



Take it to the store

Melco has updated its high-end two-box flagship with enhancements debuted in the limited-edition N10 anniversary edition

When it comes to its digital music libraries there are two distinct varieties that Melco offers. There's the conventionally sized, 430mm-wide N1 models and the half-width (or to put it another way 215mm-wide) N10. As you'll no doubt have gathered from the name, the new N10/2 models – starting at £7,000 for the N10/2-H50 and rising to £9,000 for the N10/2-S38 flagship – that we have here hail from the latter. Why the two prices we hear you ask? In a word, storage: the N10/2-H50 packs 5TB of conventional hard-disk drive (HDD), while the N10/2-S38 includes 3.84TB of solid-state (SSD).

As you might expect, given Melco's roots in Japanese computer company

Buffalo, the new drives are of a dedicated design, optimised for the kind of 'write once/read many times' work that's involved in a music library system, and as Melco explains: "hand-picked by the factory to provide exceptional audio performance". The HDD-equipped N10/2 replaces the original N10 model, while the SSD-based drive, reviewed here, takes over from the now-discontinued flagship N1Z/2EX.

In addition to those new drives, the N10/2 series receives a new mainboard that was originally developed for the company's 45th anniversary limited-edition version of the N10. Details of that new board are sketchy, but in common with past Melco designs, the circuitry is built for

DETAILS

- PRODUCT**
Melco N10/2-S38
- ORIGIN**
Japan
- TYPE**
Network-attached media storage device
- WEIGHT**
8.5kg
- DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)**
215 x 61 x 269mm
- FEATURES**
 - 3.84TB solid-state hard drive
 - USB and Ethernet inputs
 - USB and Ethernet outputs
 - Roon ready
- DISTRIBUTOR**
Audiophile Digital Music Masters Ltd.
- WEBSITE**
melco-audio.com audiophiledigital.co.uk

"extremely low-noise, high-precision digital music dataflow" and is custom-built, the company famously pointing out it swerves the sort of conventional standard IT components or PC parts that don't play so nicely with music files.

Either way, the architecture is built around a powerful Marvell Armada CPU with some 16GB of DDR RAM, while the Melco-branded storage is

The cable is short; the two boxes must be stacked or used side-by-side

isolated on a compliant suspension to keep external vibration at bay.

As with previous Melco N10s, the N10/2 is a two-box design, with all the player hardware in one enclosure, while a separate power supply box – designated the PS10 – is home to the substantial toroidal transformer, storage capacitors and regulation. The latter feeds the 'head unit' with 12V and 5V power via a 5-pin umbilical cable. As in the past, this cable is relatively short, mandating that the two boxes are either stacked or used side-by-side: the thick aluminium casework is considered sufficient for mutual shielding.

Much of what's on offer here will be familiar to existing Melco users, such as the separate Ethernet ports for connection to your network – for control, loading music and so on – and direct to a network player, without the need for a switch between the two. There are multiple USB ports too – one on the front, two on the rear – accommodating external storage, a CD ripper to copy discs onto the internal storage and the connection of external drives to function as backup for the N10/2's internal storage. Remember: no-one – absolutely no-one – should commit their entire music library to a single drive for fear of losing it should the unthinkable happen...

Meanwhile, one of the rear-panel USB ports is configured for direct connection to a USB DAC – this key provision being added to Melco players a good few years back. With said DAC connected, the N10/2 becomes a standalone player solution capable of handling music files up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD512 – provided of course your DAC of choice can cope with those formats – which means that there's no need for a separate network music player. As well as playing music from its own storage and connected devices (either plugged in via USB or elsewhere on the home network), it can also access streaming services including Tidal, Qobuz and vTuner Internet radio via the Melco Music HD app.

Users may also download content direct to its storage with access to the



Arguably, Japan's Melco brand was responsible for establishing the 'audiophile NAS' market in the first place, assisted in no small measure by its technological toe-hold in computer hardware design. Digital output-only music libraries now include the more affordable £1,500 Roon Nucleus + (HFC 439), the £4,600 Auralic Aries G2.1 (HFC 469), plus the very high-end £9,495 MU1 from Grimm Audio and two-box £11,400 Statement from Innuos. All these solutions are certainly worth checking out if you are already wedded to your own choice of USB or AES-connected DAC.

Qobuz and Highresaudio.com online stores, without the need to download purchases to a computer and then transfer them to the player. And, of course, it's also Roon ready.

What's more, it's even possible to use the N10/2 as a source for a USB DAC without the network connection and then control it via a third-party UPnP/DLNA app. In the latest version of the company's firmware, Melco libraries can be tasked to play music using the front panel controls and display, 'pushing' digital audio data straight out of its USB port. It's admittedly a touch laborious compared with the ease that swiping and tapping of an app offers, but it can be done. Alternatively, you can

A system designed entirely for listeners and lovers of music, not computer nerds

even plug in a little USB Bluetooth 'dongle' and navigate the N10/2 via approved BT remote handsets.

