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Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 477

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**"AUDIO SWISS
ARMY KNIFE..."**

Novafidelity's N25 network
streamer/preamp

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standmount

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THE UPSETTER!



The stupendous dub legacy
of Lee 'Scratch' Perry

GIANT KILLER!



Sonus faber's tiny Lumina I
standmount packs a punch



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Variety pack

Even by the standards of the genre, the N25 is a very well-featured network audio player indeed. **Ed Selley** gets to grips with it

There's a train of thought in hi-fi circles that the less functionality a product offers, the better it will be. However, the arrival of network audio as a category has done more to unpick this thinking than any other as these products tend towards offering multiple functions as a result of what they do. Even allowing for this trend, Novafidelity's N25 arrives in the market like the audio equivalent of a Swiss army knife.

At the most basic level, the N25 is a network audio streamer able to replay audio stored on a network drive or connected directly by USB. It can handle sample rates up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD256, which should ensure all but the most esoteric of material can be played. As is tradition, this is partnered with streaming service support and it's here that the first clues about how much the N25 can do start to become apparent. In no specific order, it natively supports, Qobuz, Tidal (with MQA included), High Res Audio, Amazon Music, Deezer and Napster as well as Spotify Connect access. Pretty much regardless of where your on-demand streaming is coming from, the N25 has you covered.

But we're only getting started. As you might expect, there are digital

inputs in the form of coaxial, optical and USB ports – the latter mimicking the format handling of the streaming section – as well as a pair of USB 3.0 sockets for connecting storage. There's also HDMI ARC in/output for straightforward connection of a TV, which is still a relatively rare inclusion. No less interesting are the outputs. As

An extremely good digital front-end that is effectively source and format agnostic

well as an RCA out, the N25 has coaxial and optical outputs and a USB out that enables it to run as the streaming front end for an external DAC. The aforementioned HDMI output means the front panel display can be shown on an external monitor.

Bluetooth connection is included with pretty much every format of note supported, including the latest versions of aptX and LDAC. You can also specify an optional Bluetooth transmitter so the N25 can stream wirelessly to nearby receivers. There is AirPlay despite there being no mention of it in the official specs. Then, even though there is full internet radio support, a DAB/FM tuner is included.

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
Novafidelity N25

ORIGIN
Korea

TYPE
Network audio Streamer/preamp

WEIGHT
2.5kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
440 x 73 x 260mm

FEATURES

- Supports sample rates up to: 32-bit/384kHz and DSD256
- apt-X HD and LDAC Bluetooth;
- AirPlay
- Inputs: coaxial; optical; USB; HDMI

DISTRIBUTOR
SCV Distribution

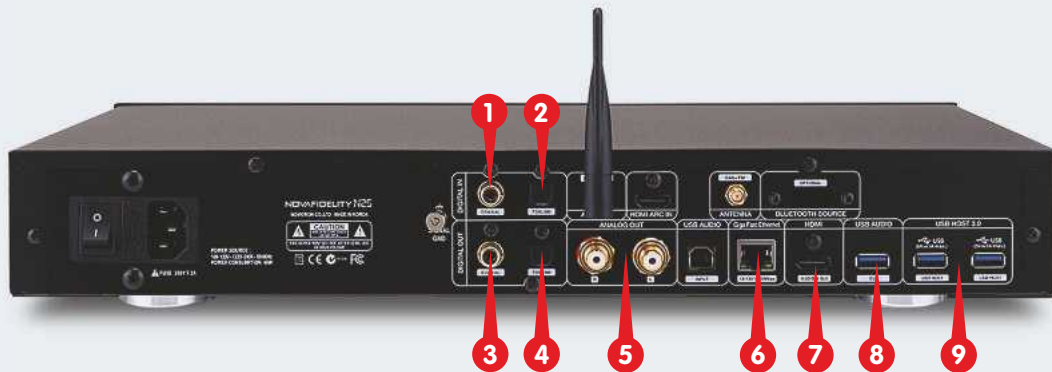
WEBSITE
cocktailaudio.com

If you do choose to use the N25 via the RCA outputs the decoding is fairly impressive in its own right. It employs an ESS Sabre ES9018K2M DAC that is supported by an ARM Cortex A9 processor and a gigabyte of memory. This can output at a fixed level into an integrated amplifier or you can engage a variable output so that the N25 can be used into a power amp or pair of active speakers. I have racked my brains and honestly cannot think of anything that gets close to this specification for a similar price. To cap it all, while I'd hesitate to describe it as beautiful, it's certainly well made and neatly finished.

