

Real Hi-Fi

NAD High-End Hi-Fi Heroes

The Smarthouse Team - Wednesday, 17 January 2007

The NAD Masters Series redefines the brand with muscle, grace and style. Read on for full reviews of the universal disc player, AV processor and power amp in the M Series.

NAD M55 Universal Disc Player | \$2499 | ★★★★★ | www.audioproducts.com.au

For: Universal play back; natural picture.

Against: Not as neutral with CD as some would like.

Conclusion: Rock solid cinema sound

Following a change of ownership, a serious corporate shake-up and major investment in R&D, the NAD brand is back with its eagerly awaited and frankly stunning Masters Series AV components. Stunning because if, like us, you were a child of the 80s (no, honest we were) the NAD name conjures up solid value products with great sound and all the design charm of a breeze block. But NAD's magical integrated amplifiers, like the legendary 3020, were the budget choice of the decade and the company's enormous power amplifiers were the stuff of dreams. Well, dreams 'sonically' at least. The looks were enough to have you waking up in the middle of the night screaming and the number of features was usually binary – one or zero. Battleship-grade matt grey boxes with matt-grey buttons, matt-grey knobs and matt-grey decals. You got one dim LED that indicated it was switched on and a ludicrously dull industrial design that had just enough protrusions and sharp edges to ensure you needed a sticky-plaster every time you dusted.

With an international design team based in Canada, the NAD Masters Series is something very different indeed. The look is high-class luxury throughout, the materials and attention to detail is sumptuous, the technical specifications are impressive and even the features count is none too shoddy. Best of all, the price – relatively speaking – still represents the great value for money for which NAD has always been famed.

But can the Masters Series take on the established brands when the budget is actually not very budget at all? Read on...

To say that the NAD Masters Series M55 is something of a departure for NAD is a big understatement. Gone is dull-as-dishwater design and drab-grey finish, gone are the budget underpinnings to hit low price points and gone is the NAD house sound.



The M55 is a true universal disc-spinner with full multichannel DVD-A and Super Audio CD playback, and is built solidly enough to withstand the rigours of everyday use for about two centuries. The casework is a mix of steel panels, extruded aluminium and die-cast zinc alloy sitting on vibration absorbing silicone rubber feet. [Click to enlarge](#)

Inside is no less beautiful, with a pristine layout of high-tech glass-epoxy circuit boards and serious power supplies. The features count is not left wanting, with the full complement of Dolby and DTS modes, MP3, WMA and JPEG file support and video scaling up to 1080i resolution. Upgradeable architecture means that 1080p scaling is only a firmware update away.

Setup is via an onscreen menu system that comes second only to Yamaha's top-flight DVD players for sheer visual splendour. The OSD is available through the HDMI output, the remote navigates smoothly through the options and there are plenty of video tweaking options.

So where's the catch? Well, the disc mechanism is a little noisy when loading... but that's about it.

Performance

The picture straight out of the crate is crisp, colourful and smooth. Motion flows like water and there is not the merest hint of player-born processing errors or artefacts even when upscaled to 1080i.

Using the HDMI and 720p scaling to an HD Ready projector gives a rich and warm balance that oozes you into the scene without sand-papering your eyeballs. Skin tones have a natural look with a healthy glow, and the high contrast gives a very good perspective of depth. This sumptuous picture can seem a little shy of impact initially, but it forgoes the overt wow-factor in favour of a well-balanced image that will keep you smiling long into an all-nighter of back-to-back *Lord of the Rings*. (Trust us, we tried it.). Trimming both the gamma and colour saturation controls offers a cooler look with more intense blues, but all of the picture trims suffer from controls that are simply too coarse for really fine tuning.

The digital audio feed from the M55 to a processor has to be wired in electrical or optical digital cable rather than break-out of the HDMI lead unfortunately, but we have found this is a better option acoustically anyway. Certainly fed into a handy Arcam AVR-350 the M55 proves to offer a sound just as large and as polished as the casework. Like the picture, the sound is a grower – not an immediate aural syringing but smooth, weighty and detailed with long-term appeal. The M55 and the Arcam both possess a certain laid-back charm but the combination might be just a little too refined and 'safe' for so me.

LAB REPORT	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
PLAYBACK				
Video jitter (Ans)	✓			
Signal-to-noise ratio	✓			
Composite (74.6dB)	✓			
S-video (74.0dB)	✓			
Component (84.5dB)	✓			
Chroma AM/PM				
AM (49.2dB)	✓			
PM (49.1dB)	✓			
Chroma crosstalk (87.5dB)	✓			
Freq response @5.8 MHz	✓			
Composite (-1.2dB)	✓			
S-video (-1.2dB)	✓			
Component Y (-1.2dB)	✓			
Audio jitter (302.2ps)	✓			

Not so when the M55 is plugged into its sibling M15 processor. There is a massive synergy that seems to elicit the best of both components in a way that mixing and matching only tends to achieve on a luck basis. The sound is more immediate and crisp but loses none of its weight or authority. Even using a more modestly powered amplifier than the matching M25, the soundstage is simply huge and there is a crushing presence to soundtracks that will absolutely delight those who enjoy cinema-realistic volume levels – and we do!

The analogue outputs on the M55 offer more of the same weighty and refined sound with rock-solid bass and timing that many decent CD players would love to boast. The overall balance is not as flat neutral or as stark with stereo music as perhaps audio purists would like, but the robust character and huge dynamic range certainly gets a thumbs up.

On the money

There is no shortage of competition at around \$2499 for universal disc-spinners but the NAD M55 can hold its disc-drawer high against any contender. It is better put together than most, offers all the features you could want, and a performance that is bang on the money. Arcam, Denon, Pioneer et al, beware. The NAD Masters Series is coming to get you.

