

AUDIO FILE

Network-enabled media storage device
 Made by: Buffalo Technology, Japan
 Supplied by: Kog Audio Ltd, UK
 Telephone: 024 7722 0650
 Web: melco-audio.com; www.kogaudio.com
 Price: £1599



Melco N1A

Melco's £1600 'entry level' N1A music storage solution brings over much of the thinking behind the N1Z [HFN Feb '15], albeit with a simplified PSU and casework – nonetheless still sturdy and impeccably finished – and with the advantage of an expanded 4TB of hard drive storage.

Rather than feeding a network music player via a conventional network and switch/router arrangement, the Melco N1A is designed to sit downstream of your router just before the network player. And it has a direct Ethernet output to feed that player, plus a loop-through Ethernet input to allow Internet connectivity, and thus the likes of streaming radio and other online services.

It also has a USB socket to which a suitable DAC can be connected directly for music playback. This means that you could actually use the N1A to 'push' files into an outboard DAC and amplifier (For

'The revelation here was what the N1A can do as a USB source into a DAC'

more on this see PM's Opinion, HFN Aug '15, p103: with the Devialet Le 800 monoblocks he thought the results were 'blissful... with minuscule details revealed from vanishingly quiet backgrounds'.)

However, with this direct route you'll still need a connection to a Wi-Fi router – so you can use a tablet or smartphone on the same network to 'drive' the Melco via

third party UPnP control point apps including Audionet Music Manager, Kinsky or Lightning DS.

In addition to playing music stored on the N1A itself, this Melco+DAC set-up will also play other music in shared folders on the same network, with whichever app you choose. Pre-installed media server software is the DSD-compatible Twonky Media Server 7.

The Melco, which uses a single switch mode supply, has rapid power-up and shutdown from a front panel button, and protection against accidental power-off.

No computer is needed to set the N1A up, and content can be copied to and from it using the USB ports to the rear, one of which is dedicated to expanding the amount of storage with the addition of an external USB drive.

FOCUSED AND CLEAN

If you're going to use this server straight into a DAC then it's definitely an effective, if still rather expensive, improvement over a direct computer connection, but for us this jury is still out on how sensible a buy the N1A would be for use with a network player.

The differences we could discern between our well-sorted networking solution and the optimised Melco way were not really compelling, although things slotted into place when the USB output of the N1A was used directly into a DAC.

However, with the Melco directly connected to a Naim NDS network player, the bass was firm with good rhythmic definition, while

ABOVE: The OLED panel and navigation buttons allow the Melco to be set up and customised: the display can be switched off, and power on/off executes quickly. The front port is USB 2.0 with USB 3.0 at the rear

the spaciousness of recordings made in churches and concert-halls was revealed. Even with a release such as Blur's *The Magic Whip* [Parlophone] in good old CD resolution, the dense layering of the recording opened up and revealed its strands effectively. And with a high-quality DSD release, the San Francisco Symphony's Mahler Symphony No 5 [SFS Media], the *Scherzo* had sparkle and vivid instrumental textures – especially in the brass – when things were done the Melco way.

However, the real revelation here was what the N1A can do when used as a source straight into a DAC connected to its USB output. With a Marantz HD-DAC 1 headphone amp [HFN Apr '15], the direct connection from Melco to DAC provided noticeably more focus and an overall sense of a cleaner sound when compared to using the DAC with our MacBook Air. The effect was especially striking with the MacBook running on mains power, and slightly less so when left running on its battery power.

VERDICT

The N1A's advantage is very dependent on the quality of your home network – if this is constantly battered by numerous connected devices then the Melco will prove an audiophile godsend. Similarly, used as a USB source in place of PC or Mac, the N1A typically offers a palpably superior sound. ☺

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

A-wtd S/N Ratio (Chord Hugo)	105.0psec (91.5psec via PC/USB)
A-wtd S/N Ratio (Oppo HA-2)	106.9psec (96.6psec via PC/USB)
Digital jitter (Chord Hugo)	7psec (18psec via PC/USB)
Digital jitter (Oppo HA-2)	60psec (97psec via PC/USB)
Power consumption	17W
Dimensions (WHD) Weight	436x70x352 mm 7kg