



DAC reviews: Acoustic Arts Tube-DAC / Audio Research DAC8 / Weiss DAC202 / dCS Debussy / Meitner MA-1 / AMR DP-777

Submitted by DM on Mon, 12/19/2011

Disclaimer: This mini review is only based on me and my friends' findings/experience over the past 6 months, with my system and with our music tastes (my friends did bring music along from time to time), YMMV. Also I didn't take any photos of the demo units (busy listening than taking photos), the photos here are the ones I pulled from the web so it is easier for people to follow.

I listen to LP 70% of the time, the rest was CD/CAS. My music taste was quite vast, from large scale classical (35%), opera (15%), through Jazz (30%) to Rock (15%) and Pop (5%).

I would say I have a fairly decent system to start with, but the digital side needs a bit of update. The CEC transport I have was quite analogue sounding, but it does lack some bass definition. Although the Theta DS Pro DAC was a classic, it was a long in the tooth that really looking for retirement.

My System, for details please see my signature at the end of the post.

For the past 6 months, I have asked, beg, borrowed, threatened, stole a number of DACs into my system for extended period of audition (I will only buy a piece of equipment if I can have it in my house for home demo).

The comparison was with my vinyl system, there was little point to compare it to the Theta DAC. I know it was not 100% fair to compare the DACs to a US\$30,000 vinyl system, but this was what I have and life is too short for me to compare it to anything lesser ...

The following was a list of the DACs that I have had the good fortune to try in my system. I didn't try any budget DAC of the day stuff, as in order to match the rest of my system, something substantial was needed, so anything US\$3000 or less was not considered.

Acoustic Arts Tube-DAC II (SPDIF only)



This was one of my friend's machines and I borrowed it for a weekend. I connected it up to my CEC and the AA DAC gave a very nice warm sound from its tube outputs. It didn't offend anyone. We were able to listen to it without fatigue. Vocal was solid and the bass has good energy. It had two outputs and the solid stage output was slightly cleaner but thinner and less body. We all preferred the tube output.

However, the downside was that the AA DAC has a very 2D sound stage and the sound was very much clogged, also the highs were not very refined and felt fuzzy. The whole orchestra (Nikolaus Harnoncourt – Requiem) seems lump together in the center of my speakers, it lacked transparency and speed and all this made the music boring. YoYo Ma playing the Prelude from Bach Cello Suite No.1 was vague, slow and dull. Plus it didn't have a USB input, so on the next Monday, it's back to in his owner's house.

Audio Research DAC8 (tested both USB and SPDIF)



This was a dealer demo unit, well ran in. The ARC DAC8 has good transparency and speed when compare to the AA DAC. Orchestra and Jazz pieces rendered quite nicely. It passed the Mahler test (Symphony of a Thousand) without too much trouble, capable of separating the instruments in full and yet keep the music and noise the orchestra was making in check.

However, it was a bit on the lean side and also the sound stage depth was a bit lacking, more importantly the all-important midrange vocal was lacking body and soul, sounded a bit hollow in fact. If one doesn't listen to much vocal music, the ARC DAC8 could be a fine choice. By the way, it sounded quite a bit better on the SPDIF input than on its USB input, so this was a machine more for upgrading your CD player than for computer audio playback.

Weiss DAC202 (tested both Firewire and SPDIF)



This was from another friend of mine, who was a die-hard Weiss fan, he has the Weiss Jason/Medea combo and the Minerva (for his MacBook), now he got the DAC202. The Weiss was definitely more laid back than the Debussy and the Meitner, the sound stage moved back a couple of meters, not as upfront, it has slightly better definition and transparency when compare to the Debussy and the Meitner. Avishai Cohen Trio's complex interplay was quite persuasively rendered. However, although the sound stage was now deeper, the music still sounded a bit tinny (if you know what I meant), there wasn't much organic mass there and sounded a bit basic. For example, Andras Schiff's piano lacked physical presence within the room.

The Weiss DAC202 does have a digital pre-amp (no analogue input) built-in and so we tried its volume control function. All I could say was as long as I engaged the volume control, there was a notable loss in sound quality and the sound was less direct. I pitched it against my Gryphon Elektra Preamplifier. And it was obvious that it was not in the same class as the Gryphon, the DAC202's volume control sounded crowded and lacking details and refinement. So the DAC202's volume control should only be consider as a bonus, but if one wants a really high quality highend pre-amp/volume control, the DAC202 won't fit the bill.

Both of my notebooks all have Firewire, but the Weiss driver only worked with the MacBook/OSX/Win7 one, the highly modified Sony/XP with MinLogon didn't work. The Firewire connection was the superior connection compared to the Weiss's SPDIF and the above conclusion was drawn based on the superior connection: i.e. the Firewire.

Also, although I use both Mac and PC at home and all have Firewire (except the new HP), the lack of USB input put me off a bit, as Firewire to me was a dying consumer format.

dCS Debussy / Meitner MA-1 DAC (tested both USB and SPDIF)



Why I lump those two together? Because they sound fairly similar in my system, both have good scale, bass and dynamic, ample details, both are forward sounding without being offensive. In fact the bass as I remembered were quite a bit better than ARC DAC8. Both machines brought us into close contact with low frequency that we simply didn't hear with others, and especially so with my Kharma Grand Ceramique Midi floor standing speakers. Very nice DACs indeed.

