

Here To Serve

Melco's award-winning N1A hi-fi network music storage device has been upgraded to Mk2 status - Jon Myles likes what he hears.

In these days of digital downloads, CD rips, digitised copies of vinyl collections and music held on USB sticks (of which I have more than is particularly sensible), the problem of where to store all this music is becoming more important.

Yes, you can collect them all and transfer to a network attached storage (NAS) device to be relayed via a streaming device to your system. But good as this is, the majority of NAS drives (especially those costing around the £100 mark) are not strictly hi-fi – built instead to house all sorts of things including movies, pictures, PDFs and just about any other digital file you can think of.

So enter Melco, producers of high-quality storage devices specifically designed to store and replay music to your system via a network player/streamer/DAC. I reviewed the

original entry-level N1A model two years ago (*Hi-Fi World*, March 2015 issue) and was impressed by its detail, resolution and flexibility.

Now the company has updated the unit to Mk2 status with a number of significant upgrades all aimed at improving what was already impressive sound quality.

First off, storage capacity has been increased with two 3TB Western Digital Blue hard drive disks on board – which can be used for 6TB of total storage or mirrored in a Raid array where one drive acts as a back-up so in the case of failure your music files are not lost.

Other improvements

include the addition of native DSD support, improvements to front panel OLED display, a dedicated capacitor bank for the power supply to help reduce noise, as well as upgraded circuit boards and wiring. Melco has also partnered with developer SongKong to offer its music tagging service to buyers (see separate panel for more details).

Housed in a standard-sized case, apart from the display window the front panel also includes a USB 3.0 port for importing files, as well as



The Melco's display can show song titles plus artist and sample rate of the file.



four buttons to control playback. There's no dedicated app for smartphones or tablet devices at present but the likes of PlugPlayer which do the job is so desired.

All the outputs are situated on the rear for output in digital form either via a dedicated USB port to a DAC or an ethernet connection to a network player. A separate ethernet connection allows the Melco to be connected to a network router, switch or hub. Three other USB ports allow importing music from external USB storage, adding additional storage devices should that 6TB capacity not be enough and adding a back-up device if you require (something I'd definitely recommend if you don't use the Melco's Raid facility).

The pre-installed media server means there's no need to involve a computer in the playback process unless you absolutely want to. Also - for those who are still wary of having a hi-fi component sharing the same network as their computers - the Melco can be switched to Direct mode meaning it simply acts as a music library.

Set-up was easy and simple, the Melco outputting music to our Oppo BDP-105D Universal player within a matter of minutes from unboxing. Importing a variety of high-resolution tracks from the front panel USB connection was also quick and painless, navigating a menu tree



The new Melco N1A Mk2 includes two 3TB Western Digital hard disks. Other upgrades include a dedicated capacitor bank for the power supply (bottom left).

possessing smooth responsiveness to all actions.

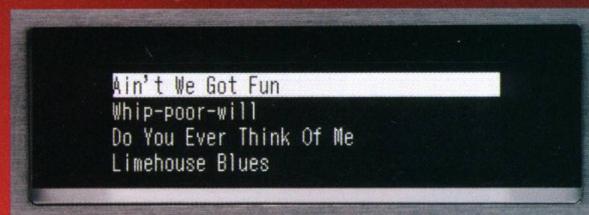
SOUND QUALITY

The original Melco N1A was probably the best network attached music library I'd heard – definitely a step-change in quality from any ordinary NAS drive.

This upgraded model adds functionality and improves on the sound quality in subtle ways. The internal changes have brought a greater element of detail to the

sound - allowing an extra insight into recordings. It's crisp, refined and ultimately extremely smooth.

With The Allegri Quartet's



Individual track lists can be displayed on the front panel.



SONGKONG FOR MELCO

SongKong for Melco is a powerful software tool designed to make tagging digital music files with metadata (song, album, composer, artist etc) as well as adding album artwork as easy as possible.