The catch is that some aspects feel a little rushed. A remote handset with no less than 54 tiny buttons is supplied and provides an extremely wide selection of control options but very few of them could be described as intuitive. There is then the 'Music X Neo' app for iOS and Android that allows browsing of a connected music library and access to the various streaming services (except Spotify, which remains via Connect in its own app). This is stable and simple enough to use, but looks and feels basic. I prefer using the third-party MConnect app for general use. To its credit, Novafidelity has secured Roon certification, which works beautifully.

Sound quality

Initially using the N25 in what probably constitutes its simplest form – streaming from a Melco N1A NAS drive (HFC 394) to Chord Electronics' CPM 2800MkII integrated amp via the RCA in fixed line out mode – reveals that its core ability is considerable. A 24-bit/48kHz Qobuz purchase of Manchester Orchestra's *The Million Masks Of God* is a vast and complex recording and the

CONNECTIONS

- 1 Coaxial input
- 2 Optical input
- 3 Coaxial output
- 4 Optical output
- 5 RCA line outputs
- 6 Ethernet port
- 7 HDMI ARC
- 8 USB output
- 9 2x USB ports (for storage devices)

Novafidelity does a fine job of delivering its scale and sheer impact. The beautiful *Obstacle* begins with a simple guitar refrain and Robert McDowell's haunting vocals. As the track builds, the N25 delivers detailed and weighty low end and enough space around the increasing scale of the song that it doesn't sound congested or confused.

With everything I play there's an agility and propulsive force that benefits all music regardless of tempo. It gives an immediacy to the presentation that I find consistently appealing and this is delivered without sounding forced or harsh. Compared with the very best standalone decoding at the price, like the Chord Qutest (HFC 436), some of the fine detail that the standalone DAC finds in the mix is a little harder to perceive, but the overall presentation is unflinchingly entertaining. This behaviour is consistently reproduced across the various digital inputs and special mention has to go to that Bluetooth implementation which, if you have a phone with aptX or LDAC, sounds very good indeed.

Switching to using the N25 as a preamp is a little more of a mixed bag. Connected to an XTZ A2-300



Cambridge Audio's CXN v2 (HFC 437) is cheaper but the spec is much more limited, with reduced streaming service support, no HDMI or USB out. However, the CXN feels much more exploitable thanks to its better control app, including superior preamp functionality. Sonically, it is close, but the Novafidelity just about has the edge thanks to its compelling combination of energy and refinement, which works really well across a wide spread of material.

Take your pick from black or silver finishes

power amplifier, it works well enough but the volume ramp is a little slow in use. While slightly reluctant at times, it doesn't do anything untoward or deliver unwanted volume levels. As a self-contained system it's effective, although I find myself preferring the volume control of most integrated amps. As a feed for a USB DAC, however, it works like a charm. I connect it to a variety of USB inputs and it just works with all of them,

The N25 arrives in the market like the audio equivalent of a Swiss army knife

imparting no character and simply providing a streaming interface. This attribute would be even more useful if the control interface of the N25 was a little better, but it's a welcome feature nevertheless.

Ultimately though, all this cleverness should not distract from the core performance, which is very good indeed. The wonderful reinterpretation of *Catch Me When I Fall* on the *Rōnin I* mix by UNKLE shows off the fundamental qualities

of the N25 to fine effect. Despite the indisputable complexity of the device itself, none of that makes itself felt in the music. Instead Callum Finn's soaring vocals are the star of the show, locked centre stage and possessed of a richness and tonal realism that helps them to sound unflinchingly believable. Change tack completely and go for the pared-back and hauntingly lovely *Tribulations* by My Baby and the Novafidelity ensures that the wonderful intimacy of the track is delivered without any embellishment whatsoever.

Conclusion

There is a slight irony here in that, if Novafidelity had concentrated on doing a little less, thereby simplifying the control interface a little, I might be even more positively inclined towards it. This is an extremely good digital front-end that is effectively source and format agnostic. So long as you can get the signal to the N25, it will handle it in a compelling way. The limitation for the moment is the interface has room for improvement. Nevertheless, the sheer flexibility and effortlessness with which the Novafidelity delivers a wide selection of music is just too good to ignore ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Exceptional spec; lively but refined sound; well made

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Clunky interface; sluggish volume control

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A feature-packed device that sounds uniformly excellent with a wide spread of material

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL

