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Lexicom-multimedia Review & Listening impressions : Roon & Metrum's Ambre



Metrum Acoustics AMBRE EndPoint



Meaningful Expansion to ROON ?

After an extensive learning curve with Roon software and the Metrum Acoustics AMBRE EndPoint last week, here is a follow-up with more Audio impressions - this time linking AMBRE to a Naim Audio System.

The sudden attention being drawn to Roon recently, has meant I/we at Lexicom Multimedia have had to bring ourselves up to date. After all, until a few weeks ago I had not tried it myself. In the meantime I have found out that Roon software for streaming music is not 100% my ideal – due to the lack of music services and the internet radio is still not working.

But the music is fantastic - so let's play about with Roon as "EndPoints".

It was so good that I have bought into AMBRE EndPoints, for use running a NUC (Next Unit of Computing) with Roon software. That enthusiasm with current Naim systems in mind, means for many Naim owners an integrated Roon Naim EndPoint is often not available. But we would like to try, so we put together a system that remains a real Naim system which makes Roon possible.

The Device

Let me briefly repeat what a Metrum Acoustics AMBRE proposes. AMBRE forms the bridge between the Roon server, often a dedicated computer such as a NUC or Nucleus and then to a device that can convert the Digital signals to Analogue output (Dac). AMBRE has a single input - an RJ45 Ethernet port but several Digital outputs - so compatible with everything. AES / EBU over XLR, S/PDIF over RCA coax, Toslink Optical and an I2S output.

The maximum bit rate and sampling frequency is 24 bit at 192kHz. AMBRE is therefore Roon and not (yet) other streaming protocols. On the front of the modest casework is an on/off switch, plus indication LED's for Standby/On, LAN and Music. Inside much attention has been paid to the power supply for the circuits and much more attention to the Digital Clocks.

Digital music reproduction stands or falls with the quality of a Digital clock, so AMBRE therefore has two precision clocks built in - one for 44.1kHz and multiples 88.2 / 176.4kHz and the second for 48kHz with multiples 96 and 192kHz. The timing with these clocks and the ultimate suppression of jitter that Metrum Acoustics manages to achieve, is technically and audibly exceptional. The AMBRE costs € 1.203.

From Naim App to Roon App

Our system consists of a Naim NAC 272N Digital music player / DAC / line amplifier (a unit that has been frequently sold to customers by Lexicom Multimedia) and has an excellent reputation. Naim will unfortunately not offer the NAC 272N as a Roon EndPoint. They will do this with the new generation of music streamers sometime this year. With this in mind, some Naim enthusiasts will be deprived of Roon's advantages, such as reproduction quality, the ability to make connections between music and artists, integration with TIDAL and the unique documentation system that constantly provides information about the recording, the musicians, historical data and more.



Back to the system, there is a NAP 300DR with NAP 300PS available and a pair of B&W 804 D3 Diamond Speakers. Of course a NUC is running the Roon Core software with AMBRE at the ready. The latter paired with a Shawline Digital Coax S/PDIF cable from Chord Company to the Digital input of the NAC 272N. I can play music with the App via Roon through this set and with the App from Naim. For both I am careful choosing the music files because they are at Lexicom Multimedia in various formats - on NAS drives, a Melco plus USB sticks etc. I choose my own music - a small part of which is stored on the Melco in the store. Both Apps have no problem finding those specific files.

MQA

Naim has no support for MQA or Roon but when I play Roberta Flack's MQA packed "Killing me softly" on the Naim, it is very harmonious and pure even though it is not an MQA unpacked file. But if I switch to AMBRE, it goes down an octave deeper and stays tighter in the mids. An excited Hi-hat on the right suddenly gets real, the specific sound of a Hi-hat. Roberta and her backing choir are being separated much further with space and placement being more effective.

This may be due to Roon working on the MQA file but that is at most only a part of the story. There can perhaps be a downside worth mentioning listening to AMBRE. You quickly hear what is happening on the virtual sound-stage, while with the Naim you surrender yourself more to the music. The AMBRE strangely provides an audible echo to the voices, the Naim software does not even want to show it.

While I rate the Naim as a Streamer very highly and can enjoy it with incredible pleasure, Roon and AMBRE overtake it. I continue with solo piano, Ola Gjello playing "Ubi charity". AMBRE creates a much larger distinction between the left and the right staging, made clear in load-bearing layers and clear highs, where each layer is spread out in space, placed high and in more pin-point positioning.

There is a good, almost real piano sound, pure, clear, realistic, especially very organic. In Naim mode, to take a minute, the view is smaller, there is much less distinction between the two channels, the presentation is more modest and simpler. Not nearly as beautiful or organic. Music is held between the loudspeakers, is less compelling and further away.