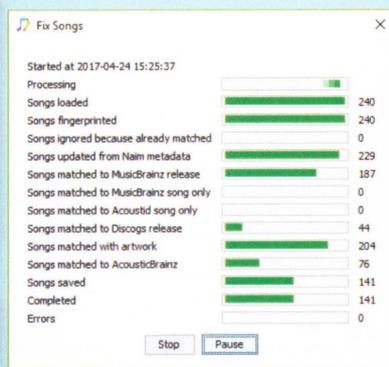
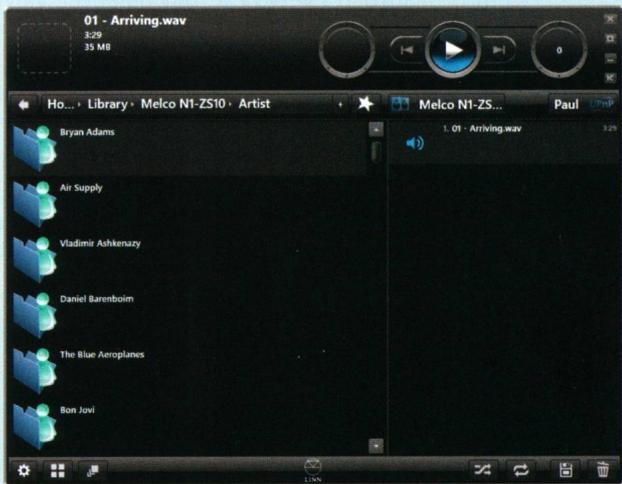
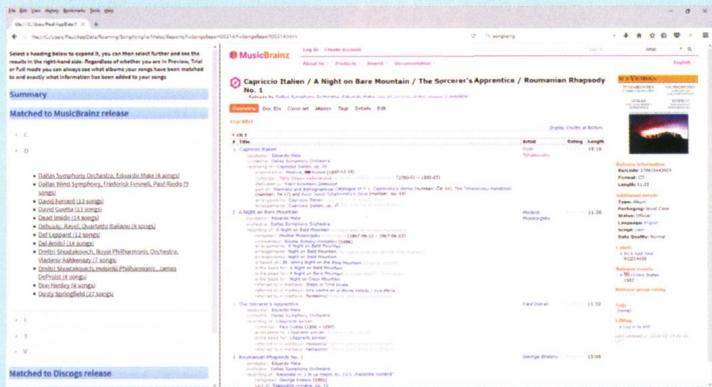
Anyone who has thousands of files stored will know how difficult it is to keep this consistent.

Basically, the programme takes samples of each song and then uses these to match it to an on-line database using information from MusicBrainz and Discogs – downloading and filling in all the relevant information automatically. It will even look for duplicate songs in a library and give the option to delete them if wanted.

Special attention has also been paid to Classical music – with SongKong capturing information such as composer, conductor, performers and even Movement numbers where appropriate.

The programme produces a list of all updated files – while users can also individually edit the metadata if required.

SongKong works on both Mac and PC and costs £40 when bought with a Melco device. For more information visit www.jthink.net/songkong.



SongKong will create metadata for all albums (see left) and also allow you to examine all music files stored on the Melco.

'String Quartet's By Alec Roth' the Melco managed to strip away any semblance of digital nastiness, letting the syncopated string parts flow with a natural ease. The changes in the rhythmic interplay between the strings was more lifelike and focussed than ever.

Acoustic instruments especially had more body, Charles Mingus's double bass coming over as big, bold and bouncy while Keith Jarrett's piano on 'The Koln Concert' (24/96) was vividly resonant. His mutterings as he pound the keys in the more



The rear panel of the Melco has dedicated RJ45 sockets for attaching to a home network and player, as well as a USB out (far left) for connecting to an external DAC. In the centre are the USB sockets for importing music, adding additional storage or backing up files.

up-tempo parts of this recording were also easier to decipher, no longer being just background noise.

It's not just acoustic instruments that benefit, though. The swelling synthesiser parts on New Order's 'Age Of Consent' expanded majestically above Peter Hook's bass lines, flooding into the room from our Martin Logan ESL-X hybrid

electrostatic loudspeakers.

There was a similar sense of scale and outright resolution no matter what music I played – one that you won't get from other storage devices.

As such the new Melco N1A Mk2 is probably the best way to store your digital files in one easy place. Admittedly, at £2099 the Melco is a fair bit dearer than most NAS drives you can buy – but it justifies its price in terms of sound and performance.

CONCLUSION

The new Melco improves on what was already a fine product with easier operation and improved sound quality. A great product gets better then.



Choose your albums from the front panel of the Melco. Just press play to cue all selections.

MELCO N1A MK2 £2099



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best.

VERDICT

A powerful, audiophile network music server which really does get the best out high-resolution stored digital music files. Sets the standard at this price level.

FOR

- large storage
- easy operation
- clean, powerful sound

AGAINST

- nothing at the price

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