

A very modern Affair

Audio Affair has become a potent online dealer, but as **Ed Selley** discovers, it hasn't skimped on the instore side of things

Located in the middle of Birmingham's splendidly named Custard Factory district, Audio Affair is a UK dealer that began under slightly different circumstances to many of its competitors. Owner Alex Field started out selling vinyl on eBay and began to move into the online retail of audio equipment from there. Alex made the decision that to be effective as an online audio retailer, it made sense to have physical premises. The showroom was opened in 2007 and since has been joined by a sister store selling pro audio and DJ kit as well as a warehouse for online stock. The total staff now stands at 11.

As a dealer with a foot in both camps, some aspects of Audio Affair differ from more conventional dealers, but some are reassuringly similar. The company is hugely involved in social media and building its online presence, but has lavished a great deal of care and attention on its store, which is beautifully finished and now features a number of brands like Naim and Cyrus that are only available via the showroom and are independent of the online business.

As such, it's time to see how this impacts on the Audio Affair sound. Assisted by sales advisor Richard, I sit down to see what the team makes of our standard three-system brief...



THE EXPERTS



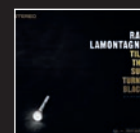
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naimaudio.com
proac-loudspeakers.com
iconaudio.com
sugdenaudio.com
audiolab.co.uk
kef.com



System test music



RAY LAMONTAGNE
Till the Sun Turns Black
Lossless FLAC



TORI AMOS
Under The Pink
CD



SCRATCH MASSIVE
Communion
Hi-res FLAC

System 1 – One-box wonder

THE LEAST EXPENSIVE system of the day is also by some considerable margin the smallest. If you can't accommodate this slimline trio, it's time to consider headphones. While it is compact, there is nothing restricted about the specs or performance – this is a system that gets a lot done in a small space.

Audio Affair began selling Naim equipment last year and it has rapidly become a favourite of the team. The flagship SuperUniti is an impressively specified product at the asking price. It is a 32-bit/192kHz-capable UPnP streamer with internet radio and supporting digital and analogue inputs. These are mated to an 80W internal amplifier that should be able to handle most

A system that wins all the arguments be they in the head or in the heart

speakers. Like the rest of the Naim streaming family, the SuperUniti is controlled by the wonderfully slick N-Stream app and Audio Affair has made sure there's an iPad on hand to make best use of this.

Hey good looking

Partnering the Naim is the smallest floorstander in the Proac Response range, the D18. This two-way design is almost classically proportioned and – finished in a lovely cherry veneer – is as much a piece of furniture as it is audio equipment. The Proac has always been more than a pretty face, though. The D18 makes use of a proprietary 6.5in mid bass driver, featuring an acrylic phase plug with a larger magnet assembly than the smaller standmount versions. This is partnered with a ¾in soft dome tweeter with a 'honeycomb' voice coil specific to Proac. Also extremely important to the Proac's overall performance is that they have a side-firing port just above the integral plinth that makes them relatively easy to place near rear walls. It's clever and usefully compact, but how does it sound?

After a minute or so of playing Ray LaMontagne's *Three More Days*, it is abundantly clear that this is a very happy partnership indeed. Naim

and Proac both produce equipment with a very definite character – it would be wrong to call them coloured, but there is a very clear sense of identity to both and when combining products of this nature there is always the danger you'll wind up with oil and water, rather than a gin and tonic. In this case, though, the combination is a happy blend of the strengths of the two brands.

Top gear

The drive and agility of the Naim is readily apparent. There is a deftness to the performance that is completely compelling and somewhat addictive. The Proacs keep this agility entirely intact (they are hardly lead-footed themselves) and add a tonal sweetness that allows the performance to completely convince. Vocals are handled with an effortless assurance that many systems at considerably higher price points can struggle to compete with and the overall tonality of the system is a perfect partnership of both detail and refinement.

There is no sense that the system is over civilised either. The more raw and aggressive *Harrowdown Hill* by Thom Yorke keeps the rumbling electronic bass and discordant midrange as raw and urgent as the artist intended, but then lavishes a wonderful richness and weight to Yorke's vocals and locks them centre stage with the supporting instrumentation arranged behind. The relatively sensitive Proacs combined with the long-held tradition of Naim equipment to have a power beyond that of what the bald numbers might suggest, also means that this system has extensive headroom for something so comparatively small.

The all-in-one system has generally been considered the convenient option for people lacking the space and capital in a 'proper' separates-based hi-fi. This system is a very elegant riposte to this way of thinking. The performance isn't simply comparable to separates at the price, but is instead right up at the top of the pile. When you consider the excellent feature set, lovely build and handsome appearance, you have a system that wins all the arguments.

