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Novafidelity N25 audio streamer

by Alan Sircom



The audio streamer is often overlooked in audio. It's not the big hitter product like a big amp or a pair of loudspeakers and its role is often ill-defined by one and all. However, it's like the logistics expert; maybe they don't get the same plaudits as the roadies or even the talent, and no-one made a movie about how quickly the army erected a food tent after D-Day, but it's these unsung heroes that often actually drive the thing.

Novafidelity's N25 is one such unsung hero. It can be overlooked by those who think their laptop should be doing that job. It can be overlooked by those who would never deign to put something that cheap in their system. But those in the middle who just want a damn good streamer without all the bells and whistles, but who want something that doesn't tie up their computer in a music-serving role... the Novafidelity N25 is a perfect bill-fitter.

Novafidelity (Cocktail Audio to the rest of the world, and even its own app) features a comprehensive range of network audio streamers at the 'affordable' end of things. Unlike many of Novafidelity's other options, however, this one doesn't include on board storage or a CD ripping disc drive.

Instead, the N25 is more of a flexible interface between local and online stored music and you. It doesn't matter whether you are pulling music from an Internet source, a local NAS drive or even some files on a USB thumb-drive. In fact, even the lack of a built-in HDD and CD-ripping options can be accommodated for locally thanks to the Novafidelity's an very comprehensive roll-out of features. Novafidelity uses a common platform (it seems logical; no point in reinventing the wheel for every new product in the line-up) and that means some features can be locked and unlocked depending on the architecture and hardware of the specific product. The N25 is very much in the Media Renderer side of Novafidelity's platform options.

As such, the N25 is Roon-ready and able to access DLNA network attached storage devices through a gigabit Ethernet socket. It can incorporate accounts from TIDAL, Qobuz, Amazon Music and Deezer, and it will accept a connection from a Spotify account via Spotify Connect, all of which can be controlled from the Music X Neo control app. Internet radio is also available directly, from the i-Radio app. There's Apple AirPlay connectivity and an upgradable Bluetooth option. It's festooned with connections too.

“I’m more than happy to use the Novafidelity N25 and recommend it as an easy to drive, easy to install device that does its job unobtrusively.”



▶ The upgradable Bluetooth connection is a clever option, one that will undoubtedly cause a flurry of ‘why don’t we do that?’ activity from its rivals. The N25 not only receives an aptX Bluetooth signal but also outputs an aptX Bluetooth signal to any passing receivers. At first flush, the word ‘why?’ springs to mind (what would be the point receiving a Bluetooth input from a phone, for example, only to then send it back to the same source?). However, it means you could permanently link a Bluetooth wireless headphone set to your N25, irrespective of input, meaning if you decide to switch between Spotify streamed by the N25 and maybe a file stored on your phone, there’s no need to disrupt anything, and no need to link your headphones to your phone temporarily. Many audio companies dismissed Bluetooth as a low-quality gimmick right up until they added their own aptX Bluetooth receiver, so expect a lot of dismissing about adding a Bluetooth transmitter by Novafidelity’s rivals until they also adopt something similar. Trust me, it’s going to happen.

In terms of on-board digital conversion, Novafidelity opts for its tried and trusted option of an ESS ES9018K2M Sabre 32 DAC – this is a 32bit/384kHz device, with DSD256 and DXD 32bit/352.8kHz capability, and the option of both MQA replay and playing through an external DAC via either the USB or HDMI outputs. This ESS chip is joined by a dual-core 1GHz ARM Cortex A9 chip for OS heavy lifting. Novafidelity has also included a DAB+/FM tuner and HDMI ARC inputs.

There’s also a 4.6” colour LCD screen, which is surrounded by controls. This should give you a hint that it isn’t a touchscreen; but sadly that hint was not heeded and I kept mashing that screen until I managed to convince what passes for a brain that I should use actual buttons, or better yet the Novatron’s own app, Music X Neo.

