

Home Cinema Choice gave the M15, M25 & M55 "Best Buy" and the "Reference Status" Award, giving them an overall rating of 5 out of 5 stars.

High End Heroes

New NAD Masters Series redefines the brand with muscle, grace and style, says an overawed Richard Stevenson

Following a corporate shake-up and a major investment in R&D the NAD brand is back with a stunning range of AV components destined to shake-up the market. The industrial design is superb, the attention to detail faultless, the technical specifications impressive and, best of all, the price - relatively speaking - still represents the excellent value for money for which NAD has always been famed. But can the Masters Series take on the established brands when the budget is not very budget at all?

NAD M55 UNIVERSAL DISC PLAYER

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 - to be replaced with

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.

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 me, I 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 I 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 some.

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 I 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 £1300 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

NAD M15 AV PROCESSOR

The M15 is an ideal cosmetic partner for the M55 DVD player and simply exudes an air of classy, timeless design that most battleship Japanese AV amps miss completely. The heady mix of steel, aluminium and cast zinc for the chassis and casework look the business and the blue display complements the disc player in colour if not size of text, which is a little frustrating. At just under £2,000 the M15 is serious money but its substantial build and THX Ultra2 accreditation go along way to justify the price ticket.



The rear panel is awash with enough connections for the most ambitious AV system, although it only sports two-in, one-out HDMI and there is no analogue-to-digital video conversion. This means that you will need an additional analogue video cable between the M15 and the display just to set the thing up or switch non-HDMI sources – grumble, grumble. On the other hand, you get eight digital audio inputs, zone 2 AV outputs, twin sub outputs and a raft of IR repeaters and 12V triggers for those with a penchant for Blofeld-style gadgetry and automation.

Under the hood is a bespoke Holmgren transformer, a beautifully neat layout and a healthy dose of high-spec bought-in components including Silicon Image HDMI modules, twin Motorola 24-bit DSPs, Wolfson DACs, Burr-Brown chipsets and so-on. Interestingly the operation and decoding software is proprietary NAD design exclusive to the Masters Series and is, of course, fully upgradeable.

The processor is completed with a neat remote control which like the M55 remote is topped with aluminium. The wonderfully titled HTRM (Home Theater Remote Masters series) controls the M55 as well of course, lights up, is easy to handle and rather thoughtfully has little buffer bars to stop buttons being depressed when it is face down on the table. Neat.

However, there is no auto setup, no supplied mic, no RoomEQ and very few features that are often deemed essential for today's home entertainment system.



A la carte menu

Despite the M55 disc player's gorgeous and intuitive OSD, the M15's menus are seriously lacklustre. Boring monochrome block text on a black background with simple multi-page menus might be easy to use but it looks so clunky compared to everything else the Masters Series stands for – particularly as it is not even available through the HDMI output.

This niggle aside, the set-up is logical and straightforward, with little in the way of divergent tweakery to keep you away from your DVD collection. There is a handy lip-sync adjustment to 100ms, digital domain tone and dialogue tone controls and that's about it. I even had to find my yard-stick and dB meter for the speaker setup. Retro!

Thankfully the M15 cuts to the chase without recourse to bells and whistles, neatly entering auto format decoding on demand and punching out a full-bodied and robust sound. Again, the sound is a grower, starting perhaps a little laid back and dark but drawing you irrevocably into films with its

subtle detail and natural dialogue. Push up the volume and there is not the ear-drilling upper treble of some of the larger AV amps, but a silky high-end sprinkled with that crafts a truly magnificent sound stage.

The balance makes the M15 very much an all-rounder, equally at home with dramas, chick flicks or all-action block busters. Hooked up to some very neutral and revealing power amps the sound is large and clean but doesn't manage the sheer emotional charge and impact that fills the room when it is attached to the matching M25 power amp.

As part of the complete Masters Series line up the M15 really shines, maximising the design synergy across the matching source and power components. From the crushing high-impact drama of Battlestar Galatica Season 2 to Pink Floyd's Pulse and on to Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were Rabbit Special Edition, the combo simply plonks you in the set of your favourite movies and doesn't let go until the credits roll.

Comparatively speaking

Interestingly, the M15 and M25 partnership works out at about £4,000 – around the same ballpark price of Denon's flagship AVC-A1XVA for example. Features-wise the Denon wipes the floor with the NAD pairing but in terms of industrial design, purist simplicity and a sound that will impress all day and all night without a hint of fatigue, the NADs have it

NAD M25 7-CHANNEL POWER AMPLIFIER

NAD has been famed in the past for its big power amplifiers – but none have come quite as quite as huge or as powerful as the unfortunately titled M25. Weighing in at 44kg and nearly half a metre deep, not only is this behemoth the size and weight of most Krell power amps, it is just as solidly built and just as well finished too. Thankfully the price tag is far more NAD than Krell, and at under £2000 for 160W to all seven channels the M25 offers superb material value and power per pound.

Internal design centering on a huge Holmgren toroidal transformer, power rails made from chunky copper bus bars and seven completely discrete mono power amplifiers. The spec sheet quotes a near flat response from 3Hz to 70kHz and 118dB signal to noise ratio at full power. With 160W on tap the design is certainly going to create spectacular dynamics.



Of course this is a NAD design too – a company wont to add nitrous-like power boosts to its amplifiers. Evolving from the Power Envelope feature of many moons ago the M25 now sports Powerdrive. This circuit engages a second high-voltage rail that nearly doubles the continuous power on a short term dynamic basis. Mama.

