



Stream come true

From an early champion of networked music comes this punchy new digital music system.
Malcolm Steward enjoys Linn's latest Majik DSM

Linn Products is one of the world's foremost manufacturers of networked audio components. Along with one-time contemporary from the days of analogue, Naim Audio, it sets the benchmark for high-end performance in this sector.

The Linn DS products are not aiming to compete with budget or convenience offerings such as the Sonos or SqueezeBox systems, but instead offer higher performance to enthusiastic, hard-core music lovers, at a higher price.

The new Linn Majik DSM is little different – in terms of physical components and construction – to the Majik DS-I (reviewed in *HFC* 332). The 'M' is still a network streaming, all-in-one device, that still plays internet radio, and still incorporates a comprehensively equipped 90 watts (into 4 ohms) Chakra integrated amplifier, Dynamik switched mode power supply, and a multiple-input DAC. So is it really a new product? Well, in these modern times, I reckon the answer is a definite yes. Differences are all readily noticeable, and attributable

DETAILS

PRODUCT: Linn Majik DSM
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: integrated DS player, preamp and power amp
WEIGHT: 4.9kg
DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD)
381x80x355mm
FEATURES:
• supported file types: WAV, FLAC, MP3, AIFF, AAC, ALAC, OGG, WMA (except lossless)
• sampling rates: various, including 32k, 44.1k, 48k, 88.2k, 96k, 176.4k & 192k
• 2 electrical and 3 optical digital inputs (max 24-bit/192kHz)
• compatible with UPnP media servers
DISTRIBUTOR: Linn
TELEPHONE: 0141 307 7777
WEBSITE: linn.co.uk

to improvements to the software – the most vital and influential component in such products. The earlier DS-I did not sound as poised and polished as the new DSM. The £2,600 unit, which has the option of loudspeakers, sounds superior to the original and now seems far slicker and genuinely faster in comparison to its slightly ponderous forerunner.

Not only does the code appear to have been tidied up, but useful new functions have been introduced. 'NetAux', for example, will silence those Apple fan boys who think no one outside Cupertino can come up with innovative functions like AirPlay. Not so: NetAux functioned perfectly with my iPhone and iPad, and the rarely used low-res iTunes library on my distant desktop PC. Having selected the NetAux input, I could play music directly from iSources through the Majik system.

Linn has, since it began in the 1970s, based its manufacturing philosophy on maximum information retrieval, attempting to coax every atom of musical information from the source regardless of what piece of equipment was endeavouring to obtain it. In the Sondek LP12



record player, CD12 CD player, or, nowadays, its digital streaming products. Performance was always to the fore, while convenience had played a supporting role. But the Majik DSM seems to blend both rather seamlessly. With eleven remotely selectable inputs (six digital and five analogue), and gain settings of those inputs adjustable so users can switch from one to another with no alarming changes in

volume, it's a swish thing to use. And, yes, the Majik DSM does have an input ready and waiting for your record player!

Like its predecessor, when streaming internet radio, the sound quality is not as good as that from ripped CDs or genuine high-res recordings. Still, it is none too shoddy, and often surprisingly good. Indeed it remains a fantastic way to discover new music. I drove the DSM for the most part with a wired laptop PC because an expired router that had to be replaced mid-review demanded that I spend time getting the wired network working optimally, before I began messing with the wireless control functions. So my iPhone, iPad and various 'apps' were virtually ignored throughout the review once I had assured myself that they worked as expected. I strung the DSM off the Gigabit switch on the sub-network that serves my music-room, and fed it with rips and downloads from my primary NAS, which runs Illustrate's Asset UPnP software. This set-up facilitates easy comparisons because I can arrange any number of media players in my music room to connect to the same NAS and switch between them in seconds.

Sound quality

The review DSM came supplied with a pair of Majik 109, three-way, ported, bookshelf-style loudspeakers. The system did not relish being played too loudly, although it still managed healthy levels. I'd already switched the Majik 109s for a pair of PMC twenty 23s, but the unit had sounded graceless when pushed hard into these speakers. But that was the only occasion when its sound drew attention to itself – for the most part its transparency, clarity, and lack of obvious coloration were exemplary. I subsequently spent a day listening to a selection of speakers, including a pair of Focal 1008Bes, but settled on the NEAT Xli standmounts as the most agreeable and rewarding partners in my room.

There is only a thin line between magic and mediocrity in the world of networked audio, which tends to be a rather grey area; audio is nowhere near as black and white as it was in the nineteen seventies and eighties. The differences one hears are frequently subtle but still significant; being good enough nowadays simply is not good enough. Linn recognises that digital streaming products are not commodities and does not regard them as one would toasters or dishwashers. Hence the company is fastidious about their construction and implementation. It eschews technological gimmickry and focuses instead on the seemingly old-fashioned value of faithfulness to the musical performance.