We’re all used to apps from slick professional designers who have a team of thousands developing the interface and integration. In audio, we’re also used to one-man bands making an app that has a passing acquaintance with functionality. Music X Neo is more in the former camp, and there are both iOS and Android editions. The iOS version I used was a flawless controller and its interface was great – maybe not ‘Roon great’ or ‘Sonos great’, but for a comparatively small company rolling its own software, Music X Neo is easy to navigate and quick to respond. Remote handsets – pah! Hard buttons – I laugh in your face (except when I need to do a hard reset, then you are a vital addition to a device).

I’m more than happy to use the Novafidelity N25 and recommend it as an easy to drive, easy to install device that does its job unobtrusively. Again going back to that mid-point it has to defend, the N25 is more convenient than a laptop because it is permanently installed and dedicated to its task; no scrabbling for the keyboard because you forgot to turn off notifications and no one likes their Bach partitas interspersed with a ‘bing-bong’ sound of incoming email. And, while the bigger boys in network streaming make better sounding equipment, you pay handsomely for the privilege. Novafidelity’s N25 represents a fine balance point for those who don’t want to rip their CD collection (and it represents a fine balance point for those who do elsewhere in its catalogue).

In fairness though, the N25 makes a pretty good sound in and of itself. It’s an exciting and energetic sounding streamer with no obvious personality flaws. OK, so it lacks the ‘wow’ factor of Linn and Naim’s big hitters, especially in their ability to present a lithe and extremely rhythmic performance, but the little Novafidelity is no slouch, and given you could buy somewhere in the region of 25 N25s for the cost of a ND555 ▶

“The more I played through it, the more I came to respect its performance both as a streamer and as a DAC.”



▶ and power supply, you get a sense of the N25's excellent value proposition. I found it played TIDAL Masters with particular aplomb, the MQA replay of Beyoncé's 'Sandcastles' [*Lemonade*, Parkwood] demonstrates that she is a far more adept and talented singer than many credit. Admittedly she is extremely close mic'd but the keyboards in the background have a shimmering quality that counterpoints nicely with the passion in her voice.

Using my own networked storage (from either a Naim Uniti Core or a Melco N10) it was clear the N25 is as competent as a DAC as it is a streamer. It is extremely detailed in presentation and has good dynamic range. The title track of *Blue Maqams* by Anouar Brahem [ECM] ably demonstrates the sinuous and detailed nature of the DAC, and the hypnotic nature of the track leaves you drawn deeper into the music. This is a good DAC in its own right; it has the right combination of warmth and space to make such tracks enticing, and the more I played through it, the more I came to respect its performance both as a streamer and as a DAC. I suspect someone in the market for a £1,000+ DAC might prefer a standalone device in absolute terms, in part because such DACs tend to be a little more 'liquid' in their coherence or 'taut' in their rhythm, but if you are comparing an £1,100 streamer/DAC with the sound of an £1,100 DAC on its own, then the Novafidelity N25 must be doing something right!

It's hard not to be impressed by what the Novafidelity N25 does, and that doesn't come with the usual "...for the money" suffix. The N25 audio streamer/media renderer is a versatile, flexible almost one-stop-shop for network streaming, however you get that network into your system. The fact it also sounds pretty damn good while its doing that streaming tops off an already outstanding performance. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Audio Streamer/Media Renderer

Performance

CPU: Dual Core ARM Cortex A9 running at 1.0GHz

Main Memory: DDR-1066 1GByte

Tuner: Selectable for DAB/DAB+ or FM Radio

Online Services: Amazon Music, TIDAL, TIDAL MQA, Deezer, Qobuz, Napster, HighResAudio, Spotify Connect

Interface

Display: 4.6" TFT LCD(800 x 320pixels)(*able to connect to ext. screen via HDMI out)

Controls: Key & Jog(Volume/Scroll)

Remote Control: IR, Customized Remote App for iOS and Android devices

Connectors

Analogue Out: RCA

Digital Out: Coaxial, TOSLink, USB, HDMI

Digital In: Coaxial, TOSLink, HDMI ARC IN

Data In: USB B type connector (support up to PCM 384Khz/32Bit, DSD Native 256, and DoP 128)

Dimensions: 440 x 260 x 73mm (WxDxH inc feet)

Price: £1,099

Manufacturer: Novatron Co Ltd

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