

HIFI CRITIC

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HIGH END 2016

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A PURR OF PRE-AMPS

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dCS ROSSINI PLAYER + CLOCK

Chris Binns assesses dCS's Rossini CD player/DAC and its associated Master Clock

WHY DO WAV AND FLAC FILES SOUND DIFFERENT?

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ROGUE AUDIO SPHINX V2

Paul Messenger auditions an affordable hybrid integrated amplifier that combines valves with digital amp modules

MUSIC & MORE

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

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Cambridge Audio Azur 851N
Benchmark AHB2
Thorens TD124
Focal Sopra No2
First Watt M2
Naim NAP 500 DR
Townshend Allegri
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As we rush headlong into the future, let us not forget that hi-fi has been around for most of our lifetimes, and that most of what the music business considers as progress has been about improving access and convenience rather than quality, through such initiatives as the widespread popularity of MP3-encoded files.

I'm currently feeling somewhat exasperated, as my computer, *iPad* and smartphone have decided to stop communicating with my Naim *UnitiServe*, and I've not the slightest idea why. I've tried restarting various bits and pieces, so far without success, and the control Apps simply refuse to make the connection.

This may well be because I have no real enthusiasm for wrestling with computers, but suspicion inevitably falls on the 'software updates' that seem to have become an inevitable and regular part of life these days. Nobody seems interested in explaining why software engineers don't get it right in the first place, but I suspect that one reason behind the continual 'updating' is simply that it's possible to do so. By their very nature, home computers and their ilk are foxy little devices that are well able to change their spots almost on a whim.

Fortunately I still have access to my music *via* plenty of 'oldfashioned' CDs and vinyl – and indeed the numerous tracks that are stored on my laptop. But you'll probably have to wait until the next issue to find out about access to my server.

Towards the Future?

In the meantime it may well be high time I got into streaming. It's something I've not really bothered with to date, largely because I've spent more than fifty years collecting enough discs (vinyl and compact) to keep my CD and vinyl players busy for years. (Indeed, simply because I've already got plenty of material, my disc collecting seems to have tailed off somewhat in recent years.)

However, I've recently been staying for a few days with my younger brother in Sweden, who streams his music *via* a Spotify subscription. While this may not particularly appeal to my hi-fi sensibilities, I have started to appreciate the easy access to all manner of tracks that it brings. And although I've always regarded my music collection as reasonably comprehensive, it does inevitably have some gaps (usually around the time that progeny are arriving), so a streaming service does therefore have some advantages (especially since contact with my server has temporarily been lost).

I should have got streaming up and running by the next issue too, so will be able to report on any of the practical difficulties this computer phobic encounters along the way. As a parting shot, however, it seems to me that the advantages of streaming may well depend on the size of one's music collection, which is likely to be a function of one's age.

Paul Messenger
Editor

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dCS Rossini Player and Clock

CHRIS BINNS TRIES OUT THE LATEST dCS GEAR, SPECIFICALLY THE ROSSINI CD PLAYER/DAC AND ITS ASSOCIATED MASTER CLOCK



In the grand scheme of things, I don't think digital audio can be considered a technology in its infancy any longer. It is now forty years since the first commercial recordings began to appear, and nearly thirty-five since the introduction of the compact disc. For better or worse, the ways in which we create, record and manage music has changed out of all recognition, and the mass adoption of digital media has affected every corner of our lives. We are seemingly at a crossroads where it is increasingly likely that CDs will continue to shrink back in popularity and take on a similar status to the LP, and downloading and/or streaming files will be the only way forward for new material.

That's fine, and in theory it should be encouraging greater availability of higher quality music. But outside of audiophile circles no one seems particularly interested. Higher definition TV and movies, yes, but persuading ordinary people to move away from the now 'de facto' MP3 could be a real struggle. So far, outside my role as a studio engineer, it's a debate which has not had any real impact on my personal listening, but I guess once I can no longer buy a new album by an artist I like on CD it will. I have also quite legitimately been able to hide behind the technological barrier of a cripplingly slow broadband connection. But hey, despite a mile

and a half of nearly one hundred year old cable, I have recently been upgraded to a speed where downloading music is now a possibility.

I was also a late starter with CD. In an ideal world good analogue replay has always done it for me; with it I'm easily captivated and entertained by the right music. It was only when vinyl production started to dry up that I began to make the changes needed to accommodate digital. But so far I have never quite managed to experience the same degree of freedom, where music effortlessly makes the transition from loudspeaker to brain. More often than not I've had to concentrate and work a bit harder in order to follow what was going on. True, players have tended to become progressively better, and I've found it easier to relax while listening to CDs. But despite the relative inconvenience (particularly if cleaning is involved), LPs generally still give me the most immersive musical experience around.