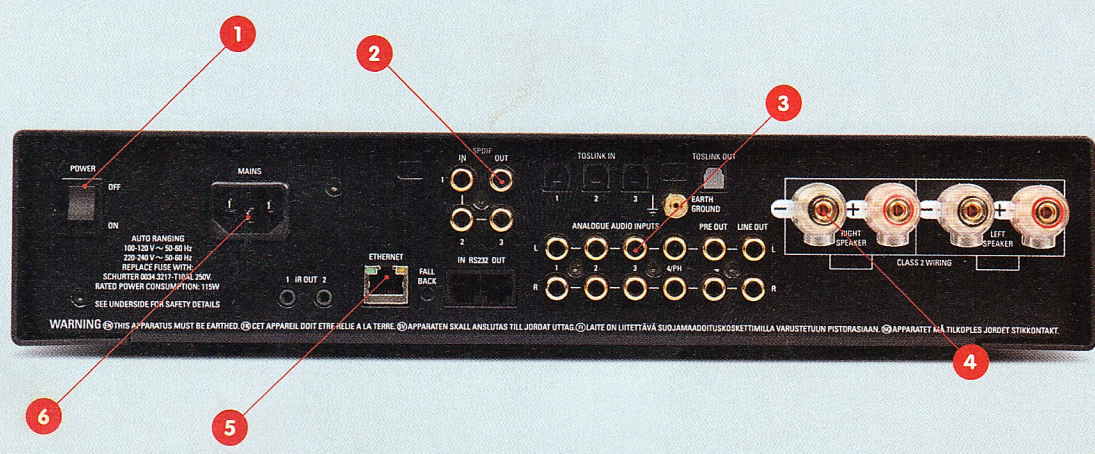
The result? Linn's Majik DSM sounds quite excellent; its Ethernet connection and its UPnP capability being the undoubted stars of the show. The DSM does all the

I frequently gained further rewarding insights into even familiar music from the experience

famous tunes and timing stuff as one expects from Linn, but was not *quite* as musically persuasive as the pricier Naim SuperUniti, although it certainly had the edge in terms of transparency and resolution. Its presentation was ferociously precise and etched. It scavenged detail and information from every corner of a mix or arrangement. It displayed exceptional realism on the new 24-bit/192kHz NaimLabel rip of Antonio Forcione and Sabina Sciubba's *Meet Me in London*.

It was truly outstanding at disclosing harmonic texture in guitar recordings, which are a particular favourite of mine. Duke Robillard, for instance, is a technically brilliant player and insists upon selecting

CONNECTIONS



- 1 rear-mounted master power switch is fiddly to access
- 2 2x coaxial digital inputs; 3x TOSLINK opticals to the right
- 3 line level analogue inputs via RCA phons
- 4 left and right loudspeaker outputs via binding posts
- 5 Ethernet input; no serious digital streamer uses Wi-Fi
- 6 IEC power socket lets you experiment with mains cables

Q&A

MALCOLM STEWARD SPEAKS
WITH GILAD TIEFENBRUN, MD
OF LINN PRODUCTS



MS: Is it the case with networked audio products that the software is the make or break factor?

GT: A digital stream player is much more than a network interface, DAC and power supply. Software and hardware are both important when it comes to audio quality, but they must work together in harmony and precision engineering is the key to getting the best from both.

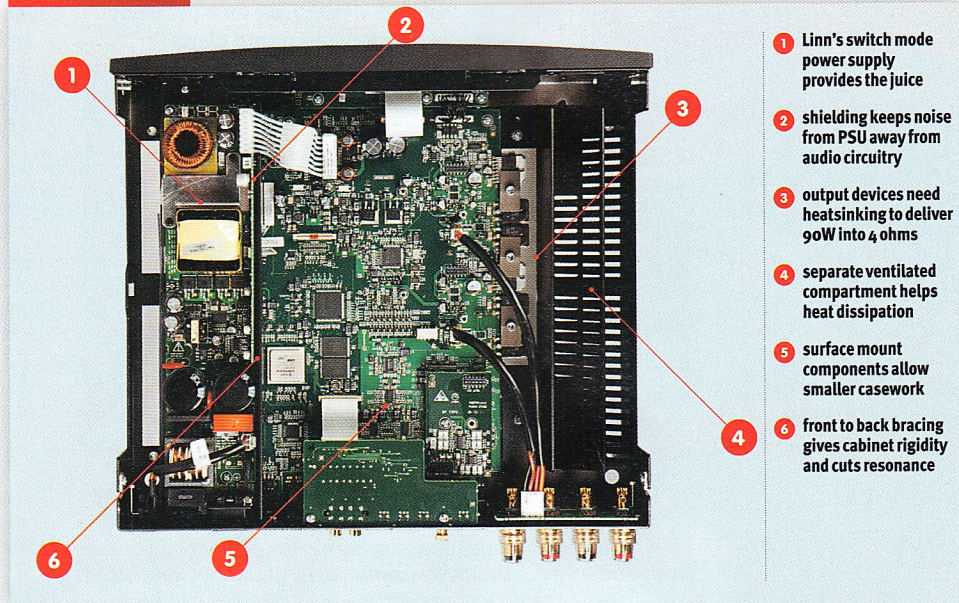
Is there much you can do, apart from in software, to make one's streaming product stand apart from the crowd?

