

from the
test bench

HIGH PERFORMANCE \$\$\$ – \$\$\$\$

NAD Masters Series M15 Pre/Pro, M25 Amplifier, and M55 Universal Disc Player

They want to take you higher.



BY STEVE GUTTENBERG

The component that put NAD on the map in the mid 1970s—the 3020 integrated stereo amplifier—didn't look like a giant killer. Finished in an indeterminate shade of grayish-brown and devoid of gee-whiz features, the 3020 nevertheless became one of the best-selling audiophile amplifiers of all time—and not just because it sounded better than anything going

for two or three times its humble MSRP. The 3020 had that special something that made it, well, lovable. Over the decades, the engineers squeezed a bit of the 3020's magic into every NAD product, but they've pulled out all the stops with the new Masters Series components. They had to, as the ultimate NADs are competing with the likes of Anthem, Arcam, B&K, and Rotel. They're playing with the big boys now.

The Masters Series M15 pre/pro, M25 seven-channel power amp, and M55 DVD/SACD player's handsome good looks are a radical upgrade from NAD's usual plain-wrapper aesthetic. The new models' subtly sculpted steel-aluminum and zinc chassis inspires confidence, and their top panels' inset perforated metal grilles are a distinctive design motif. The beautifully finished components exude class.

Masters and Commander

I immediately fell for the M15's clean ergonomic design; it's a lot less intimidating than a typical surround processor. Setup navigation was straightforward, and I liked that the M15 lets you hide unused inputs so only the remaining inputs are active. You won't waste time searching for your sound. The connectivity suite includes switching capabilities for two HDMI sources, say an HD cable box and maybe a Blu-ray player. This is great, but be aware that the HDMI switching is for video only—you still have to hook up digital audio cables. If you've opted for the matching Masters Series M55 universal player, you'll have to wrangle six analog cables, as well, to hear high-rez audio from DVD-Audio and SACD discs.

You can fine-tune the sound with the M15's bass and treble

controls, and the Center Dialog control can tweak your center speaker's tonal balance to more closely match the front left and right speakers. Anyone considering a multiroom installation will appreciate the M15's AMX and Crestron compatibility, 12-volt triggers, and neat little second-zone remote control.

While the M15 offers adjustable lip-sync delay to match sound with tardy video displays, you can't store the delay setting in the M15's memory. Since most folks probably won't use the delay, that's not that big of a deal. If you do want to use it, you'll have to reset the delay every time you turn on the M15.



Stream Digital signals to conventional PCM digital. NAD's purist approach delivers the very best sound from SACDs. It's also worth noting that the player has separate bass-management paths for DVD-Audio and SACD playback to maintain the utmost quality. On the video side, the M55 offers Faroudja DCDi upconversion to 480p, 720p, and 1080i resolutions over HDMI and component outputs. All of the video outputs are always active, ready

to send video to a second zone. One nitpick: The M15 mutes DVD sound for a couple of seconds when the M55 changes chapters.

The M15 and M55's slick-looking remotes are fairly well laid out and comfortable, but only the M15's is backlit. The M15's provides direct access to the center, surround, and subwoofer volume levels, so it's easy to tweak the balances when you're changing discs. There is also a USB connector for possible future upgrades.

◀ The M15's backlit remote provides direct access to the volume levels for the center, surrounds, and subwoofer. You also get a small remote for a second zone.

AT A GLANCE NAD M15 PRE/PRO



CONNECTIONS

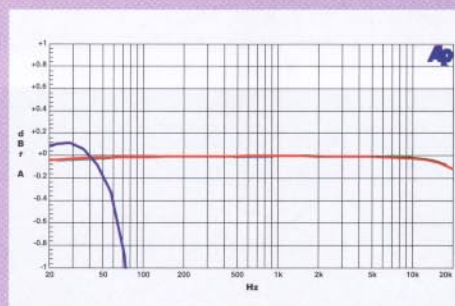
- Inputs:**
Video: HDMI (2), component video (3), S-video (6), composite video (6)
Audio: coaxial digital (4), optical digital (4), 7.1-channel analog (1), stereo analog, RCA (10)
- Outputs:**
Video: HDMI (1), component video (2), S-video (2), composite video (2)
Audio: coaxial digital (2), optical digital (2), stereo analog (3), 7.1 channel preamp-RCA (1), second subwoofer output (1)
- Additional:** RS-232 (1), 12-volt triggers (4), IR outputs (2), IR input (1)

FEATURES

- Processing Modes:** Dolby: Digital 5.1, EX, Pro Logic IIx; DTS: DTS, ES, 96/24, Neo:6 Yes, Ultra2
- THX Certification:** Yes, Ultra2
- Audio D/A Converter:** 24-bit/192-kilohertz
- Dimensions (H x W x D, inches):** 5.24 x 17.1 x 13.98
- Weight (pounds):** 29.3
- Price:** \$2,999

These listings are based on the manufacturer's stated specs; the HT Labs box below indicates the gear's performance on our test bench.

