



HELP & ADVICE

If you decide to rip your entire CD library yourself make sure you use a good ripping program. Many audiophiles rate dBpoweramp ([dbpoweramp.com/cd-ripper.html](http://dbpoweramp.com/cd-ripper.html)). It will let you rip music to high-quality FLAC files, and add album art and metadata – automatically or manually. Another option is a special ripping box like Zoneripper or VortexBox, which will automatically rip your discs and then store them on its internal hard drive.

These really come into their own if you are planning on continuing to buy a large number of discs. If you own thousands of CDs, your easiest option might be to have a professional organisation do the work for you. Prices vary as do some of the options available in terms of formats, tagging and storage. If you have the budget it's the fastest option, but the prospect of sending your CD collection away via a courier can be a touch traumatic!

NETWORK COMPONENTS £700-£3,999

# Digital music essentials

sophisticated options for high-resolution music streaming, CD ripping and audiophile-grade network storage

**T**radition dictates that music is stored on physical media (cassette, vinyl, compact disc etc.) and if you don't own the music in question, you don't get to listen to it. But what if there was another way? What if it were possible to have all the music you could ever wish for at the tip of your fingertips, allowing you to pick and mix what you listen to? Network music components allow you to do just this, selecting music from a variety of sources – internet radio, streaming websites and music servers – and then piping it to your system so that it can be played out of your speakers just like it was a CD or a record.

The world of network music is a complex and at times highly confusing one with many different components to choose from and a variety of alternative routes to take, but in its simplest form it should provide you with access to high-resolution music and in some cases you can even pipe it around your home to different rooms so that you can listen to Jimi in the bath, Janis while doing the washing up in the kitchen or the Jacksons in the lounge.

## Pick and mix

With music streaming services on the up, there's a growing number of providers to can choose from, offering a wide choice of music and curated content that simply require you to pay a monthly subscription to get hi-res content. Check out *HFC* 414 for our roundup of the best services and be sure to take advantage of a free trial of a service to check it fulfils your needs before subscribing. Over the next few pages, we highlight the very best digital network components to bring your hi-fi setup bang up-to-date, and explain some of the basics to get you started.



## Cambridge CXN

PRICE € 1099,00

Featuring the company's newly abbreviated corporate identity shorn of the word 'Audio', the CXN isn't quite the flagship model in Cambridge's streaming family (that accolade goes to the Azur 851 range), but it comes pretty close. The CXN puts the multi into multi-talented acting as not only a streamer or network audio player, but also as a DAC and digital preamp. It has AirPlay, Spotify Connect (with a choice of wired or wireless network connection) and can be used with the Cambridge Audio BT100 aptX Bluetooth receiver (€99) for wireless streaming from smartphones, tablets and computers. It can handle content at up to 24-bit/192kHz over network connections or from USB storage devices via a type-A port.

## Sound quality

The CXN fulfils its promise of focusing on rhythm, timing and bass quality and sets itself apart from rivals with a tendency to play things safe in the quest for a less 'digital' presentation. It may upsample the digital signal (to 24/384) with typically finessed smoothness and refinement, but that doesn't stop it from kicking hard when required. Switch to something a bit more refined like a piano concerto and it still impresses with a convincingly open and natural soundstage.

**WE SAY:** A highly versatile network player with smart looks and a great sound at the right price



## Melco N1A

PRICE € 2200,00

The N1A is the more affordable of two bespoke NAS drives that have been designed from the ground up in order to provide the highest performance audio playback possible. And it does so in a way that's completely different to anyone else. Usually NAS drives have one Ethernet socket for hookup to a streamer, but the N1A has two. The idea being that by removing the need for the connection to be as fast as possible, it can concentrate on performing a single role over a quieter, less data-filled line. It's able to handle a massive variety of music file types including DSD and if that 4TB hard drive isn't enough for your collection, further storage can be added. Finally, a USB output allows the Melco to be hooked up to a USB DAC with no need for a driver to be installed.

## Sound quality

Moving across a variety of music types at a multitude of different bit-rates, the presentation is very slightly opened up so that it sounds less congested. Oddly, the complexity of music doesn't seem to make a great deal of difference to what the Melco does. Whether it's the pared-back simplicity of Jon Allen's *Deep River* or the crazy clatter of Aphex Twin's *Syro*, the sound remains natural and fluid. In short, if you like the way your system sounds, the N1A will keep those traits adding just a touch of refinement along the way. If you are serious about streaming, this is a fine one-stop solution to get the very best from your system.

**WE SAY:** This impressive 4TB NAS drive offers great functionality and a superb sonic performance

