

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Neat Ultimatum XL10

By Malcolm Steward

Last year I was invited to hear the ultimate member of the Neat Acoustics Ultimatum series, the as then unheard XL10, being launched in Milan... on the end of quite the saddest high-end system the Italian importer could assemble. Regardless, the XL10 overcame the turntable and electronics that strove to hold it back and revealed its potential by sounding rather damned fine. I just knew, however, that the XL10 would sound so much better on the end of a well-sorted Naim electronics system – Neat speakers appear to have a magical synergy with Naim Audio's electronics – such as the one sitting, waiting impatiently in my music room. Shortly after my system had undergone a major, ground-up rebuild, Mr Surgeoner's MPV pulled into my drive and he unpacked the crates containing a brand new pair of XL10s.

The XL10 is a big loudspeaker. Once parked on its spikes it nearly stands taller than me. That is not saying much but it does indicate, at least, that setting them up in one's room is probably a task better saved for when one has a friend who can manhandle heavy weights available to assist.

Recently, the Editor and I were discussing how many times one gets to audition a piece of equipment that one genuinely feels one cannot live without: something so exciting and vital that life without it appears unthinkable? The answer, we decided, was very rarely. Sadly, few reviewers are entirely honest about just how mundane most review subjects are. Most writers tend to find it easier to shy away from giving readers the absolute truth and instead search out facets about which they can enthuse. I do not like damning with faint praise nor using terminological inexactitudes like Ivor Tiefenbrun's famous answer when another manufacturer asked for his opinion on their product: *"That is great hi-fi..."* with the following conclusion being muttered quietly under one's breath or left unspoken... *"but it could not play music with the benefit of divine intervention."*

Regardless, it seems that there are one or two manufacturers that do not churn out humdrum products that purport to be exciting with monotonous regularity but instead release components only when they have been tweaked to near perfection; painfully and painstakingly laboured over until such time as they are able to get out of the way and allow the music to communicate near directly to the listener. One such manufacturer is Neat Acoustics, and that company has twice blessed us this year with products that I cannot imagine living without.

The first of these were the newest occupants of my office desktop, the diminutive, two-way, £600 lota loudspeakers that make my working day so much more bearable. The second arrivals, even though they came from the same factory, could not have been more physically different.

Having been manhandled into my music room, the superb and magnificent Neat Ultimatum XL10 loudspeakers were duly connected to my waiting Naim NAP250 power amplifiers. Subsequent experimentation over the next week or so demonstrated that ages-old Naim NAC A5 seemed to be their preferred speaker cable, sounding more coherent and persuasive than the TelluriumQ Ultra Black that I had been using very successfully with the smaller Ultimatum

XL10s. I had been quite taken by the relatively inexpensive XL10s and the XL6s: their larger than their boxes style of presentation and their ability to communicate music with a near effortless grace truly had me won over. I was sad to see them depart... but I soon overcame my discomfiture when I cast eyes upon the imposing grandeur of £15,000 worth of majestic XL10s spiked into my floor.

The XL10 uses a nine-driver per enclosure configuration, but a seated listener will only be aware of the five of these that are visible – two 168mm mid-bass drivers, two 168mm bass drivers, and a single 26mm high frequency driver. Hidden from view are the two upward-facing EMIT super-tweeters on the top panel of the cabinet, and the interior-mounted bass units, which combine with the visible bass units and internal cavities to provide an isobaric loading for the low frequencies. These drivers are affixed in their own, individual sub-enclosures designed to enhance their performance and reduce their ability to affect or be affected adversely by the operation of the other drivers.

The 1.5metre tall enclosure housing these drivers is not the typical MDF confection but is constructed from damped 18mm Birch plywood. MDF is used along with Polyethylene in a sandwich arrangement to form the rigid, non-resonant baffle structure. Each of the two separate isobaric loaded sub-bass sections features its own enclosure volume and tuning, and houses the latest version of Neat's 168mm bass drive unit, which the company has developed and refined over a twenty-year period. These sub-bass sections are critically tuned independently to maximize room location flexibility for the speaker. Indeed the XL10 was not a difficult speaker to optimise in terms of placement in my room, requiring no more than slight adjustment to maximise its musical coherency and to refine its cosmetic performance – focussing its presentation of the sound stage on appropriate material. ▶

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▶ The crossover network, which is positioned in the base of the enclosure, is a minimalist five-element type (along with damping and attenuating resistors) employing precise-tolerance, low-loss air-cored inductors and newly developed polypropylene film and foil capacitors. The speaker uses predominantly first-order crossover slopes and mechanical roll-offs to deliver a natural, uninhibited performance, and sounds delightfully open and free of the usual crossover network ills.

I am obliged to state that there are honestly few loudspeakers today that are truly bad – and most of those, I often jest, are instantly recognisable by being circular-horn-loaded – so it becomes increasingly hard to discriminate between the merely good, the exceptional, and the outstandingly brilliant. I, for example, think the XL10s go way past being brilliant while the majority, even those from famous name producers, rate no better than averagely good. But what makes that difference – gigantic though it is – is hard to define. Most loudspeakers manage to play in tune and in time, and few are so horribly coloured that one cannot recognise the instrument or instruments that are playing or the performer's voice. Some, a very small number, can go that step further and produce sound so realistic that it can almost convince the listener that he has been transported to the site of the original recording, so believable is the sound. What is more, the sound must also be compelling: it must invite the listener into the performance and virtually take him by the hand and lead him through the arrangement or score, effectively enabling him to understand why the music progresses the way it does and the relevance of the performers' interjections, and how they contribute to the music as a whole. They make it all too easy understanding why, say, a band such as the Allman Brothers, was truly ground-breaking, and how each of the players contributed to the band's overall mastery of the Southern Rock genre: listen to their emotion-packed *Live at Fillmore East* album version of "Stormy Monday" and you realise

instantly why it is so vastly superior to the versions you will have heard over the years by myriad other artists. The way the Allmans' two drummers and bass guitarist worked together to keep the rhythmic impetus aflame is subtle but utterly magical and compelling.