The external design shares the material mix and cosmetics of the matching disc player and processor. The intense blue LEDs show all channels in operation and the back panel offers seven phono inputs and seven pairs of binding posts that clearly wouldn't balk at zero-gauge cable. There

is a 12V trigger to complete the Blofeld scenario and a switch to engage NADs old faithful 'soft clipping' feature.

Soft Clipping ensures that if you are completely barking mad and/or stone deaf and want to drive the M25 to its limits, it will fall into gentle 'peak' clipping rather than full-scale distortion. Given the M25s power and current reserves, you would probably be sonically crushed and picking bits of molten speaker driver out of the sofa first. There should be a warning in the manual – if you see the soft clipping light on the front panel of the M25 illuminate, please seek urgent medical attention.

Quote, unquote

It takes about a nano-second of listening to the M25 to realise it is quite something special in terms of dynamic headroom, bass extension and sheer control over speaker drivers. The soundstage is absolutely immense, bursting from an inky silent background with frightening realism and tautness. It is as if every note, every sound and every effect is not simply hurled from the speakers but chiselled into the air with laser like precision.

Hooked up to a big set of floorstanders with decent bass extension, the M25 renders a subwoofer all but an optional extra, such is its low down drive and power. I would go so far to say that no amplifier yet to grace the Stevenson home cinema room has ever driven my big Tannoy Dimension TD system quite so hard nor kept them under such tight control – including the £20k power-amp setup currently in-situ.

Bass and snare drum attack is awesome, underpinning soundtracks with incredible low frequency definition and control. The effects extends through the entire frequency spectrum keeping a flat-neutral balance with tight control all the way from explosive LFEs up to shrill effects like shattering glass.

Dialogue is projected superbly and the M25s rendition of vocal scale gives actors with serious presence a tangible reality in your living room. This effect extends to multi-channel and stereo music too, turning decent recordings into a full emotional experience complete with foot tapping, bopping, duck-walking or air-guitaring depending on your genre penchant.

Switching back to my reference power amplifier set up, the NAD can suddenly seem a little boisterous and heavy-handed with more delicate material. Genteel female vocals lack a little of the sparkle and minutiae tonal inflections of the very best esoterica, and it is not totally character-less... but let's get real. The M25 is a sub £2,000 power amp and comprehensively eclipses every other multi-channel power amp in its class for sheer jaw-dropping performance and pretence-free home cinema enjoyment. Versatile

For me, the M25 is the star of the Masters Series and is the most versatile, weaving its potent magic with just about any processor or source you throw at it. If you like your home entertainment big and dramatic in every conceivable sense the M25 is an absolute bargain. It both ices the cake of a Masters Series system and offers itself as a first-class upgrade to just about any AV amplifier or receiver out there

CONCLUSION

The Masters Series not only represents a design departure for NAD it could also spell the beginning of a new world order in the serious home theatre market. For a little less than £5,300 you get AV performance that fights well above its price point and three gorgeously crafted boxes with design flair that would not look out of place on high-end esoterica.

Compare and contrast to a typical Japanese AV combo at the same price: A slab-sided integrated AV amplifier festooned with features unlikely to ever see use in anger and over a grand's worth of DVD player that, to the untrained eye, looks just like a Chinese special. If you like features aplenty and a high gadget count then the NAD Masters Series is not for you, but consider carefully just what you want an AV system for. If you come up with answers like performance, simplicity and pride of ownership – then look no further than your local NAD dealer.

The M55 universal disc player is frighteningly close to Arcam's DV-137 in design philosophy, performance and price – and gets a 5-star accolade in just the same way. In isolation the differences are miniscule. The Arcam nudges microscopically ahead of the darker sounding M15 with music while the NAD has marginally better picture contrast and so on. They both annoy by their lack of OSD to the HDMI output too, which is an amusing twist. Cosmetically, my vote goes to the NAD...

"It is simply one of the most potent, dynamic and well-controlled multi-channel power amplifiers on the market and, frankly, a 24-carat bargain"

The M15 processor is a rare beast these days in that it eschews gadgetry - almost to a fault. There is no hint of auto-set-up or room EQ, no video scaling or up-conversion to HDMI and a distinct shortage of picture tweekery. But it matters little because the M15's fundamental sound processing and picture handling is fabulous from the outset. It is also joyously simple to use and its robust and detailed sound simply immerses you into movies – whatever the genre.

The M25 power amplifier is the brightest shining star of the Masters Series, causing a stir in the chez Stevenson home cinema room the like of which has not been seen since the original Star Wars trilogy was launched on Laserdisc with AC-3 soundtrack. It is simply one of the most potent, dynamic and well-controlled multi-channel power amplifiers on the market and, frankly, a 24-carat bargain at less than £2,000.

While each individual component has much merit in its own right, the Masters Series' ultimate strength lies in its holistic design and system synergy – the system as a whole being even greater than the sum of the parts.

This is both impressive and a potential flaw in the NAD plot. You can certainly purchase the M55 disc player for its excellent audio and visual performance, the M15 processor for its smooth sound and simplicity, or the M25 power amplifier for its awesome dynamics – but unless you have all three links in the chain you will never truly capture the full magic of the NAD Masters Series at its very best. Oh, go on then, I'll have all three...