

FIRST TESTS

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EXCLUSIVE

If this is the future of hi-fi, count us in

NAD D 3020 Integrated stereo amp | £400

Few hi-fi products truly deserve to be called legendary: NAD's original 3020 amplifier is one of them. Thirty-five years ago this unassuming budget amp set the hi-fi world alight. At a time when most rivals were putting tech-specs and low distortion figures above all else, the 3020 put real-world sonic performance first. NAD is hoping to recapture that spirit with the new D 3020. In the original 3020's day a phono stage was vital, but this model shows its forward-looking credentials by including a DAC and aptX Bluetooth instead. The latter opens up the amp for use with laptops, smartphones and tablets.

The built-in DAC is decently equipped. It accepts data streams of up to 24-bit/96kHz through its asynchronous USB, coaxial and twin optical inputs. The D 3020 also has two analogue inputs: a stereo RCA connection and a 3.5mm jack that also doubles as an optical input. Phono stage? Times have changed; if you want one you'll have to buy an external unit.

Quirky (and useful) design

Build quality is really good on the whole. The amp can be used upright (how we like it) or laid flat (but we think the fixed display looks a little odd on its side). Note that the amp will rock a bit when upright if you don't stick on the supplied feet.

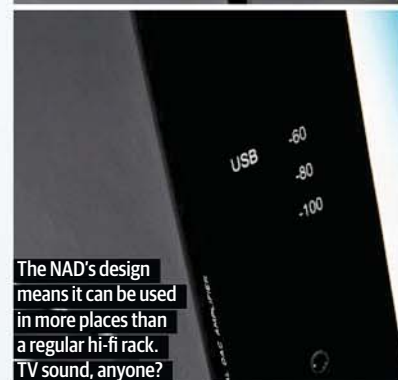
The D 3020 looks at home next to a desktop computer, where its carefully developed headphone output pays dividends. But equally, it could fit unobtrusively on a TV stand to deliver stereo sound from a satellite box, say, into a set of speakers. It fits on a traditional hi-fi rack too, of course, but the point here is that this amp's size and shape allows a great deal of freedom in use.

High-tech components

Take a look inside and you'll find Class D amp circuitry, which makes perfect sense for its low power consumption and low heat output. The compact switch-mode power supply helps everything fit into the D 3020's compact casing, too.

Class D technology and switch-mode power supplies are controversial in hi-fi circles. Some brands, such as Chord and Linn, have managed to get good results, but some designers still say both technologies have some way to go before they can challenge more traditional alternatives when it comes to sound quality.

Improvements are coming in leaps and bounds, though. The Class D circuitry used in the D 3020 is claimed to sound more consistent across a range of speakers (traditionally a Class D weakness) and produce less distortion than rival designs.



The NAD's design means it can be used in more places than a regular hi-fi rack. TV sound, anyone?

Should you bother with Bluetooth?

Bluetooth has always been about convenience over sound, which is why hi-fi enthusiasts have never valued it as a connection. But its inclusion in mass-market kit is vital.

Many people store music on their laptops, smartphones and tablets and Bluetooth is arguably the most convenient way to access that data. By including Bluetooth here, NAD has made an inclusive product that finds uses where traditional alternatives wouldn't. Of course, NAD, being NAD, has gone for the higher quality aptX Bluetooth. This provides a much better sound than standard Bluetooth (but it still isn't as good as a wired connection).

However, the D 3020's sonic character is the same when using Bluetooth as when it's wired. The amplifier's innate smoothness makes even low data-rate music streams sound listenable, and we like the warmth and weight the amplifier delivers.