- 1 NAIM SUPER UNITI £3,250
- 2 PROAC D18 £2,145
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £5,395



The SuperUniti packs loads of capability into one box



Proac's D18 is room friendly, handsome and musically involving

System 2 – Hot and heavy

THE SECOND SYSTEM takes us all the way out to the other end of the Audio Affair portfolio. Gone is the compact solid-state amplification and instead we have three boxes of valve-based goodness partnered with two boxes of digital, which is CD rather than streaming-based. Speaker responsibilities are kept with Proac, but with the increase in budget, there is a further move up the product range meaning that some new technology is available.

With the Proac D30, this means that although the slim cabinet is still visually similar to the D18, the driver compliment is all new. The mid bass driver is constructed from carbon fibre and polymer for reduced weight and increased strength. In the 'R' suffix version seen here, this is joined by a specially designed ribbon tweeter intended to improve performance.

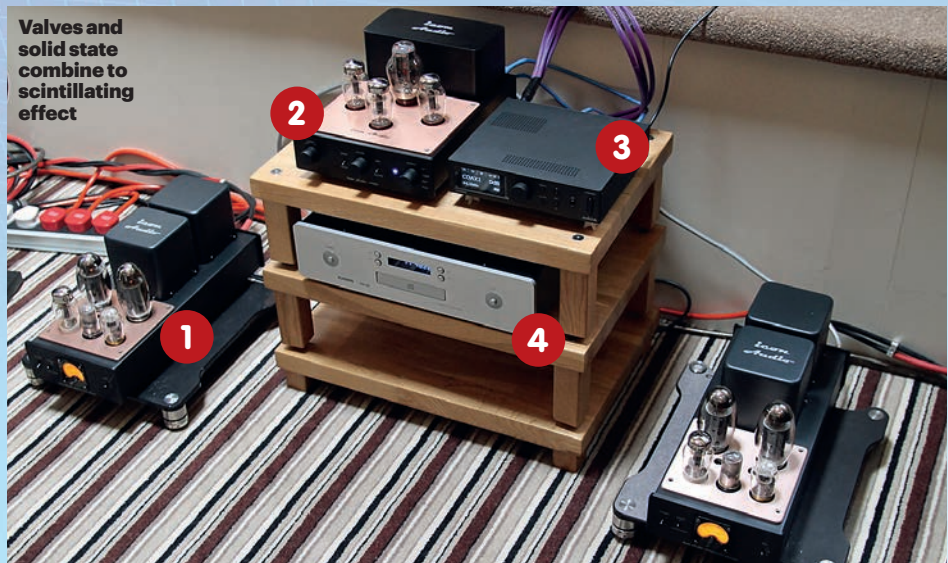
Powering the speakers is a triumvirate of units from Icon Audio. The MB90 monoblocks are both visually striking and technically interesting as they make use of the KT150 valve. These burly tubes help the MB90 produce a considerable 115W per side and this power is in turn marshalled by a LA4 preamp, which adds to the valve compliment with a trio of 6SN7 signal valves and a 274B rectifier.

The digital front end is a combination of the gorgeous and impressively substantial Sugden Fusion CD21SE, which is given a helping hand by Audiolab's superb 8200DAC. Partnering a high-on £2K CD player with a £600 DAC might seem odd, but Richard feels that in this system, the results are superior to running it on its own.

Tori party

Cueing up Tori Amos' peerless *Under the Pink*, it is immediately obvious that second guessing the role of a particular component in the system is somewhat irrelevant when the end result is as capable as it is. *Pretty Good Year* is a wonderful demonstration of all of the good points of a valve-based system with none of the downsides. There is a weight and realism to vocals that is arrestingly real and the sense of space the performance has is deeply compelling. There is a lushness to the midrange and upper frequencies not commonly encountered in solid-state systems.

Valves and solid state combine to scintillating effect



Beguiling it may be, but lacking in control and definition it is not. Switching to Admiral Fallow's *Squealing Pigs*, there isn't the slightest sense of bloat or sluggishness. The bass is tight, packed full of detail and clips along with the speed and assurance to make the song work as it should. The system manages to find the detail and texture of the voices and instruments, but at the same time keep the rough edges under control. There is something almost self-effacing about the way that great recordings are presented almost without there being any sense of electronics being present but when the quality isn't so great, this system carefully chips off the worst rough edges, leaving the musical message intact.