Bluray



I continue with a Blu-Ray ripped version of Adele's "Love song". On the Naim it plays as I am used to, having had many listening sessions in the past. The 'room' acoustics are present in the Royal Albert Hall, the stereo imaging showing depth with the audience, guitars sound clear and tight. The voice is so characteristic of Adèle. The lower notes build up with slight pressure. The Hammond organ is immediately recognizable. With AMBRE the hall stretches further back and the guitars are much more harmonious than before.

The echo from the room emerges, small sounds get their own place and identity. Low notes now carry the music and the Hammond organ demonstrates its distinctive feature - a wanderer of sound through space, where the notes seems to determine the place of the Hammond Europe Loudspeaker.

Adele sings purer than before, strings are more prominent. All music is freed from the Speakers, while the stereo image grows both in depth and in width. The presentation loses the Naim characteristics, it is very different to the famous Naim sauce - which can actually form a stumbling block for the real Naim fan. With Roon and AMBRE connected, they create a new way of listening to music, much more attention-seeking, more intense to experience and especially with beautiful music.

Jazz

The Bobo Stenson Trio plays the "Song of Ruth". With AMBRE this leads to the same piano reproduction as with Gjelto, big in the lower notes and more emphasis placed on the highs. Portrayed very well is the body of the sound and prolonged decay of notes. Percussion makes samba balls very recognizable, provides metal sounds to the cymbals, makes a snare drum spicy and the bass drum deep. The tension between the instruments has become tangible and the overriding bass becomes completely separated from the piano and percussion.

This brilliant recording has rarely sounded so beautiful to listen to. This is High Fidelity on the Honors Podium. Partly because the music is not only technically perfect but also as 100% of the music remains. In Naim mode it is all a few steps more common, less exciting, less rich in details and dynamics. Music and instruments are much more presented in a clump, in which nothing is missing and yet the experience has diminished, the reproduction becomes a bit more cluttered.

The bass sounds flatter, cymbals lack that real metal sound. No matter how nice the Naim, AMBRE gives an extra dimension to the music if the recording lends itself to that. Roon makes the presentation faster, more detailed and fascinating.

USA Sounds



In Naim mode, Lori Liebermann has a recognizable, slightly sharp voice, something that the B&W Diamond tweeters audibly contribute to. On "Last thing on my mind" the guitar is alive and plucks happily with her voice. The reproduction has an intimate atmosphere due to the small recording venue in which the voice is by far the most important. I get a bit of an idea that Lori is playing between sliding doors, although the doors are allowed to open a bit further to give her space. Via AMBRE the doors have opened up, the general sharpness is replaced by "s" and "t" sounds, while the voice is more natural and warmer.

Guitar still does not have a leading role but has become a full-fledged instrument. The voice is placed higher between the Speakers, the guitar stays at abdominal height. Voice and guitar become separated for the listener and Lori is at least a meter closer. I get the feeling I'm really present at a home concert. During the track I now appreciate the absence of the sharpness with her voice and she sound's warmer. This more closely approximates her human voice as I recognize it. Music is again organic and smooth to the ears. It remains a repetition switching to the much used "Fever" from Ray Charles and Natalie Cole.

The sound landscape is very different with AMBRE compared to the Naim, so I will not bother repeating all the aforementioned points. Let me just say that the Naim also plays these tracks very well. Even if it is that much smaller, simpler, more compressed. The songs still remain an experience with Naim streaming. I signed up for a set like this.

Charles breathes calm, Cole has female bite - Charles you feel on your skin. Yet they display AMBRE's points quickly, due to the much larger stereo image. Charles moves to the left, Cole stands prominently in the middle with more power in her voice, more intonation, richer in vocal sounds. The presentation wins with clarity, passion, emotion and atmosphere. Cole's voice is less like current female vocalists, it is clear and clear to understand. Plucked instruments are almost magically realistic.

I again choose Roon and AMBRE as the optimal system for Naim as DAC and amplifier driving the B&W Loudspeakers to an outstanding performance.

Addendum

These listening impressions are not about designating a winner, rather the intention is to indicate that the investment in a NUC for Roon Core software and the placement of an EndPoint such as the Metrum Acoustics AMBRE, creates the possibility to get the best out of Roon when starting out.

That I personally experience gains in presentation may not interest you at all, for Naim is often chosen for timbre, strong rhythm feelings and for music enjoyment. Roon affects the Naim sound, makes the presentation differ from what you are used to and requires more attention to the music.

For me, Roon and AMBRE drive the performance of the NAC 272N to a level that I have not heard previously. From Europa League to World Championship.

Still, marginal issues remain, you will have to get used to a new App with Roon, you miss some ease of use with the Naim App - that applies to all Naim devices ... and Internet radio is not available.

The opposite also applies - the added benefit of better presentation, the discovery of new music if you are a TIDAL subscriber, the historical information and the convenience of multi-room with Roon.

The AMBRE ? I heartily recommend it, what a wonder box.

Footnote :

We have now succeeded in playing Roon internet radio on the Ambre with excellent quality. This has previously been a problem for the world of Roon users.