

Focal + Naim: Aria 905 + UnitiLite

PAUL MESSENGER STEPS OUT OF HIS NORMAL 'HIGH END' COMFORT ZONE TO ASSESS SOME VERY AFFORDABLE 'BUDGET' UNITS FROM THE NAIM/FOCAL ALLIANCE



I don't think Naim's four *Uniti* genre components that have appeared over the last 5 or so years are really aimed at somebody in my situation. However, I've always regarded the role of the reviewer as an excellent opportunity for some self-education, so reckoned I was game enough to give this £1,995 *UnitiLite* a try, along with a £600 pair of partnering Focal *Aria 905* loudspeakers.

UnitiLite

The *UnitiLite* is a complete one-box hi-fi system. It combines numerous sources and capabilities, and at an under-£2,000 pricetag it's clearly primarily aimed at a younger and more computer literate generation of consumers than Naim's traditional audiophile constituency. One question that this review must therefore try to establish is whether (and to what extent) this has been achieved at the expense of

Naim's traditional sound quality values. Are the various *Uniti* models significantly 'dumbed down', or has Naim managed to maintain its core strengths?

Naturally enough tone controls remain entirely absent, but there's certainly no shortage of features elsewhere, so much so that the *UnitiLite* seems surprisingly un-Naim-like. It's defiantly digital in its range of inputs too – indeed, for a company that refused to fit its CD players with S/PDIF outputs for many years (on quality grounds), the *UnitiLite*'s four rear panel S/PDIF inputs, alongside just two analogue pairs, must represent a substantial change of heart.

The unit has a built-in drawer-loading CD drive, power amplification rated at 50W/channel, an FM/DAB/DAB+ radio module, Spotify Connect, internet radio, and a DAC capable of 24-bit/192kHz. It accepts Bluetooth signals, plus inputs from regular digital (S/PDIF, 2x electrical, 2x optical), network (Ethernet) and analogue sources (2), and supports all common formats (see specifications). The front panel has two 3.5mm jack sockets, one for driving headphones (and muting the speakers), the other providing easy access for analogue or (optical) digital signals. A USB socket is also fitted into the front, as is the CD loading drawer, a modest display and a cluster of nine operating buttons. It has a WiFi transmitter that can integrate with multi-room systems, and may be controlled either from a conventional remote handset (infra-red or wired), or via an App on iOS or Android devices. There's even a DIN pre-out socket for connecting it up to, say, your *NAP500* or triode (valve) power amps. The sole 'on/off' switch is on the rear panel.

That's quite a list by anyone's standards, never mind Naim's, and is a testament to just how much can be crammed into a compact slimline case, thanks to modern chips and surface-mount components. It's also a rather effective indicator to just how far hi-fi has had to evolve in order to suit the requirements of today's relatively youthful, computer-literate, smartphone-equipped, *iTunes*-downloading customer. Whatever, a familiar looking,

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thoroughly practical and slim 'bought in' handset gave comprehensive IR remote control over all the available functions. However, the unit did have a slight mechanical hum, which is certainly a source of mild criticism, and this was only partly due to the balanced mains outlet that was initially used.

Loudspeakers

Besides the *UnitiLite*, a pair of walnut-flanked Focal *Aria 905s* were delivered in order to make up a complete system. (This would indeed make a complete system by just adding some cables and a couple of speaker stands.) The *905* is the smallest model in the *Aria 900* range, which consists of five stereo pairs, and is positioned somewhat above the budget *Chorus 700*-series models. In fact both these Focal *arias* have stand-mounts with '05 and '06 designations, essentially distinguished by the volume of their enclosures and the diameter of their main drivers.

The styling of the two ranges is also quite similar overall, albeit differing somewhat in terms of detail. In particular, our *Aria 905* samples have a glass top surface, which is an attractive embellishment. Shaped and walnut-veneered side panels provide further decoration, while black leatherette covers the rest of a vertically oriented wrap.