Data Conversion Systems (dCS) originally started by manufacturing sophisticated converters for the military and telecommunication industries. The accrued digital expertise came in useful as a sideline in servicing DAT machines for the BBC, which gave the company a chance to dip a toe into the murky waters of audio. With defence budget cuts imminent, there was a realisation that the level of accuracy, low noise and precision that had achieved great success in military applications might well have an audio application, and so the transition began.

Its first products were aimed very much at the professional recording industry and were greeted with much enthusiasm, particularly with engineers involved in classical music recording. The problem was that the 900 and 950 series converters were expensive; in the more lucrative market of commercial rock/pop, where multi-track recording is at the epicentre of production, multiple converters – up to 48 units – was way beyond the budget of most facilities.

Fortunately the crossover into the hi-fi industry was already happening, as a number of audiophiles were already using dCS equipment at home, so the company expanded into the domestic market with

the introduction of the *Elgar*, an easier to use and more aesthetically pleasing version of the professional product. Since that time the company's profile has been well represented in the upper echelons of high-end audio, where increasingly sophisticated products have more recently allowed them to focus exclusively on that market.

My first exposure to its converters came about through an engineer doing orchestral recording for an album I was involved with, and playback of the tracks made with the dCS converters left a favourable impression. But while I continued to be aware of the company and some of its products within the hi-fi market, and subsequent demonstrations left me impressed by the technology, the level of detail and the refinement, I also to be honest somehow remained unmoved by their musical qualities.

However, the ambitious *Vivaldi* system proved to be a turning point. I had the opportunity to spend many hours listening to this four-box player, and was frankly gob-smacked at what I was hearing, which amounted to some of the most musically poignant performances I had ever encountered from a digital system. Setting aside the astronomical price (and lets not even mention the vast array of cables needed), I came away feeling that my perception of the distance that separates analogue and digital replay had somehow been reduced.

The Rossini

The company's latest player, the £18,000 *Rossini* represents something of a step forward in a number of directions for dCS. Available both with and without a CD disc drive (the former being slightly taller; the latter saving £3,000), it now also has an accompanying £5,000 precision clock – dCS has long advocated this form of upgrade to its systems. This new player has superseded all those from the previous range of products, save the entry level *Debussy* DAC and the upmarket *Vivaldi* – a decision partly necessitated by uncertainty regarding the supply of the Teac-Esoteric CD drive on which these machines are based.

Responding to the rapidly shifting landscape of digital replay, the *Rossini* represents something of a new approach, designed from the ground up to be a more universal input hub. The player will accept virtually any digital signal you can think of (and probably several that you can't), via USB types A and B, AES/EBU, S/PDIF and Ethernet, and functions as a fully integrated network player to boot. The only caveat is that the new transport won't play SACDs, though it will of course support input files in this format. Rather than an off-the-shelf solution, the design team has also developed its own Ethernet

streaming front end, together with an App to control this and all other functions of the player, from either a pad or a smartphone.

Being a company with a heritage focused purely on digital technology, dCS is in a virtually unique position; unlike most manufacturers that use off the shelf components, the key elements of its products are designed from the ground up and built entirely in house. Recent developments have moved towards creating an architecture where the electronic circuitry comprises a processing platform instructed by sophisticated programs, so software improvements and updates are easy to implement, and future formats and standards may be easily handled. Significantly, the *Rossini* player and the clock are the first all-new products from dCS since the launch of the *Vivaldi*, and as such benefit from the research that has gone into that flagship digital converter (specifically the Ring DAC), while the digital processing platform and clocking circuitry are all new, cutting edge technology.

The *Rossini* units share a similar visual aesthetic to their more costly sibling: solid aluminium construction, softened by the sculpted curves on the top and bottom edge. The feel and finish is excellent, as one should expect at this level. However, by contrast I found the remote handset complex and counter-intuitive, with a rather limited angle of actuation, making everyday use a rather frustrating experience. There's really no excuse for such a lapse in this modern world. Although in practice many may use the smartphone App for control, an additional and very simple handset covering just the basics might have been welcome.





My initial sessions with the *Rossini* were mainly concerned with using it as a standalone CD player, without the additional clock. While it will perform perfectly well straight out of the box, a considerable number of user options are also available for setting various parameters, and these can have a quite dramatic impact on the sound. These are accessed *via* the menu, aided by a clear and colourful display. An integral volume control also allows the player to be used straight into a power amp, but it should be noted that, at very low volume settings it will have some impact on sound quality due to a moderate loss in resolution.

Sound Quality

The output level is programmable for 0.2, 0.6, 2 or 6V, and it should be noted that there was some discernable difference in quality between these in my system. For the same loudness (measured at the speaker terminals) the 6V output sounded more ‘robust’ with better dynamics than the other three. I opted to leave the player’s pre-set and volume controls at maximum, because the line stage I normally use has a relatively low gain and will happily accommodate this level. But

trying an alternative Naim 252 pre-amp resulted in input overload distortion at this setting, and it was far happier with the maximum output set to 2V.

