Melco N1A High-Definition Digital Music Library

Doggone Good Value

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I wasn't familiar with Japanese manufacturer Melco, but it turns out it has been in business since 1975. Melco brand recognition should improve in the U.S. now that it's being represented in the States by The Sound Organisation, a well-established importer. Melco stands for Maki Engineering Laboratory Company, and its products are manufactured by Buffalo Technology of Japan.

Computer audio players such as Melco's N1A are fairly common nowadays, but the N1A has some interesting twists. First, unlike most other servers it does not require a computer to function. Second, it looks like a standard hi-fi component: Its black or silver chassis would be right at home on an audio equipment rack. Third, although it works on a home network, it stores music files internally on a 4TB hard-disk drive. In addition to being a network player with 4TB of storage, it is also an Ethernet streamer. Two dedicated USB ports are provided for backup and expansion drives, respectively. (You can also use the USB ports to connect backup drives.) Fourth, the N1A sells for $1999—hardly dirt-cheap, but not crazy expensive either. And these are just a few of the N1A's features. Not too bad for starts!

Like most computer audio players, the N1A plays PCM files up to 384kHz/32-bit, and DSD files up to DSD128. If your DAC isn't capable of DSD-over-USB playback, the NA1 will convert DSD to PCM on the fly when connected to a USB DAC but not when used as a network player unless you add a MimimServer.

Physically, the N1A is a rather plain design, comprising a black or silver box 17.2" by 2.8" by 13.9" and weighing 15.5 pounds. The N1A's feet are made of wood, a measure designed to limit susceptibility to vibration. As for its controls, on the front panel there's a large on-off button to the left, a menu window in the center, and four small buttons on the right for navigating menu set-up and status options. (On the black review unit, I needed a flashlight to read the small typeface on the buttons.) The front panel also has a USB 2.0 connector. On the rear panel, the connection options from left to right include three USB 3.0, two RJ-45, and an IEC for the power cord.

Melco doesn't offer a dedicated remote-control app for the N1A, but you can use a tablet or smartphone running Linn's free Kinsky or Audionet's Music Manager ($6.45). Melco has tested and approved these apps, but others may also work.

Setting Up and Using the N1A

The N1A comes with a printed Quick Setup Guide, and there's a downloadable, 55-page User Manual with further operational instructions. Unless you have a digital music player or a DAC with an Ethernet input, you'll use one of the three rear USB connections to connect the N1A to your digital source (USB 3 is recommended). In order to use the N1A with a remote-control app on a tablet or smartphone, you need a WiFi access point. If you already have a WiFi router as part of your home network as I do, just plug the N1A into the network. If you don't have a WiFi access point, it should be simple to add a router.

I used an Au24 SE USB cable to connect the N1A to the DAC and an Audience Au24 SE power cord. Once the N1A was connected, it appeared on the device list as "N1-079E: PS Audio USB Audio 2.0," where "N1-079E" was the name of my specific N1A and the "PS Audio" refers to my DAC. You'll need to use the full name when setting up the app for playback.

SPECS & PRICING

Supported file types: PCM, DSD, FLAC, AIFF, AIF
Sampling rates: PCM up to 384kHz/32-bit; DSD files up to DSD128
Connections: One USB 2.0 port (front), three USB 3.0 ports (rear)
Internal hard drive: 4TB
Power supply: AC 100–240 V 50/60Hz

Dimensions: 17.2" x 2.8" x 13.9"
Weight: 15.5 lbs.
Price: $1999

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I used Linn's Kinsky app on my iPad3 to control the N1A. (It includes a link to a website with instructions on how to use it—a rarity for remote-control apps.) The Kinsky app as implemented by Melco has some neat features, such as the ability to sort music files by file type. This enabled me to view only DSD files, for example, and to further sort them by sampling rate, so I could view only DSD64 or DSD128 files. It also has a valuable "By Folder" view of installed music files that lets you peruse the contents of the N1A's hard drive as they appear on a computer, rather than by album name or artist. I find that helpful in finding files for playback. Kinsky did not display the sampling rate of the file being played, however—a minor annoyance. The N1A, however, shows this information on its front-panel display.

Naturally, an essential part of getting started with a new server that has internal file storage is loading music files onto it. Fortunately, Melco's instructions for this process were clear and easy to follow. The N1A appeared as just another computer on my network, and I could easily access it from my desktop Windows computer. I just selected around 75GB of files on my hard drive, and transferred them by dragging and dropping them to the N1A's *share* folder (that already existed on its internal hard drive). After copying the files, I used front-panel commands on the N1A to update the drive's database, so the files would register on the remote app and could be played back. There are other ways to load files on the N1A's internal drive using commands on its front-panel menu. All listening tests were performed playing music files on the N1A's internal drive.

The review sample was supposed to have already been broken in, so I just played it around 50 hours to get used to it. Once the remote app was operating, the N1A played music back without a flaw. When a song was playing, its name scrolled across the display and was readable from my listening seat about ten feet from the equipment rack; this was useful. The N1A's front panel also displayed additional information, although in very tiny print. (I've added a small monocular to my hi-fi accessories, which I use specifically to read the tiny print on digital displays.)