HT Labs Measures: NAD M15 Pre/Pro



• Analog frequency response in Stereo mode:
 -0.36 dB at 10 Hz; -0.12 dB at 20 Hz
 -0.07 dB at 20 kHz; -57.74 dB at 50 kHz

• Analog frequency response with signal processing:
 -0.36 dB at 10 Hz; -0.12 dB at 20 Hz
 -0.07 dB at 20 kHz; -58.08 dB at 50 kHz

The above chart shows the frequency response of the left (aqua), center (green), LFE (blue), and left surround (red) channels at the preamp outputs of the Dolby Digital decoder. The left channel measures -0.03 decibels at 20 hertz and -0.11 dB at 20 kilohertz. The center channel measures -0.04 dB at 20 Hz and -0.07 dB at 20 kHz, and the left surround channel measures -0.03 dB at 20 Hz and -0.11 dB at 20 kHz. The LFE channel, normalized to the level at 40 Hz, is +0.11 dB at 20 Hz, reaches the upper -3-dB point at 96 Hz, and reaches the upper -6-dB point at 117 Hz.

Response from the multichannel input to the main output measures -0.16 dB at 10 Hz, -0.04 dB at 20 Hz, -0.03 dB at 20 kHz, and -0.24 dB at 50 kHz. The analog THD+N is less than 0.021% at 1 kHz with a 100-millivolt input and the volume control set to +2.0. Crosstalk with a 100-mV input was -95.13 dB left to right and -95.71 dB right to left. The signal-to-noise ratio with a 100-mV input from 10 Hz to 24 kHz with "A" weighting was -121.07 dB. —MJP

Plays All Kinds

The M55 player spins DVDs, CDs, DVD-Audio, and SACD discs. While the latter two formats haven't broken through to the mainstream in any significant way, new discs are still coming out. The soon-to-be-released Doors boxed set will sport DVD-Audio-encoded DualDiscs, a bunch of Moody Blues titles are now available on SACD, and audiophile labels like Telarc and Chesky Records continue to release new SACDs. This reminds me: The M55 is one of the few universal players that doesn't convert SACD's native Direct

Quiet Power

The M25 is rated as a 160-watt (times seven channels) power

amplifier, but it feels and sounds more powerful. I reckon NAD's PowerDrive circuitry is responsible

HIGHLIGHTS

- The Masters Series has NAD's best-ever components
- Looks, feels, and sounds like more expensive gear

AT A GLANCE NAD M25 AMPLIFIER



FEATURES

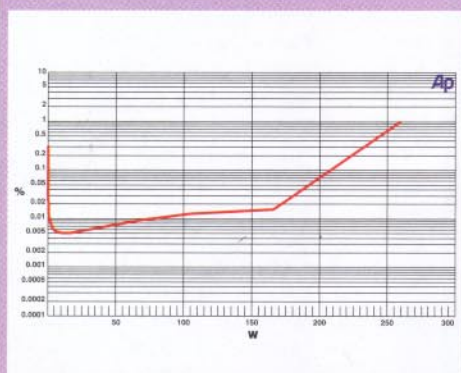
- Number of Channels: 7
- Power Rating (watts per channel): 160 into 4 or 8 ohms, specified between 20 Hz and 20 kHz
- Frequency Response: -3 dB from 3 Hz to 70 kHz
- Dimensions (H x W x D, inches): 7.9 x 17.2 x 18.4
- Weight (pounds): 96.3
- Price: \$2,999

These listings are based on the manufacturer's stated specs; the HT Labs box below indicates the gear's performance on our test bench.

CONNECTIONS

- Inputs: RCA (7)
- Outputs: Five-way binding posts (7 pair)
- Additional: 12-volt trigger (1)

HT Labs Measures: NAD M25 Amplifier



- Frequency response:
 - 0.23 dB at 10 Hz; -0.07 dB at 20 Hz
 - 0.19 dB at 20 kHz; -1.09 dB at 50 kHz

This graph shows that the M25's left amplifier channel, with two channels driving 8-ohm loads, reaches 0.1% distortion at 207.7 watts and 1% distortion at 259.5 watts. Into 4 ohms, the amplifier reaches 0.1% distortion at 394.3 watts and 1% distortion at 484.6 watts. An input level of 98.30 millivolts was required to produce an output of 2.83 volts into an 8-ohm load with the level controls set to maximum, indicating an overall gain of +29.18 decibels.