Everything we make is designed in-house and from the ground-up. Rather than using the standard upsampling filters commonly provided by the DAC manufacturer, we replace this with our own custom-designed solution, which delivers the best audio performance. In addition, our streaming technology extends the benefits of our Linn-designed ultra low-jitter master clock all the way from the DAC to the media server. Being in control of every aspect of the electronic circuit design ensures we get the best possible sound from our products.

What else is unique about the Majik DSM?

As technology changes, Linn DS evolves. Over the last four years regular software updates have added new functionality to Linn DS, the latest being Songcast which lets you listen to any audio from your computer on your Linn system. Plus, with Songcast, anything you listen to on your Linn can be shared with another room, perfectly synchronised and without sacrificing quality. During this time we've also added internet radio, ALAC support, easy access to your iTunes library and BBC content and interoperability with Airplay. Linn's Kinsky control app continues to get new features and is now available for all Mac, iPad, iPhone and iPod Touch.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Linn's switch mode power supply provides the juice
- 2 shielding keeps noise from PSU away from audio circuitry
- 3 output devices need heatsinking to deliver 90W into 4 ohms
- 4 separate ventilated compartment helps heat dissipation
- 5 surface mount components allow smaller casework
- 6 front to back bracing gives cabinet rigidity and cuts resonance



THE LINN MAJIK DSM does not have a host of similar rivals. Only the Naim SuperUniti is in any way comparable. Both combine streaming with amplification, can be controlled with an iPad or iPhone, and both require a NAS device for storage of music.

Which sound you prefer will depend on your taste – choose the Naim if you like the way music flows with a great sense of rhythmic propulsion, or the Linn if you want matchless transparency and detail. The clarity, precision and resolution of the Majik DSM are beyond reproach.

particular guitars for particular recordings. The DSM clearly lets you hear why he does this, as well as making it simple to study his flawless playing technique. Put these two abilities together and it presents music in a way that is compelling.

Its presentation of the acoustic guitar is no less enthralling. You quickly realise why luthiers call the timber they use 'tonewoods', when you can hear the richness of tonal colour, sustain and resonances that acoustic instruments produce, especially as they age.

The finest demonstration of the spatial characteristics of the DSM came on the rip of Ramirez' *Misa Criolla*, featuring Jose Carreras. The placement of the tenor, choir and orchestra somehow scaled to fit my room perfectly, and the streamer created a credible impression of being in the wonderful acoustic of that Spanish church, the Santuario de la Bien Aparecida in Cantabria. It also presented the choir as a collection of individual voices the entire performance was truly magical; the kind that you could happily sit and enjoy for hours.

A similar realism was created with the 24/48 NaimLabel live recording of cellist, Tim Hugh. His instrument, and the piano accompanying him, exhibited fulsome instrumental warmth and timbre on Faure's *Apres un Reve*, complete with 'muted' coughing being clearly audible and locatable among the applauding audience. The Lasso from Bartok's *Rhapsody* number 1 was perhaps the Majik's

most emotive performance here. Hugh's animated, impassioned playing was evident right from the outset; his determined breathing and his strident bowing betraying the physical energy he was putting into the performance.

Conclusion

This latest Linn Majik DSM has a very quiet noise floor, enabling you to hear soft piano notes decay gently into silence or the delicate breathing of a backing vocalist, for example. There was never any suspicion that digital hash was obscuring any low-level detail, which is the Achilles' heel of modern network players.

I could, and often did, listen to the Majik DSM all day, and frequently walked away feeling that I had gained further rewarding insights into even familiar music from the experience. For a compact little system that includes bundled speakers, it walks very tall. ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Digs deeply into musical performances; a highly involving listen

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Not as rhythmically assertive as it could be

BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



WE SAY: A highly attractive proposition if you are looking for a stylish all-in-one streaming system

OVERALL