Sound

While demonstrating the N1A to a visitor, I played Shelby Lynne's album *Just a Little Lovin'* [DSD64/DSF, Acoustic Sounds]. When we listened to the title track, the N1A portrayed Lynne's vocals with lots of detail overall, but although there was ample deep-bass energy, the low end seemed a bit sodden and lacking in resolution.

Moving to *über*-favorite selection "Folia: Rodrigo Martinez" from *La Folia 1490-1701* [ripped to AIFF format from CD Alia Vox AFA 9805], Jordi Savall and his band were depicted with considerable energy and verve, but here again, although the bass extended fairly deeply, the accustomed low-end detail was lacking. The percussion instruments, on the other hand, were reproduced with unusual clarity, so that they did not fade into a background clatter, as they often do with other sources. Although the soundstage extended from speaker to speaker, instruments weren't located with pinpoint accuracy. Savall's viola da gamba was portrayed slightly forward of its normal location, with richly depicted harmonics.

Having recently heard cellist Yo-Yo Ma perform the Dvořák B minor Cello Concerto in concert, I gave it an encore in my listening room, this time with cellist Steven Isserlis accompanied by Daniel Harding leading the Mahler Chamber Orchestra [96/24 AIF, Hyperion]. While in no way duplicating the actual performance, the recording was a welcome reminder of the live experience. Isserlis' cello was rich in timbre and the orchestra unusually realistic. The soundstage was wide and deep. In one section, a passage for the flute section seemed to stand out more than I'm accustomed to hearing, however.

The track "Miserere" from the Tallis Scholars' *Allegri's Miserere & Palestrina's Missa Papae Marcelli* [96/24 FLAC, Gimell] is a good test of soundstaging, since it has a choral group at the front and a small solo group behind them. The N1A spread the performers beyond the speakers, with a modicum of depth. The reverberant cues indicating that the solo group is located well behind the main group were fairly well reproduced, although I've heard very slightly more depth from other players.

The choral group played back without any evident distortion, so the singers sounded smooth yet easy to distinguish. Sometimes the choral group, especially the solo tenor, can sound a bit strained, but not with the N1A.

To see how the N1A performed with solo instrumental music, I tried Alex de Grassi's solo guitar on the album *Special Event 19* [DSD64/DSF, Blue Coast Records]. The cut "Shortening Bread" exhibited well-defined transients as the guitar strings were plucked. They didn't bludgeon my eardrums with unnatural sharpness, but sounded quite like real guitar strings. This well-recorded album displays a realistic blend of guitar body and strings, and the N1A captured it very naturally.

Comparison

Roon runs on a Windows or Macintosh, can use a tablet or another computer as a remote, and presents you with quite a lot of information as you play music files. For comparison with the N1A, I listened to these same computer audio tracks on my personal listening system. Here, my music files were stored on the NAS drive on my network and played back using Roon. A copy of RoonRemote on my Toshiba laptop served as the remote control. I used the same USB and network cables I had used for the N1A.

The bass in "Just a Little Lovin'" was better defined, with plenty of low-frequency energy. I heard none of the sodden characteristic I had heard from the N1A. Above the deep bass, Lynne's voice was smooth and expressive, and there was plenty of instrumental detail. Similarly, the bass in "Folia: Rodrigo Martinez" had better-defined transients, thus sounding like it normally does. Of course, because I usually use this equipment configuration for personal listening, it essentially is a reference that defines what "normal" is for me. Percussion instruments were not as prominent, although not at all suppressed.

The Dvořák cello concerto sounded very slightly darker, though still offering plenty of harmonic richness and detail. The tiny micro-dynamic variations that a musician employs for phrasing were well-defined, so the concerto was very expressive. In Allegri's "Miserere," the sense of separation of the solo group was quite well defined. There was just a very slight hardness to the main choral group I had not noticed before. It was only after listening to the N1A that it became obvious.

Roon's reproduction of "Shortening Bread" exhibited plenty of the bouncy energy that makes this piece such fun to listen to. Transient detail was just as well defined as it had been with the N1A. Both systems extracted the micro-dynamic detail of de Grassi's performance of this piece.

Bottom Line

There are a lot of dedicated servers on the market today. Although it's hardly inexpensive, at $1999, the N1A could be considered a reasonable choice, especially given its generous 4TB internal storage capacity. In contrast, Sony's similar-looking HAP-Z1ES offers only 1TB of internal storage, although it also includes a decent DAC in addition to a dedicated playback app.

The Melco N1A High Definition Music Library played all common file formats, and was easy to set up and use. Working in conjunction with Linn's Kinsky remote control app, it provided unusually flexible control over playback on the N1A's hard drive. Although I wouldn't describe it as audio jewelry, its refined conservative styling wouldn't be out of place in the fanciest systems. And its sound quality, especially its detail retrieval and wide soundstaging, was quite nice. At its price, it's a doggone good value, and easily recommended. **tas**