THD+N from the amplifier was less than 0.002% at 1 kHz when driving 2.83 volts into an 8-ohm load. Crosstalk at 1 kHz driving 2.83 volts into an 8-ohm load was -109.73 dB left to right and -104.01 dB right to left. The signal-to-noise ratio with 2.83 volts driving an 8-ohm load from 10 Hz to 24 kHz with "A" weighting was -112.67 dBrA. —MJP

- All channels driven continuously into 8-ohm loads:
 - 0.1% distortion at 194.3 watts
 - 1% distortion at 230.7 watts

for that, because it can nearly double the output power on a short-term dynamic basis.

The M25 amplifier's three large cooling fans are thermostatically controlled—they only run as fast as they need to. And here's the really cool part: The fans shut down during quiet passages, so you will never hear any fan noise from the M25. Plus, no matter how much I cranked the sound, the fans were always dead quiet.

I had the M25 sitting on the floor next to my right speaker and found the amp's bright blue LEDs to be somewhat distracting during movie watching. I checked, and there isn't any way to turn off or dim the eight LEDs.

Soul Asylum

The Masters Series components produce a sound you can luxuriate

NAD M15 PRE/PRO, M25 AMPLIFIER, AND M55 UNIVERSAL DISC PLAYER

OVERALL RATING

Build Quality	Value	Features	Performance	Ergonomics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → The machined alloy chassis exude high-end class → The seven-channel amp has fully discrete amp modules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → I don't know how NAD did it, but their Masters Series components look and feel like much more expensive gear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → The M15 features HDMI switching → Even with three cooling fans, the M25 power amplifier is quiet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Don't let the NADs' mellow demeanor fool you; the sound is wonderfully transparent → Bass is big, weighty, and remarkably visceral 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → The M15 comes with a cute little second remote to control the system from another room → No auto setup
94	95	92	95	90

94

NAD's move upmarket with the Masters Series components successfully builds on their traditional strengths of remarkable value and great sound. Plus, it adds stunning good looks and exquisite build quality. The sound gets awfully close to that of stratospherically priced separates.

General information

M15 Pre/Pro, \$2,999; M25 Amplifier, \$2,999; M55 Universal Disc Player, \$1,799
 NAD Electronics, (800) 263-4641, www.nadelectronics.com → Dealer Locator Code NAD

in. They're so richly balanced, I wondered if they were maybe a little too mellow. I spent some time comparing the newly remastered and expanded edition of Aretha Franklin's *Aretha Live at Fillmore West* CD with the original CD. The NADs dramatically revealed the new version's heightened transparency, clarity, and dynamic life. I sat there swooning over the sweet soul music, totally captivated by Aretha's grooves. The Masters Series components were just letting the music come through, without adding any false emphasis. They're champs at sorting out the refinements that a superior mastering job can provide. Detail retrieval is top notch.

Guitarist John Abercrombie and bassist Eddie Gomez's jazz *Structures* SACD sounded even better. The tactile sense of Gomez's fingers moving over the strings on his stand-up bass was totally convincing, and the first time I heard him quietly humming and vocalizing with the music, I couldn't believe how real he sounded. Abercrombie's slow-motion guitar notes hung suspended in the air over the left speaker; the treble detail was beautifully balanced



▲ Steve thought the M55's remote was well laid out but wished it was backlit.

and effortless. The sound's three-dimensional presence was so clear that I could almost see the musicians. If more SACDs sounded like this, the format would stand a fighting chance.

Spike Lee's latest, *Inside Man*, doesn't stray too far from the well-worn bank-robber/hostage formula, but the DVD's sound was anything but routine. Terence Blanchard's pumped-up score perfectly supports the onscreen tension, and, when the inevitable gunfire erupted, the sound made me jump. Even when I had it cranked to a stupidly loud volume, the M25 amp never strained to keep up. And, as far as I could tell, the PowerDrive never shifted into overdrive. No matter how hard I pushed the Masters Series

components, their sound had a remarkable sense of precision.

Best of all, NAD hasn't forgotten their roots. The Masters Series components are—by high-end standards, at least—solidly in the affordable range. They're the best-sounding components that I know of for the money, that's for sure. 🗣️

AT A GLANCE NAD M55 UNIVERSAL DISC PLAYER



FEATURES

Playable formats: DVD-Audio/Video, DVD+R, DVD-R, CD, CD-R/-RW, SACD, MP3, WMA

Dimensions

(H x W x D, inches): 3.9 x 17.1 x 11.8

Weight (pounds): 19

Price: \$1,799

CONNECTIONS

Video: HDMI (1), component video (1), VGA (1), S-video (1), composite video (1)

Audio: Coaxial digital (1), optical digital (1), stereo analog (1), 7.1 channel (1)

Additional: RS-232 (1), 12-volt trigger in (1), IR input (1)