The *Aria 905s* are clearly primarily intended to be used on their own dedicated speaker stands, and are normally fixed tightly to the (rather costly) *Aria 900* stands, using bolts fitted to the base of the speakers. Said stands were not in fact supplied, which was probably just as well (as I already have all manner of different stands all over the place; assembling new ones is a pain in the proverbials, and they're rarely collected after a review is finished). Logically (since the bolts couldn't be used unless they just happened to line up with holes in the top plates) I decided to go with existing 'known' stands (Kudos *S100s*), using beads of Blu-tack to hold the speakers in place. However, the latter damaged the leatherette when the

speakers were subsequently removed, so spikes would clearly have been the better option here. Given that Blu-tack is widely used as a coupling medium, and normally causes rather less damage than spikes, I do feel that this particular problem should be highlighted and emphasised in the instruction leaflet. (Maybe actually emblazoned as a warning on the outside of the packing carton!)

Stand matters aside, the *Aria 905s* might be the same size as *Chorus 705s*, but they cost around twice as much, so where does the extra money go? The glass top must account for a little, I daresay, but only a little (though it probably also helps the sound quality). The main benefits of the *Aria 905* lie in its new driver technology. The 5in bass/mid unit used here has a cone made largely from flax (0.4mm), sandwiched by 0.04mm sheets of glass fibre, which has low elasticity and hence high stiffness, as well as being quite easy to make consistently. The type-TNF tweeter has a characteristic inverted aluminium/magnesium alloy dome with Poron suspension, and a new horizontal waveguide.

Trying Them Out

I spent some time listening to the *UnitiLite*, and found myself quite won over by it, not because it can match the performance of my regular and relatively 'high end' Naim-based system, but because the economies do seem to have been very well judged. Despite its modest price, it manages to retain much of the charm and coherence of Naim's more upmarket gear, albeit without quite the same tautness of timing or degree of dynamic drama.

I also had sufficient time to lend the units to a local friend who is rather more familiar with hi-fi equipment at these sort of prices. He was full of enthusiasm when he brought them back, and had already decided he ought to purchase the complete system for his personal use. He did wonder whether the slightly larger *Aria 906* with its 6.5in main driver

Manufacturer's Specifications (UnitiLite)

Audio Outputs	Speakers L + R Preamplifier (4-pin DIN), Headphones (3.5mm stereo jack)
Preamp Output	775mV
Preamp Output Load	10kΩ min
Frequency Response	10Hz - 20 kHz ±0.1/0.5dB
Signal to Noise Ratio	82dB A-WTD ref 1W 8 Ω
Power Output	50W/8ohms, 75W/4ohms
Antenna Input	F type
Analogue Inputs	3.5mm front jack 2x RCA pairs
Analogue Input Sensitivity	275mV
Digital Inputs	5 x S/PDIF (2 x optical TosLink, 2 x coaxial, 1 x front panel 3.5mm mini-TosLink)
Analogue Input Overload	27dB (all inputs)
USB	Front. Power output: 1A max at 5V DC
Other Inputs	Ethernet
Remote Input	Rear panel, RC5
Upgrade Interface	Rear panel mini-USB
iRadio Service Provider	vTuner 5* full service
Audio Formats Supported	WAV and AIFF (up to 32bit/192kHz), FLAC (up to 24bit/192kHz), ALAC (up to 24bit/96kHz), WMA (up to 16bit/48kHz) must be WMA 9.2, Ogg Vorbis (up to 16bit/48kHz), MP3, M4a (up to 320kbit/s), Playlists (M3U, PLS),
Internet radio	AAC, Windows Media™ formatted content, MP3 streams, MMS, Ogg Vorbis
CD Compatibility	Red Book and CD-R
Supply Voltage	100V - 230V, 50/60Hz
Quiescent Consumption	20 Watts
Dimensions (WxHxD)	32x70x301mm
Weight	7.7kg
Finish	Black
Price	£1,995





