



Light fantastic

The first one-box streamer from iFi looks superficially normal, but **Ed Selley** discovers there's rather more to it than meets the eye

The rate at which iFi Audio generates new products would allow for most pages of *HFC* to be dedicated over to them if we felt so inclined. But the quantity of products does conceal that some categories you might expect to find the company active in have hitherto not been contested. We have seen the ZEN Stream (*HFC* 485), which turns any DAC into a streamer – but until now we've not seen a one-box streamer. Enter the NEO Stream.

The long-awaited one-stop solution combines the company's decoding with a streaming platform in a single, usefully compact chassis. The decoding is closely related to the NEO iDSD DAC, which acquitted itself well in the *Group Test* in *HFC* 494 and is built around a Texas Instruments DAC combined with an output stage that makes use of various carefully selected high-spec components. Format handling is somewhere close to state of the art with PCM supported to 32-bit/768kHz and DSD512 (with DSD and DXD to boot).

Like the iDSD, the Stream is balanced and unbalanced (and has full preamp functionality), but its greater number of connections means there is no place for XLR – instead balanced operation is available solely via a single 4.4mm Pentaconn connector, which partners a conventional RCA out. If you want to use the iFi as a digital transport, every option you could realistically want is here, with optical, coaxial, AES, USB and i2S via HDMI available.

The NEO Stream is competitive with key rivals across most aspects of its connectivity, but where it takes a fairly distinctive departure is the network connectivity. Included is an 'OptiBox' intended to sit between your router and the streamer. Ethernet is connected at one end and an optical cable on a locking connector proceeds off to the NEO Stream where it connects by the same socket type. iFi says this reduces noise and improves latency.

Something I find fairly admirable about the OptiBox is, if you have reservations about using it, iFi has still fitted a conventional Ethernet and

DETAILS

PRODUCT
iFi Audio NEO Stream

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Network audio streamer

WEIGHT
1kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
214 x 41 x 151mm

FEATURES

- Supports sample rates up to: 32-bit/768kHz and DSD512 with MQA
- Outputs: USB; AES; optical; coaxial; i2S
- Roon Ready

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home Electronics

WEBSITE
ifi-audio.com

wireless connection. The latter is exceptionally stable and reliable. Something that has been omitted is Bluetooth, which is a shame given iFi's proficiency in the area. You do get AirPlay, but Chromecast would have been a useful further addition.

It can be operated by iFi's control app, which is basic but well laid out and usefully stable on both iOS and Android devices. There is no native streaming service support built in, but Tidal and Spotify Connect are here, so their dedicated apps can be used. There is no native Qobuz or Deezer

Bass combines hefty low-end shove with excellent detail and articulation

support, though, and while third-party apps and Roon can be used to make good on this, it puts the NEO Stream at a slight disadvantage to some similarly priced rivals.

The exterior matches the iDSD and the result is a slightly mixed bag aesthetically. In the positive column, it is well made, usefully compact and has the unusual attribute of being able to work just as happily placed vertically on a supplied foot. The 9V power supply is a very good one too.

Sound quality

The NEO Stream is fitted with a display that is crisp and colourful, but is so small it's almost impossible to read from my normal listening position. There is also no remote control, unlike some price rivals.

In truth, I find myself willing to be tolerant of a number of these detail

foibles because the sonic performance of the NEO Stream is so far in advance of anything I can remember testing at this price. Initially connected to a Naim Supernait 3 (*HFC* 456) over RCA and using the wireless connection rather than the OptiBox, the iFi still delights. Listening to the gorgeous *Neptune* by The Olympians, the NEO Stream pulls the neat trick of balancing the almost liquid refinement that the recording has with enough dynamic punch to keep you paying attention to the performance. It's simplicity itself to follow the different instruments and their relationship to one another, but this is conveyed without being in itself a distraction.

By now, I think it is fair to say that iFi has a fairly well-developed 'house sound' and the NEO Stream makes good use of it. The manner in which it takes Agnes Obel's complex and dense *Myopia* and opens it out without losing the cohesion of the track as a whole is deeply impressive. The altogether less well-recorded and considerably less cerebral *Boilermaker* by Royal Blood also demonstrates it has superb bass; combining a genuinely hefty low-end



The NEO Stream is a similar price to the Arcam ST60 (*HFC* 477), which is far less radical in terms of hardware and decoding. Sonically, the iFi is comfortably superior. It's able to match the Arcam for refinement and tonal realism, while sounding more spacious and hard hitting. However, for those getting into streaming, the ST60 is nicer to use. The Music Life app offers more facilities and native streaming service support, the display is easier to read and it's arguably slightly better looking. The iFi is the superior performer, but it does make you work for it.



shove with excellent detail and articulation. If you have a balanced system, using that 4.4mm connection to XLR makes for a more spacious and three-dimensional performance that keeps the same compelling tonal balance. Connected to a Chord Electronics CPA2800 MkII, the performance steps up a gear.

And what of the OptiBox? I feel the fact that iFi lets you use the NEO Stream with and without it in place speaks to a certain confidence in the premise and, depending on how you

The NEO Stream is well made, usefully compact and also works vertically

choose to use it, conveys certain advantages. Connected direct to a router serving a full household, the OptiBox is a useful addition. Listening to the sparse and simple *Night Lands* by Sunda Arc, it brings a little more order and cohesion to the performance, particularly when the router is processing a lot of traffic elsewhere. If you're expecting a night and day "this changes everything" sort of difference, I suspect you might be disappointed, but for something included in the price it's certainly a useful addition.

During testing, the streaming method that really stands out is Tidal Connect. This is considerably more stable here than it was on the ZEN Stream when I tested it on earlier firmware. When this stability and user friendliness is combined with the excellent MQA decoding that iFi has developed over the last few years, you

have a combination that is a joy to use and sounds excellent. Listening to *Digging In The Dirt* by Peter Gabriel – an MQA file that can sound curiously different to the hi-res PCM file I own – the NEO Stream does a fine job of ensuring it sounds as it should. The performance via Roon is extremely good too, but there are of course more associated costs with that.

Conclusion

The NEO Stream doesn't quite achieve the objective perfection of some other iFi Audio devices we have reviewed on these pages. It could do with a more comprehensive control app, Qobuz support and the tiny display and fussy aesthetics won't appeal to everyone. The sonic capability, however, is absolutely beyond reproach. There is no one-box streamer I've tested anywhere near the price that manages to sound so effortlessly engaging and natural with such a wide spread of formats and styles. It's been a long time coming, but certainly worth the wait ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Outstanding sonic performance; connectivity

DISLIKE: No native Qobuz, Bluetooth or Chromecast; display

WE SAY: It isn't perfect, but it's a technically fascinating device that offers a sensational sonic performance