Much of the beauty of the Melco experience is down to the 'behind the scenes' development of the company's Intelligent Music Library suite, which combines MinimServer and SongKong music file management software to provide an attractive user interface with extensive, logical metadata tagging. All this happens without any user-intervention, making finding and playing music both simple and intuitive. Throw in the superb quality

of the fit and finish of the two enclosures themselves and a resolutely non-computer-like user-interface, and this is clearly a system designed entirely for listeners and lovers of music rather than computer nerds.

So, yes, the Melco concept isn't cheap, especially in this flagship iteration, but there's a strong sense of all the hard work having been done for the listener in order to provide a seamless, simple means of accessing their music library.

Sound quality

Previous experience of using Melco players as a network source for, say, a Naim ND555/555PS player has taught us that it can be an excellent option, but with no real clear advantage over connecting a current NAS music library via inexpensive fibre optic converters. So, for the purposes of this test we decide to stick to using the N10/2 as a source for a selection of different USB DACs, including everything from the Matrix Audio X-Sabre 3 (p28) down to the relatively affordable iFi Audio Neo iDSD (HFC 482) and the peerless Chord Electronics Mojo 2 (p56), both of which have become mainstays of many a desktop setup.

Without wishing to in any way prejudice what follows, we find that even with the £800 iFi Audio and £450 Chord DACs, the N10/2 sounds spectacular. Yes, the combination of this £9,000 library and a £450 pocket-sized DAC, however unlikely it may seem, is a killer main-system setup! ▶

IN SIGHT



- 1 USB input for hooking up an external CD drive for ripping
- 2 USB output for connection to an external DAC
- 3 Ethernet network connection
- 4 Ethernet port for dedicated streamer or network player
- 5 DC in/outputs. The outboard PSU (lower box) is coupled to the digital library (upper box) via an umbilical
- 6 AC mains input



Playing the gloriously detailed *Lamento* set by mezzo Marianne Beate Kielland and baroque ensemble Oslo Circles, the Melco/Chord combination delivers a sound dripping with the ambience of the church recording venue. The soloist and period instruments are placed persuasively before the listener – it’s a superbly immersive audio experience

Finding and playing your music via the Melco is both simple and intuitive

as remarkable for its mournfully mellifluous tonality as it is for the precision with which the music is revealed. The voice is simply luminous, hanging in space, while the delicate accompaniment fills out the soundstage with atmosphere.

Lifting the mood a little with pianist Jan Lisiecki’s *Night Music* recital, that precise but atmospheric rendition

perfectly suits the reading of Mozart’s celebrated variations on *Ah, Vous Dirai-Je, Maman*. The crisp – and appropriately twinkling – playing benefitting greatly from the speed and definition, while both the weight of Lisiecki’s instrument and way the lower octaves resonate in the lively acoustic are beautifully conveyed.

That resolution is just as apparent in the 24-bit/192kHz remaster of Eric Clapton’s *461 Ocean Boulevard* album, when the Melco/Chord pairing slams into *Motherless Children* with all guns blazing before settling back into the lushness of *Give Me Strength* and the harmonies of *Let It Grow*. Arguably Clapton’s finest solo work, it sounds magnificent via this unlikely combo, from the deep, funky bass of Carl Radle to Yvonne Elliman’s silky vocals.

Melco’s two-box N/10 also works supremely well with Matrix Audio’s X-Sabre 3 DAC – though Chord’s Mojo 2 is uncannily close in performance – when it comes to the big, dramatic stuff, such as the Bergen Philharmonic/Gardner recording of Britten’s *Peter*

The aluminium casework is perfectly sufficient for mutual shielding

Grimes. Here it crashes out all the fury of the famous *Storm* interlude without losing track of any of the instrumental textures, and at the same time movingly conveys the uneasy atmosphere of the fishing village and its outcast, culminating in its bleak, desolate finale.

Conclusion

This recording is possessed of breathtaking dynamics and tiny nuances in equal measure, and this combination artfully reveals them all. It achieves the same with the skill of both scoring and recording in (deep breath) *Jeff Wayne’s Musical Version Of The War Of The Worlds*, incredibly now knocking on the door of its 45th birthday, but still something of an unmatched sonic marvel, especially if you listen on SACD.

Even with Jeff Wayne’s 2000 remixes album, *ULLAdubULLA*, which really cranks up the drama (and, of course, the bass!), the N/10 and whichever DAC you choose to partner it effortlessly deliver all the hefty weight and intricate detail one could ever want, creating an absolute riot of samples and thumping rhythms. This is a library that demands you’re noisy ●

The Melco is designed to be stacked or stood side by side



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Slick interface; clever metadata handling
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★☆	DISLIKE: Price; limited storage capacity
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Sophisticated digital front-end
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL

