

● REVIEW BLUESOUND VAULT 2i AND NODE 2i

Hi-res network solution

The latest multiroom system from the NAD/PSB speakers people comes with a range of new technologies

Multiroom audio is big news, and it's not hard to see why: the latest systems have made simple what was once possible only with a substantial investment in custom installation, not to mention all the domestic disruption involved in putting the systems into your home.

These days you no longer need a server rack in the cupboard under the stairs or a hub in the attic: you can start with nothing more than a single wireless speaker and the home Wi-Fi you probably already have, plus your smartphone or tablet device to control a system – you can start small and expand as your budget allows. What's more, it's all totally portable: unlike a dedicated installation, you can take today's whole-house audio systems with you should you move.

The Bluesound system has always gone beyond what the likes of Sonos and Denon's HEOS offered from the start, in that it was designed from the ground up to be a wireless high-resolution audio system, coming as it did from the parent company behind NAD electronics and PSB loudspeakers. Since it launched the original Bluesound models, the Canadian company has seen its rivals playing catch-up – although to date Sonos remains resolutely limited to CD-quality sound and no more.

Bluesound has evolved, from the original wedge-shaped Vault ripper/server/player and Node players to a more conventional line up of compact boxes in its second generation. The Node2 emerged as a slimline box designed to be plugged into an existing amplifier or system, while the PowerNode 2 – as above, but with built in amplification to drive speakers – and the Vault2 were designed to look like two Node2 boxes stacked. Especially neat was the industrial design solution for the Vault2, in which the slot-loading CD mechanism was fitted between the two 'boxes', both hiding and highlighting its functionality.

The latest '2i' versions of the Bluesound products, including the £1099 Vault 2i and the Node 2i (£499) we have here, have recently been announced; the amplified PowerNode 2i (£799) completes the 'components' line-up, while the five-strong speaker range starts with the Pulse Flex 2i at £299 and goes up through the

£499 Pulse Mini 2i, and £749 Pulse 2i to the Pulse Soundbar 2i at £799. The Pulse Sub subwoofer, selling for £599, is the only model carried over from the previous range, and all models are available in black and white at the same price with the exception of the soundbar, which attracts a £100 premium for the white finish.

As well as accessing both locally stored music and online services – and, in the case of the Vault 2i, allowing up to 2TB of music to be ripped from CD or downloaded onto its internal storage, which can then be played directly into an amplifier or accessed by other Bluesound devices – by the time you read this the new 2i models will have the latest Apple AirPlay 2 wireless multiroom technology, which allows streaming directly from Apple devices, with Siri voice control. What's more, owners of existing Bluesound products need only add one 'Gen 2i' product to extend this new functionality to their entire set-up. The new products also gain Alexa voice control using Amazon Echo devices and a new BlueVoice interface.

Bluetooth aptX HD is also provided, and in addition the new units have two-way Bluetooth, so they can stream from a phone or computer, as before, but also now play out to a pair of Bluetooth headphones or speakers.

PERFORMANCE

If you wanted a simple storage/playback solution for a single system, the Vault 2i would do very nicely. With simple disc-ripping and download, and connectivity to an amplifier via analogue (line plus subwoofer) or digital outputs, plus Ethernet networking to hook up to your router or Wi-Fi hub, all you need add is a phone or tablet running the BluOS app, and you're ready to go. All the cables are provided, and the set-up guide runs to just four steps in a little leaflet.

What the Node 2i brings to the party is the ability to have the Vault 2i snaffled away in a remote location, or connected to one system, while it connects to another system, or acts as the access point for your main set-up. It's also possible to scale up the installation by adding further Nodes to feed further 'zones', use Pownodes to drive remote speakers, or even bring music



BLUESOUND VAULT 2i

Type Network ripper/server/player

Price £1099

Internal storage 2TB hard drive

Supported file formats MP3, AAC, WMA, WMA-L, OGG, FLAC, ALAC, WAV, AIFF, MQA

Audio outputs Analogue line plus subwoofer, optical/coaxial digital, headphones

Audio inputs Combination 3.5mm optical digital/analogue

Other connectivity Ethernet, two USB Type A for external storage, 12V trigger out, external control in

Finishes Black, white

Dimensions (WxHxD) 22x9x19.1cm

BLUESOUND NODE 2i

Type Network player

Price £499

Supported file formats As Vault 2i

Audio outputs Analogue line, optical/coaxial digital, headphones

Audio inputs Combination 3.5mm optical digital/analogue

Other connectivity Ethernet, USB Type A, 12V trigger out, remote in

Finishes Black, white

Dimensions (HxWxD) 22x4.6x14.6cm

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to extra rooms with one of the all-in-one Pulse speakers.

What's more, if you already have network storage in the form of a NAS drive or similar, you could do without the Vault, and just use Nodes or Pulses under app control to build a system.

The new Bluesound products build on the success of past generations with added functionality, while maintaining performance – both sonically and operationally – that was never in question. Whether with heavily compressed MP3 files or hi-res FLACs, both the units here sound crisp, clean and neutral, although of course the sound improves as you move from low- to high-resolution file formats.

The sound here is powerful and well-detailed, making listening a pleasure, and comparing CDs with ripped versions played on the Vault or via the Node reveals no losses in the process, which is as it should be. These products make a compelling case for networked audio. **G**