

Specifications

**Melco N10/N100
Digital music library**

Music formats
PCM to 384kHz/32bit,
DSD64/128/256/512

Connections
Ethernet from network,
dedicated Ethernet 'player' port,
3x USB-Type A

Control
Via front panel,
Melco Music app
or third-party remote control

Internal storage
Small form factor HDD,
3TB in N100, 2TB in N10

Accessories supplied
Dedicated 5-pin DC
power cable (N10),
power supply,
Ethernet and USB cables

Dimensions (WxHxD)
N10 head unit 215x61x269mm
power supply unit
215x61x273mm
N100 215x61x269mm

Prices
N10 £6750
N100 £1800

www.melco-audio.com

With the arrival – at last – of its own app, Melco has addressed some of those valued aspects of network systems, so whether it's right for you will be something of a philosophical question, akin to the old division between network music and the 'Mac and DAC' approach. It's just in this case the computer in question is one highly optimised for music playback, and now has an new interface making it a lot more like hi-fi- to better suit its intended position on the main equipment rack.

During the time I've had the Melco on-site, I've been fortunate to be able to use it with a variety of DACs, and amps with built-in digital-to-analogue conversion, ranging from the likes of the Chord Mojo all the way up to dCS's latest iteration of the Rossini DAC, taking DAC-toting amps including the ATC SIA2-100 also reviewed in this issue and Hegel's H390. And in every case I have been drawn to the same conclusion, which is that the N10 provides a blank canvas on which the DAC you choose can do its stuff: yes, there's a little more detail and definition than you'll get when using, say, a general purpose laptop into the converter in question, but it's of the 'final nuances' level of tuning rather than actually revelatory.

As an experiment, I also used the N10 into the digital input on the Naim ND555 I'm currently using as a network player reference, connecting it via the excellent Mutec MC-3+ USB smart clock interface,

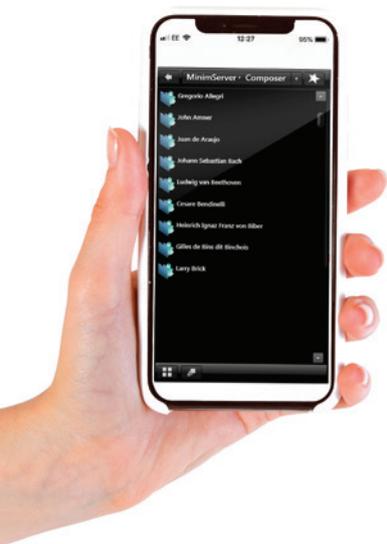
as well as trying the Naim against the Melco through the various amps with digital inputs I had to hand during the review period. Yes, clearly there are some variables here one would ideally like to rule out but, good though the N10 was in these various set-ups, I felt that while there was little in it between the ND555 alone and the N10/Mutec/ND555 chain, when using the Melco as a digital source and the Naim as an analogue one.

True, that's a well-known trait of the ND555, which shows all the Naim hallmarks of rhythmic acuity and close detailing, but with a new-found dose of weight and substance, and of course the price is double that of the Melco even before you've added suitable storage. However, there was nothing in the sound of the N10 used as a digital transport to have me abandoning my current set-up and taking an entirely new approach.

And if I were to start from scratch? Well, that might be a different matter, although I'd have to take a long hard look at the storage capacity available: the 3TB offered by the N10, though more than enough for many, would require some very severe pruning of my current library, although variants of the one-box N1 offer double that, and of course extra capacity can always be added via USB or network connection.

All of which leaves one truly compelling reason for exploring the Melco way of working with the music, as you can read below...

Melco's Intelligent Music Library



During the course of the review period, Melco provided me with a second machine: not only was the N100 the most affordable way into the company's world, at £1800 complete with 2TB of internal storage (and the review sample the first black unit to escape the clutches of the Japanese factory), it also came loaded with the Melco Intelligent Music Library, being rolled out across the range through ongoing firmware updates.

As well as developing the hardware for its products, Melco has long been working on the software involved in managing the content stored on them, this reflecting the change in thinking from purely network-based audio to that role as a USB music source for use straight into an external DAC. The Intelligent Music Library software is its latest, and most highly-developed attempt at tackling a subject well-known to anyone heavily involved in what's generally called 'computer music': the

handling of the metadata used to identify music files, and the way it's manipulated to allow browsing, searching and so on.

For many users, that can be a make or break: it's no use having a huge music library if you can't find what you want when you want to play it, and of course different users – and indeed various kinds of music – will place their own demands on the way music is tagged, and how listeners want to access it.

Bringing it all together

That last point is the major plank of the new software, which has been very much driven by Melco's UK guru Alan Ainslie, and brings together two leading third-party software solutions. JThink's Song Kong music tagger has been offered for a while by Melco, as a solution to enables users to 'fix' incorrect tagging automatically, while having special support for music server software including the excellent MinimServer.