Manufacturer's Specifications (Aria 905)

Type	Two-way bass reflex stand-mount
Drivers	130mm (5in) flax cone bass/midrange 25mm (1in) Al/Mg TNF inverted dome tweeter
Frequency response (±3dB)	60Hz – 28kHz
LF rolloff (-6dB)	52Hz
Sensitivity (2.83V/1m)	89dB
Impedance (nom/min)	8/4ohms
Rec. amp power	25-100W
Crossover frequency	2.5kHz
Size (WxHxD)	212x334x245mm
Weight	5.8kg
Price	£600

might have suited his room better, but when he made up a cardboard dummy to check its bulk, he (and his wife) opted for this smaller *Aria 905*.

I carried out my usual in-room measurements on the *905* and found it rather bass light and mid-forward when located out in free space, but discovered that it made a very good match when positioned quite close to a wall. Under the latter conditions it proved very well balanced overall, holding within ±3dB right across the audio band above 60Hz, with the exception of a slight peak at 230Hz. A (sensible) mild depression was seen around 3.2kHz, sensitivity was around 88dB, and the impedance stayed above 4.5ohms, while the 48Hz port tuning did slightly exaggerate our c50Hz room mode.

I spent some time listening to the *Aria 905s* on my regular 'high end' Naim-oriented system as well as *via* the *UnitiLite*, partly because these speakers really are very good indeed, and did a fine job of 'disappearing' in our listening room. There are limitations too of course – some more bass weight would naturally have been welcome, and dynamic expression is rather muted – but the basic balance is exceptionally good, and the ability to reproduce the quiet bits is very good too. Imaging is first class, with no identifiably audible effect of the wall proximity, and I have to point out that the little *Aria 905* makes the most of its near-miniature dimensions without involving too strong a compromise elsewhere. It is, in short, a very impressive compact speaker that's essentially musical and communicative without ever becoming in any way aggressive. It represents excellent value for money.

One can say much the same about the *UnitiLite*, which is certainly very capable and expressive, if perhaps a tad mid-oriented in sound quality. It does lack a little muscle and tautness low down in the bass region, and the very top end sounds a little restrained and lacking in delicacy and transparency, but I really shouldn't be trying to compare this little all-in-one unit with the far more costly (and rather less versatile) separates I normally use. This is, after all,

effectively a music centre 2015 style, and ought to be treated as such.

I can't claim to have tried every available option, but those that I have tried all seemed to work very well. Certainly all three radio options (FM, DAB and internet) seemed to function fine, as did the Bluetooth connection. UPnP also seemed to be working well, as it was happily playing decent quality and mostly very enjoyable music, but I've no idea what source or operating program it was using (I'm guessing it was working its way through a random selection from my *UnitiServe!*)

I have only two criticisms of the *UnitiLite*, and one of those is hardly its fault. Its mains transformer hums mechanically: OK, so it's at a low level and therefore tends only to be audible late at night, and I guess taking a little care over its location will also help to minimise audibility in the main listening zone, but it is a valid criticism nonetheless. I can't really blame the *UnitiLite* for the other point of criticism, but it is an infernally complicated device, thanks to its huge range of input options and the necessarily complex ergonomics that consequentially result, somewhat exacerbated by the relatively small display. (In some ways it reminded me of an AV receiver.) I can't say I ever really learned to master all of the controls, but I guess with a bit more time and practice all would become clear....

Conclusions

Both of these very capable and communicative components clearly deserve Best Buy ratings. They work together so well that it's difficult to choose between them, but if forced to rate one above the other I'd have to pick the little *Aria 905* as the absolute honey. The *UnitiLite* also unquestionably does the business, and every option that I tried seemed to function as intended. To have crammed all these capabilities within a compact slimline case is quite an achievement, so my hat is doffed to the designer(s), even though I might personally prefer a system which has rather less capability and more and larger boxes.

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