It is important to acknowledge what the designer was aiming to achieve when one assesses the success or failure of the loudspeaker he has produced. Bob Surgeoner who is responsible for the XL10 and its predecessor, the MF9, is also an active semi-professional musician. He plays a multitude of instruments... and plays them far better than his modesty allows him to admit. He and his right-hand man at Neat – also an active musician, songwriter and engineer – have made recordings at gigs and in the factory demonstration room against which they can compare their speakers. Furthermore, they keep a range of acoustic and electric instruments at the factory to provide some sort of absolute reference should that be required. It doesn't get much more real or accurate than that!

'Hi-fi sound' makes all the right noises. It delivers dynamics. It has wide bandwidth, too: It plumbs the depths to deliver bowel-moving bass, and is similarly extended at the other, hair-parting end of the spectrum. All too often, though, it fails to stitch all these elements together in any meaningful way. The Neat XL10 manages this task with consummate ease. Regardless of my disliking audiophile recordings for their often clinical presentation and lack of soul, I dug out some audiophile hi-fi rips and gave them a thorough auditioning through the XL10s. Much to my surprise, I found several of them were almost palatable, even pleasant and approaching enjoyable.

The XL10 fared well with tracks from a 16/44 rip of the Ernest Ranglin CD, *Below the Bassline*. The bass guitar appeared rich in timbre and weight, with appropriate snap to the leading edges of notes. It pushed cleanly through the mix and was harmonically rich but dry so there was no smearing to add any lack of clarity or murkiness to the proceedings. The drums were equally well treated and displayed real attack and impact. The kit cut through the mix especially well: in particular, the likes of snare and rim shots had sometimes alarming and startling presence. Cymbals had similar attack along with credible timbre and note-shape [ASDR] envelopes, adding to the naturalness and conviction of their presentation.

Jazz singer, Cassandra Wilson ably demonstrated how accurately and sympathetically the XL10 handled voices. On a 16/44 rip of her album *Belly of the Sun*, songs like *The Weight* and *You Gotta Move*, her voice sounded natural, convincing and realistically detailed, and finely resolved with nuances such as her breathing being clearly disclosed. She and her band occupied a ▶

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- ▶ wide, deep arc of a soundstage with the players distinctly positioned in it and not constricted by the loudspeaker enclosures.

Also beloved of the high end fraternity because their music is fundamentally tinkle and slam (albeit with a groove) laid out within a spacious three dimensional soundstage, Afro Celt Sound System's *Anatomic* album delivered the band's Celtic fusion replete with throbbing, weighty, low frequencies free of any slurring, punctuated by percussion (toms) with gunfire-like, staccato attack. All this precision and scrupulous delineation of instruments was presented with their natural harmonic characters unaltered – they still sounded one hundred percent like the band that I heard making the ground tremble at the Fleadh in London back in the 1980s.

Similarly, the 1997 *Buena Vista Social Club* album – the 24/96 rip – which manages to be musically rewarding while ticking all the high-end boxes, sounded no less than truly glorious on the XL10s. The bass, while not appearing over-blown, had plenty of natural weight and impact along with crisp definition and precise timing. Dynamics were, on occasions, quite startling; it was as though someone had surreptitiously cranked the volume control before a transient arrived. But the most outstanding characteristic was perhaps the purity and timbre of the vocals: the tonal qualities of even voices at the back of the mix were explicitly revealed, allowing near scrupulous access to the contributions of supporting singers as though they were at the front of the stage. This imbued the performance with genuine vibrancy – a true vitality and life that is so rarely experienced with recorded music. This exquisite recording played through the XL10s managed the near-impossible task of allowing the speakers to satisfy both the roster of hi-fi and musical requirements. Their flawless portrayal of the sonics allowed the music to gel and cohere so convincingly that the result was the most persuasive I have encountered in my room to date.

Indubitably, the Ultimatum XL10 makes an unwavering statement regardless of the music one chooses to play through it. Suitably powered, the XL10 presents all manner of music with a rarely experienced ease, control and coherence.

Ultimately, if you crave a musically persuasive performance but also desire the scrupulous insight of a high-end loudspeaker, be certain to put the Neat Ultimatum XL10 at the top of your list of models to audition. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drivers: 2x EMIT 25mm planar/ribbon supertweeters, 26mm Sonomex dome tweeter, 2x 168mm NEAT mid/bass, 4x 168mm NEAT bass

Sensitivity: 88dB

Impedance: 6 ohm (nominal) 4 ohm (minimum)

Dimensions (HxWxD): 1500x22x37cm

Weight: 65kg per loudspeaker

Price: £15,245 per pair (£17,080 premium finish)

Manufactured by: Neat Acoustics Ltd

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