Other user options include selection from six different filters for PCM and four more for DSD, all of which have a subtle but significant influence on the sound. Finally there’s a choice of upsampling to DSD or DXD. My personal preference seemed to favour DXD for music that relied on a strong sense of rhythm, particularly with drums and/or percussion. When playing classical, string or choral music, the slightly more ethereal DSD delivery worked well, and I was quite happy to switch between them according to what I was playing.

To begin with, the *Rossini* player sounded sophisticated, refined and detailed, all performance virtues that I’ve associated with dCS products in the past, but I couldn’t initially find a strong emotional connection with the music I played, which is where the *Vivaldi* system had seemed to excel. Listening sessions seemed to be more of an academic exercise than an involving, emotionally charged experience, until after about four days use, when a quite startling overnight metamorphosis occurred.

This abrupt development endowed the *Rossini* with (to put it rather crudely) more balls. It felt as if there was a significant increase in dynamic range – drums and bass seemed to have far more impact, for example, but more importantly the musical dynamics were suddenly being expressed in a way that served to make far better sense than previous comparatively fey, limp performance. Was it running in or settling down? I’m not sure, but either way it was a most welcome transformation.

The music now had a real sense of coherence, where all of the aspects that go to make up the performance were in the right place at the right time, interacting with each other in a way that convincingly conveyed the very essence of what the music was about. I found that I was no longer having to concentrate on the process of listening, and the



sense of mechanics working that I normally associate with digital reproduction slipped easily into the background. If a lot of processing was going on, rather more of it was now happening in the machine and rather less in my head.

I was particularly impressed by the ability of the *Rossini* to dig out the best of more or less any material presented to it. Quite a lot of 'early' CDs have tended to sound rather flat and synthetic; many of them transferred from analogue tapes using what would now be considered primitive A-to-D converters. They are also mastered at relatively low levels. However, playing these through the *Rossini* revealed that many of them actually sound rather good, and in truth dramatically shame the majority of loud, compressed and brittle remasters that abound among more recent releases.

There are exceptions – the reissued early Talking Heads albums overseen by Ted Jensen in 2006 sounded fantastic. Dynamics were well and truly preserved, rivalling the original record in that respect, with a full bodied presence that was both exciting and truly engaging, easily recapturing the energy and excitement that I recall from these recordings when I first heard them. This was digital I could really live with.

Listening to orchestral music, I was able to sit back and enjoy the sensation of having music unfold in front of me, presented in such a way that was both natural and engaging. Exceptional image placement, dimensionality and spatial depth all contributed to a real sense of witnessing an event, and increasingly I found myself being drawn in to whole performances from beginning to end with a feeling of excitement and anticipation. Rhythm and timing is important to me, but it should be the musicians that dictate the pace rather than the system, and the *Rossini* simply let the musicians' reign.

Adding the Master Clock

Having allowed a reasonable period to assess the *Rossini* player on its own, it was both interesting and enlightening to add the Master Clock into the system. The effect of this upgrade is both obvious and disarmingly difficult to pin down; as you might expect there is better rendition of detail, more air and space apparent with greater visceral impact - all good hi fi. But it is that more direct sense of musical communication - the result of the amalgamation of these factors - that really gets you hooked.

Having played the legendary Jacqueline du Pré/Barbirolli recording of the Elgar Cello Concerto on the player alone the night before, with the clock now installed the music seemed to be conveyed with greater emotional weight, which alongside the sheer passion of the playing damn near reduced me to tears. It goes without saying that adding the clock makes the *Rossini*

a better player, but a word of warning: once heard, the extra confidence that it brings to a performance will be difficult to live without.

Networking

Once set up with my network, the *Rossini* opened the gates into the delights of streaming and playing files from a NAS drive. It all came together with surprising ease, the dCS App running seamlessly on an *iPad* (or *iPhone*), giving complete control over the player transport, settings and possible other sources of music (in this case Tidal and Spotify). The ability to take files from work-related projects and play them via a USB stick was a real bonus, but listening to albums from the NAS drive of discs that I had ripped via an *iMac* proved interesting but ultimately a little disappointing. Maybe I need better software, but the results I heard were pretty much universally worse in comparison with the original CD, they sounded thin and lacking in body, almost as if they were compressed files, which they weren't.

Maybe because I wasn't expecting too much, listening to FLAC files via Tidal proved surprisingly good, and a fantastic way of discovering new music. I have spent a considerable number of hours exploring territories that I otherwise would not have had access to, which alone might justify the subscription. It also appealed to my couch potato mindset. Rather more worrying was a developing 'revert to teenager' tendency to hit the 'next' button after about ten seconds of listening to a track.