Modern art

For a valve system it presents no great domestic issues either. The real-world power output of the MB90s allows for the slender and relatively compact Proacs to be used without any limits on volume and the build quality and design of the components is first rate. The presence of the Audiolab also allows the owner to start dabbling in computer audio if they feel the need. Like Audio Affair itself, this is a traditional approach that is thoroughly modern in implementation.

The ribbon tweeter and carbon mid/bass give the D30R huge ability



- 1 ICON AUDIO MB90 MKII M, WITH KT150 £2,900
- 2 ICON AUDIO LA4 MKIII PREAMP £1,100
- 3 AUDIOLAB M-DAC £599
- 4 SUGDEN CD21SE £1,870
- 5 PROAC D30R £4,750
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £11,219**

System 3 – My Naim is...

FOR THIS ULTIMATE demo of the Audio Affair portfolio the speakers come courtesy of KEF whose Reference range is a very popular part of the store lineup. Although this is a system with a fairly substantial price tag, the dimensions are still something that a standard lounge could take without being dominated.

The minimal controls, the multitude of glowing logos and the acres of brushed black metalwork combine to give a palpable sense of purpose to this front end. The choices are interesting, though. The NAC 252 preamp and attendant SuperCap power supply are from a good deal further up the range than the ND5 XS Streamer that fronts the system. The consensus among the Audio Affair team is that Naim's baby streamer does an awful lot right and there is more to be gained by spending out a bit more on the amplification than on the digital. The ND5 XS takes its files from a UnitiServ rip NAS that allows for ripping, tagging and storage in one smart and compact package.

Towers of power

Fronting the system is the KEF Reference 205/2. The middle of three floorstanders in the Reference range, the 205/2 does an impressive job of hiding its mighty dimensions. Built around a pair of substantial 8in drivers and the distinctive housing that contains a 6.5in Uni-Q driver that mounts a titanium dome tweeter coaxially in the time-honoured fashion of KEF speakers, the 205/2 is business-like in a refined sort of way. The satin walnut finish is handsome and discrete, but if this is all a bit grown up, you can order them sprayed fire engine red.

One of the more surprising things I realise when sitting down to listen to this system is I don't recall ever hearing these two brands combined before. Like the first system, the behavioural traits of the two brands are still readily identifiable, but they complement each other in a way that is to the benefit of both.

With Ali Farka Toure and Ry Cooder's *Talking Timbuktu*, the Naim accuracy and agility is all there – indeed it is quite uncanny how these electronics come across as like the SuperUniti, but enhanced, extended and simply more visceral. The KEFs take these traits and add the focus and exceptional soundstaging that the carefully evolved Uni-Q driver is renowned for. There is also a clear demonstration that there is no substitute for cubic capacity when it comes to the bass. The twin 8in drivers take the detailed and substantial low end that the Naim stack can generate and lends it an authority that is only apparent when you switch to something less capable.

Packing a punch

It is perfectly capable of a bit of wanton aggression, too. Switching to the high-res FLAC of Scratch Massive's *Communion* gives the bass drivers something to chew on and the way that this system pounds through the massive slabs of live electronica is deeply entertaining. There is something impossibly entertaining about the way this concentrated collection of fastidious engineering will let loose and hammer out basslines like a PA system if you want it to. The sheer grip that is exerted over the bass is truly outstanding.

The price tag is not inconsiderable, but spend any time with this system and you won't find yourself questioning it. The way it can go from outstanding delicacy to pile-driving force in an instant without losing tonal accuracy or shrinking that phenomenal soundstage is deeply addictive. When you consider the superb build, easy upgradability and handsome appearance, it is easy to see why the Audio Affair team puts this at the top of the tree.

- 1 NAIM ND5 XS £1,925
 - 2 NAIM NAC 252 £5,530
 - 3 NAIM UNITISERV £2,150
 - 4 NAIM SUPERCAP £3,795
 - 5 NAIM NAP 250 £3,140
 - 6 KEF REFERENCE 205/2 £6,000 (FINISH DEPENDANT)
- TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £22,540**



Alex and his team clearly understand that to survive in a competitive sector, they need to offer an online service that puts them above the box shifters and back that up with a dealer experience that is second to none. The presence of brands that have no real interest

in online sales should be indication enough that this is a store that is up to the challenge of high-end retail. In terms of meeting the peculiar demands of top-class audio demonstrations in particular, they have succeeded admirably. All three

systems deliver considerable musical enjoyment and some interesting upgrade possibilities within overall dimensions that can be accommodated in a UK lounge. Affairs are supposed to be fleeting, but this could be the start of something beautiful.