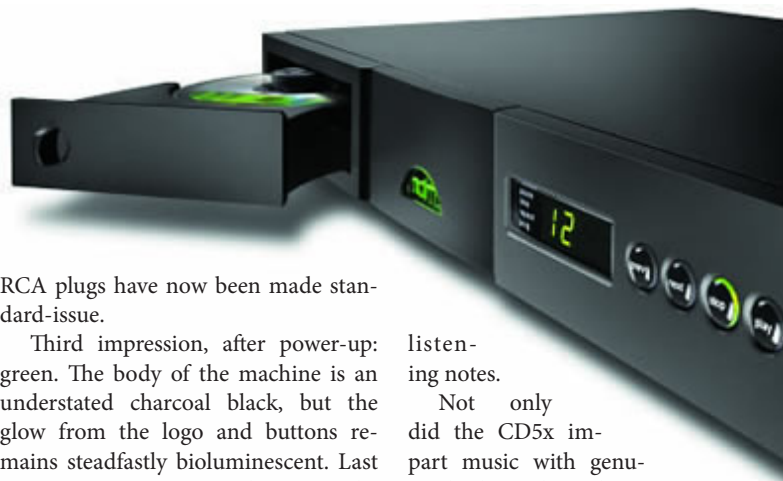
belief in the fundamental importance of musical timing and energy, the consensus in the reviewing community seems to be that they've moved away from a full-frontal-assault approach to music-making,

and have since learned the virtues of soundstaging and tonal subtlety. Let's see if that is in fact the case.

### Under interrogation

This month we're confronted with the CD5x, at \$5,000 the company's second CD player, after the CD5i previously reviewed as part of a system. First impression: heavy. Not only is the internal power supply clearly up to the job, but the casework is a nice solid alloy casting, so this is a machine that will not undermine its own talents with a flimsy, vibration-prone box.

Second impression: RCA output plugs! On a Naim! The DIN plugs so beloved of the company are still there, because Naim sincerely believe they improve the performance of the player, but, probably with great reluctance,



RCA plugs have now been made standard-issue.

Third impression, after power-up: green. The body of the machine is an understated charcoal black, but the glow from the logo and buttons remains steadfastly bioluminescent. Last impression, prior to auditioning: the manual swing-arc CD drawer. Put the remote down, there's no eject button on it: you have to open and close this one with your own sweaty mitt. The glass-reinforced drawer swings outwards with a gentle tug, you remove the magnetic puck on the spindle and position your disc, replace the puck and swing the drawer closed. It recalls the romance of setting an LP spinning on a turntable, and completely defeats the regular mechanised plastic tray in style and assuredly in substance.

### System virtue

We should not make the mistake of appraising this CD player in isolation, however. Naim adheres to a philosophy of incremental upgrades, especially with regard to power supply, so the analogue circuit in the CD5x can be powered separately to the digital circuits by external supplies in the form of the Flat-Cap 2 (\$1750) or Hi-Cap (\$3200). Experience suggests each upgrade – while not cheap – would yield a significant performance enhancement.

### A rose by another Naim?

Is this another model in the Naim tradition of old, thrilled to play rock, but just too impatient to manage a chamber concert, and uninterested in the ambience of a listening space? In short, no. Once warmed-up properly (allow several days on repeat play), the CD5x immediately impressed with a tangible musical presentation that reminded me at once of a well-sorted record-player. There was no hint of coldness or flatness – indeed I see the word 'organic' in my

listen-  
ing notes.

Not only did the CD5x impart music with genuine body, it showed no signs of favoritism. Well, it's true to say Naim has not lost its special way with energetic musical genres, but now it doesn't matter if that means rock, jazz, symphonic, or electronic. I've not heard The Prodigy's *Breathe* reproduced with so much intensity, yet a quiet little song like *Bungalow* from XTC was no less captivating. Better still, quaint little acoustic pieces by The Penguin Café Orchestra, featuring hushed voices and an assortment of oddly-tuned detritus, were delivered in a perfectly judged manner.

### Sum of all perfections?

Shortcomings were few. Compared to Arcam's similarly priced CD33, the Naim required a little more effort on the listener's part to separate out different instrumental strands. The soundstage, while impressively wide and solid, and with discernible height, did not strike me as especially deep. There's no digital output, but these days you'd be spending at least twice as much on a transport if you use a separate DAC. While I'm at it, I might also take a swipe at the remote – you really shouldn't have to search to find the 'play' button.

These quibbles amount to little, however, next to the Naim's undoubted ability to do what CD player of this price should, and that's not sound like a CD player—*Brent Burmester*

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