



Hero in a half shell

The world of audiophile digital music library storage is hotting up, as **Ed Selley** checks out this half-width starter server from Melco

Adding a music library server to your network to centralise all your digital audio files is becoming increasingly popular. Melco has been one of the leaders in this category with an extensive range of models spanning the £2,100 N1A/2 4TB HDD (HFC 424) and £4,300 N1ZH/2 6TB HDD (HFC 438) through to the flagship N1ZS/2A 2TB solid-state music server with 2TB SSD storage priced around £7,700. With prices for these components increasing, Melco has released the £1,800 N100 to provide a new first rung on its ladder. Despite its half-width dimensions the N100 is not a 'cut-down' version

of its full-size siblings. The entirely new server design uses a chassis that is closely related to Melco's recently released range of accessories – enabling it to be placed alongside an E100 external 3TB USB HDD or D100 USB CD drive (£1,000 each), and still only take up the same space as a full-width N1A/2. Internally, the N100 makes use of a single 2TB HDD. Compared with the more capacious models further up the range this might seem a little limited, but is still roughly equivalent to 4,000 CDs stored in a lossless format – although hi-res material will eat up capacity faster, of course. Melco has mounted this drive using its HS-S²

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Melco N100
ORIGIN
Japan
TYPE
2TB music server
WEIGHT
3kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
215 x 61 x 269mm
FEATURES
• Supports up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD512
• Connectivity: 2x Ethernet ports; 3x USB ports
DISTRIBUTOR
Kog Audio Ltd.
TELEPHONE
02477 220650
WEBSITE
melco-audio.com

(Highly Stable Storage) system that can be found in its flagship model and is designed to ensure the drive is unaffected by external forces. Format support is pretty much universal, thanks to compatibility with files up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD512. Other aspects of the N100 are also recognisable from previous Melco designs. The most significant is the pair of Ethernet ports at the back rather than the usual single option. The N100 connects to your router as normal, but instead of passing information back through it to your

The Melco N100 is quieter and gives music the space it needs to breathe

network player, it uses the second Ethernet port to make a dedicated connection with your player without any additional traffic to keep the signal as clean as possible. This is partnered with three USB ports. Two are extensions – one on the front and one on the back to support a backup drive like the E100 or D100 CD drive. The third is a dedicated audio output for feeding a USB DAC, which allows the N100 to

act as a streaming front end as well as a server. Until recently, this playback functionality was dependent on third-party apps, but the arrival of the N100 coincides with the release of Melco's Music HD control software and is backwards compatible with all other Melco models using the latest firmware. As with previous Melco models I've seen, the N100 feels exceptionally well assembled. The silver casework is finished to a very high standard and thanks to the absence of a cooling fan, it is completely silent at all times. A small display shows some useful information about the

CONNECTIONS



In one chassis Naim's Uniti Core (HFC 438) has the ripping facilities that the N100 needs the D100 CD drive to achieve. For the £2,800 price of the two Melco units, you could buy Naim's Uniti Core with a 4TB solid-state drive. The Melco's SongKong metadata system is superior and the USB DAC connection is more flexible than the coaxial connection fitted to the Naim, meaning that if you intend to use it with a DAC, the Melco N100 has the edge.

capacity, address and status of the N100 and sat next to the D100, the pairing looks and behaves like it belongs on a hi-fi rack rather than something you'll want to hide away. The catch for the matching D100 USB CD drive is that while it makes for an excellent stylistic partner, the resulting combination of units is rather costly when judged against some key rivals (see How It Compares, left). Melco's counter to this argument is that the N100 has enough of the attributes of its bigger brothers that the value calculation is not as clear cut as it might first appear. It uses the same software platform as its full-size models and, as I have mentioned in the past, devices like the N100 are designed to streamline an audio system that you are fundamentally already happy with, allowing it to more effectively demonstrate the sonic values you already enjoy.

Sound quality

Connected to a Naim Uniti Star one-box system (HFC 433) and running some tests alongside both an original N1A (HFC 397) and a standard Western Digital My Book HDD are informative. The N100 and N1A are extremely hard to separate in performance terms, but both allow for a 24/88.2 download of Dead Can Dance's *Black Sun* to sound a little cleaner and more refined than the Western Digital's output. The background noise floor that the music rises from feels quieter, adding to the dynamics and sense of space, which helps the Naim to sound big, confident and three-dimensional. Like other members of the Melco family, the other key strength of the N100 is the USB output. Connected to a Chord Electronics Hugo 2 DAC (HFC 428), the combination works well as a network streamer in its own right. Compared with playing files from my laptop, the Melco is quieter

and seems to enable music the space it needs to breathe, allowing the engaging character of the Hugo 2 to really excel. With some of the big integrated amps and preamps that are being fitted with a USB input, the N100 looks like a very sensible way of adding full network music streaming capability as the music library is stored on the N100 itself. The only slight disappointment is the control software. It's perfectly OK in use, but doesn't feel like it really moves the game on over third-party options and compared with Auralic's Aries G1 network transport (HFC 441) – which will act as its own server with a drive attached – it doesn't feel nearly as slick. The ripping performance with the D100 USB CD drive is impressive. The drive is quiet and smooth, and makes high-quality file rips of several CDs I try, including a very tired copy of *Experience* by The Prodigy which until now has proven rather difficult to extract a clean rip using any other hardware. It's unquestionably one of the more expensive CD drives I've seen, but as a pairing it makes pretty short work of a stack of CDs, while SongKong's music tagging software does an excellent job of applying accurate and durable metadata to the ripped files.

Conclusion

The N100 isn't a radical step forward over anything we have seen from Melco already, but it does bring the well-honed virtues of the brand to a more affordable price point. If you have a streaming setup that you are fundamentally happy with, the N100 music library is a great way of bringing audiophile sound quality to your digital files. With excellent stability and the elegant industrial design, it's a welcome arrival that looks set to attract those wanting to make the most of high-quality digital music playback.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Stability; high-quality playback; facilities; build
DISLIKE: Control app doesn't improve on third-party alternatives
WE SAY: A usefully compact music server that offers a strong overall performance

OVERALL ★★★★★