WorldMags.net
Its 4K image is massively detailed, as expected, and it's stable with motion too

Samsung UE65F9000, p14

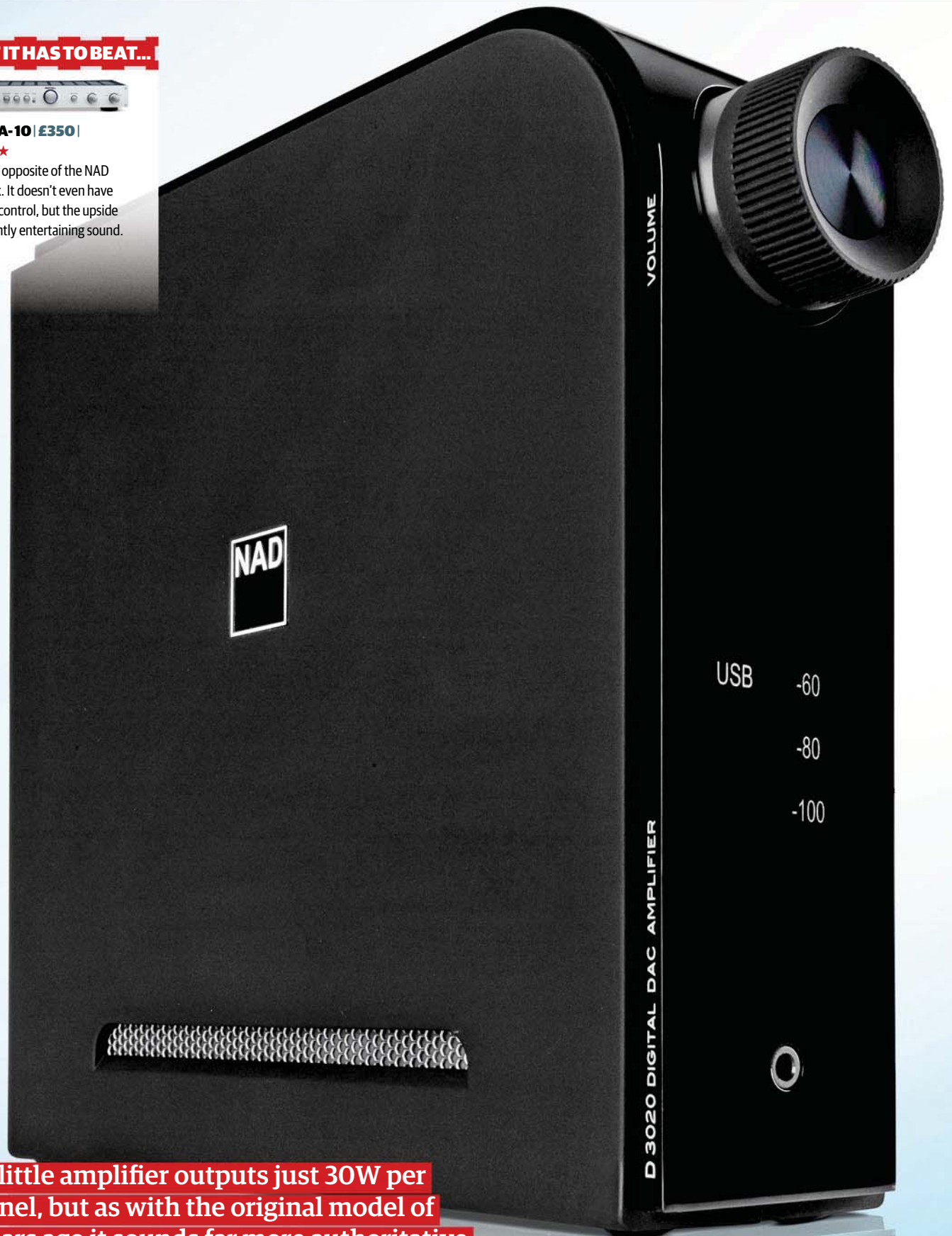
WHAT IT HAS TO BEAT...



Rotel RA-10 | £350 |

★★★★★

The exact opposite of the NAD in outlook. It doesn't even have a remote control, but the upside is a brilliantly entertaining sound.



This little amplifier outputs just 30W per channel, but as with the original model of 35 years ago it sounds far more authoritative than that modest figure suggests

NAD D 3020: round the back

1 Bass performance tweaks

NAD recognises that an amplifier of this type is likely to be used with some pretty small speakers. Bass power and weight are likely to be issues. That's where this relatively subtle-acting Bass EQ feature and subwoofer output come in.

2 Dual-purpose socketry

The D 3020's limited rear-panel space has forced NAD to think laterally. Here the company has used a 3.5mm socket as both an analogue and digital optical input.