Conclusions

Much of this review has been taken up with my findings on the *Rossini* as a CD player; it is of course much more than that. Flexibility and forward thinking are very much intrinsic in its design, which should be a major consideration for those able to invest in digital replay of this calibre. The evolution that has been taking place with dCS products has seen the emergence of a new strain that began with the *Vivaldi* and has continued with the *Rossini*, where all of the advanced technical achievements have now merged together to make products that are more about music and less about hi-fi; moving digital forward in an artistic way.

That rather academic, dry and slightly soulless quality that in my view seemed to characterise some earlier dCS product generations is now replaced by a performance that allows the listener to get deeply involved with the music, and more directly connects to the heart and soul with little or no effort. The *Rossini* excels in creating a sense of believable musical realism, and that is far closer to where I would like digital audio reproduction to be.



Manufacturer's Specification

| Rossini Player | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Type | Upsampling CD/Network Player |
| Converter | dCS proprietary Ring DAC |
| Digital Inputs | 2x RJ45 (network), USB 2.0 A & B, 2x AES/EBU, 3x S/PDIF (1x phono, 1x BNC, 1x Toslink). Apple AirPlay. |
| Analogue Outputs | balanced 2x XLRs, unbalanced 2x phonos |
| Filters | 6 on PCM; 4 on DSD |
| Finish | Silver or Black |
| Size (WxHxD) | 44.4x15.1x43.5cm |
| Weight | 17.4kg |
| Price (UK) | £18,000 (£15,000 w/o disc drive) |

| Rossini Clock: | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Type | Class 1 Master Clock |
| Clock frequencies | 44.1 or 48kHz |
| Output | 3x BNC |
| Finish | Silver or Black |
| Size (WxHxD) | 44.4x6.4x43.5cm |
| Weight | 8.3kg |
| Price (UK) | £5,000 |

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Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

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Martin Colloms, Publisher

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Three issues ago (*HIFICRITIC Vol9 No3*) I wrote about a very practical, sensible and inexpensive *irDAC* from Arcam. At a typical price of £425, it naturally made no attempt to set the sort of high standards one might encounter from brands like DCS or MSB. But it proved most effective at doing the very basic job of extending the analogue inputs of my system pre-amplifier into the digital domain, with full remote control over input selection too – a vital feature in my view.

Not long after that review had gone to press, however, I received an e-mail about a new *MkII* version. The differences seem quite minor, but are the reason for covering the new version here. For examples, the replacement does include a price rise to £495, which is still quite inexpensive in my opinion, but also seems to have addressed a couple of irritations that snuck up on me after I'd already written the original review.

Although I was happy enough with the original, a couple of minor niggles that emerged included a tendency to 'click' when changing either sources or TV channels. This was only mildly irritating, but the DAC also showed an occasional tendency to 'crash' (as all computers seem wont to do), which was certainly rather more exasperating. The good news is that the 'click' seems to have completely disappeared from the latest version, and (after a couple of weeks) it hasn't yet crashed (he says, carefully touching wood).

I normally use one of the two optical (Toslink S/PDIF) inputs for the TV, a USB type II input for my laptop (which only started working after I restarted it and went to a sub-menu), and one of the two electrical S/PDIFs for the Naim *UnitiServe* (when it's working, which it isn't right now – see *Editorial*). That leaves three inputs that are currently unused – one optical, one electrical, and one other. On the original *irDAC* this 'other' was labelled '*iPod*' on the handset, and appeared to add an extra USB type I on the unit, but the new *irDAC-II* has replaced that input with a Bluetooth capability, which is why a stubby little aerial now attaches to a screw terminal on the back. Another difference between the old and the new models is that the 'digital out' socket has been replaced by a pair of variable analogue outputs (which I naturally ignored).

The new handset is the same intelligently small and light plastic affair as its predecessor, though it actually has three fewer buttons, eliminating an unnecessary on/off and others labelled 'AES' and 'filter', neither of which I used previously (or indeed knew what they did!)

Since CD now seems to be in decline, I reckon I'll stick with vinyl as my prime source. Although the arrival of downloads, servers and streaming might have made digital stuff more musically interesting, it has also become much more complicated too, as computers, networks and the internet have effectively taken over from the much more straightforward (and reliable) CD player. This might be no problem for those who enjoy interacting with computers and computer technology, but digital audio seems better avoided by people like yrs trly that consider them useful but also a pain in the proverbial.

I'm perfectly happy for others to follow a digital audio future, but I myself will continue to regard it as a secondary source: certainly worth having, but hardly meriting the sort of expenditure I'll happily lavish on the analogue gear. Simply as a remote-controllable switch-box for digital sources, Arcam's £495 *irDAC-II* is clearly exceptional value for money, so the no-frills Best Buy rating of its predecessor definitely deserves to continue.