So has NAD done enough when it comes to sound? In short, yes. This little amp outputs just 30W per channel, but as with the original it sounds far more authoritative than that modest figure suggests.

Our first impression of a smooth and solid sound stayed with us throughout the test period. This balance makes the D 3020 surprisingly forgiving of poor recordings. Even a 192kbps recording of Eminem's *Mockingbird* (through our MacBook Pro's USB output) was listenable, despite it having what we know to be a thin, hard sound. Just as importantly, the NAD keeps the track enjoyable, displaying plenty of finesse and a firm sense of grip on rhythm.

Move up to 24-bit/96kHz material in the form of Kate Bush's *Among Angels* and the NAD responds with plenty of detail, a nice

In pure sound quality our vote would go to the Rotel. When it comes to detail, rhythmic drive and dynamic subtlety it's a clear winner. But is that a knock out blow to the NAD's case? We don't think so.

The NAD is musically satisfying. It works well with a wide range of music and kit, and while it might not be as capable as the Rotel in pure sonic terms, the standard it reaches is still very good. And when you consider its size and shape (which give it access to situations where traditional amps wouldn't even get a look in), not to mention that spec-sheet, NAD is on to a winner.

That built-in DAC is as capable as many talented £200 stand-alone units we've heard, and a good Bluetooth receiver costs around half that again. If the D 3020 represents the future of hi-fi, count us in.

The NAD is musically satisfying, it works with a wide range of genres and equipment, and that futuristic spec-sheet is a real winner

sense of delicacy and the kind of top-to-bottom cohesion even the very best at this price would struggle to better.

The analogue inputs sounds just as good. It doesn't matter whether you listen to Kanye West's aggressive *Yeezus* or Hans Zimmer's wonderfully delicate *Earth* from the *Gladiator* OST, this little amp comes up trumps. It has the muscle, precision and delicacy to make all types of music work.

Most people will look at the price tag and point to Rotel's £350 RA-10 as one of the NAD's main rivals, and in some ways it is.

Rating ★★★★★

FOR Smooth, solid and punchy sound; forward-looking features; adventurous, versatile design
AGAINST Erratic controls

VERDICT A potential game changer. We hope other manufacturers take a brave-pill and produce amplifiers as innovative as this

TECH SPECS

Type Integrated stereo amp • **Claimed output** 30W per channel • **Inputs** Line level x 2, asynchronous USB, optical x 2, digital coaxial • **Outputs** Speakers, headphones, subwoofer • **DAC** Yes • **Bluetooth** Yes (higher-quality aptX version) • **Tone controls** No • **Remote control** Yes • **Finishes** 1 • **Dimensions** 19 x 6 x 22

SYSTEM BUILDER

Perfect partners for the NAD D 3020



DIGITAL SOURCE

Apple MacBook Pro, from £1000

Any computer with (preferably) high quality music files will do. The NAD will make the most of things even with low-bitrate music.



PHONO STAGE

Rega Fono Mini A2D, £85

★★★★★

The NAD doesn't include a phono stage. This affordable one from Rega sounds great and works well with the D 3020.



STEREO SPEAKERS

Wharfedale Diamond 121, £230

★★★★★

The D 3020's smooth, solid sound will work well with what are arguably the most insightful standmounters below £300.

Total build £1715

REVIEWER'S NOTES... 5 THINGS ABOUT THE NAD D 3020

1 Take the D 3020 out of the box. Nice packaging, NAD! We like the amplifier's small size but some of the team don't get on with the appearance. More than one person likens it to a projector.

2 We prefer the amplifier when used upright but notice that it wobbles. We're worried about this until we spot some stick-on feet in the packaging. Once the feet go on the amplifier feels stable.

3 The NAD sounds pretty good when listening from cold, but given a couple of days' use the sound opens up noticeably. Timing improves too, as does outright transparency.

4 We try everything from a Sony Xperia S smartphone via Bluetooth to our high-quality reference Naim NDS streamer for the coaxial and analogue inputs. The NAD sounds good across the board.

5 Time to try the headphone socket. It's clear that NAD has put a good deal of effort in here. The sound mirrors that through the main speaker outputs, which isn't always the case with these things.