With the dCS Debussy, it was Filter 2 (with the Filter LED on) that we liked the most, it gave a more relaxing, natural and smooth sound than the other filter. According to the dealer, this was the "Minimum Phase" filter, the other one was the traditional digital filter. On the Debussy, the USB input sounded similar to the SPDIF inputs, but this unit was limited to 96kHz only. Also if one wants the best sonic from the Debussy, don't use the digital volume control, setting anything other than 0dB immediately affect the sound, although not major, but audible.

With the Meitner MA-1 DAC, what we found out was the SPDIF input from the CEC transport sounded significantly better than the USB input from the computer. We were a bit puzzled and then we tried an M2Tech USB to SPDIF convertor, suddenly the music from the computer was beautiful again. We try a couple other different computers with the Meitner MA-1 DAC, and they all sounded worse than the CEC transport with the SPDIF input. Although the Meitner MA-1 DAC's USB input supports 192kHz, I think there was something amiss in its implementation (may be a design/matching bug).

The only other thing that stopped me from bring out my cheque book was that they both sounded a bit too clinical and the music was lacking passion and not very musical. I got the feeling that Pavarotti wasn't interested in what he was singing.

AMR DP-777 (tested both USB and SPDIF)



The only reason I auditioned the DP-777 was because I have the AMR PH-77 which I enjoyed very much. Actually, the DP-777 was really a bit too cheap for my system. They do have the CD-77 (have USB input too), but I wasn't prepared to buy another CD player. So I took the dealer's advice and gave the DP-777 a try.

To be honest, I wasn't expecting much. After all I was nearly settled on the dCS. When I first turn on the dealer's DP-777 on a Saturday evening, the initial feeling was quite nice, but nothing really special. What happened was after half an hour or so of playing, which I wondered off to do a stock take on my vinyl LPs, sudden I realized I was smiling like an idiot and singing along (Belafonte at Carnegie Hall – Matilda), then I realized something wonderful has happened, something just bridge the gap between the performer and myself, I was teleport to the actual performance.

I often had that experience when I was enjoying my vinyl system. The vinyl system literally transported me to the performance (the signature of a good vinyl system). But I never had that with my digital system, nor with all the other DACs that I have tried in my home.

To give a short summary (which I will discuss more on its sonic quality in the separate DP-777 review of my own unit), the dealer's DP-777 arguably had more PRAT (Pace, Rhythm and Timing), but lose out a little bit on the sheer ultra-low energy. So if you are a super-duper bass freak, then the DP-777 may not fit your bill, but if you are only a bass freak like all audiophiles do (including myself), then the DP-777 should have enough in the bass department to keep you happy.

The ultimate strength of the DP-777 was the sheer musicality of the machine (listening was mostly done under Bit-Perfect II with Zero Jitter turn On); excellent PRAT, truly full body mid-range with stunning imaging and sound stage. It had a wonderfully natural sense of ease and liquid phrasing which other DACs were struggle to compete. All of those make the music so much easy to follow, and hence transport you to the music performance without one recognized. It put the emotion back into the music in a digital system.

Conclusion

No, none of the DACs above bettered my US\$30k vinyl system, my vinyl system is still more open, direct and ultimately more musical. But the AMR DP-777 at least stands a chance of holding its own beside my US\$30k vinyl system, which was no small feat and hence I ordered one myself.

They were all very good DACs, but for pure sound quality, which not just HiFi quality but also music quality, I will rate those DACs as follows (in order of my preference):

AMR DP-777

dCS Debussy / Meitner MA-1 DAC (tie for second place)

Weiss DAC202

Audio Research DAC8
Acoustic Arts Tube-DAC II

Normally for a layman like me the mini review will and should stop here, however as the DP-777 was something really special and has so many features (twin DACs, Zero Jitter mode, Bit-Perfect Mode, selectable filters, Tubed SPDIF inputs, analogue inputs etc.), I decided to do a more in depth review on my own DP-777 (which arrived a couple weeks ago, still burning it in). So for people who are interested, hopefully they can get a fairly detail and fair view of the unit.

I also planned to see how much I can get out of this little machine by optimizing my computer and modifying the DP-777 (e.g. trying different tubes) in the upcoming detailed DP-777 review.

(new additional, didn't know I can add more to the original post, as many have asked about my CAS setup, here is some info):



My CAS setup

(didn't want to put all of those into my signature, as it will be too long)

Ripping: was EAC and now dBpoweramp with AccurateRip enable

PC system:

Sony Vaio PCG-X505 Notebook (WinXP using MinLogon)

Apple Macbook (Mac OSX/bootcamp/Win7, SSD mod)

HP TouchSmart 310 (Win7, SSD mod, I also wish I got the 610 instead, 20" screen is still too small)

(all boot around 10-20s, so this is how lean/optimize the system are)

Playback s/w:

MacOS: Audirvana and BitPerfect

WinXP: ASIO/CPlay on WinXP

Win7: ASIO/WASAPI(event style)/CPlay/Jplay/J.River

Computer Connections:

USB cables (various, including battery powered ones)

Firewire cable various(This was used only for Weiss DAC202)

I personally don't mind Firewire at all, all my notebooks had it, but seems to me its biggest supporter in Consumer products (not professional), Apple, has dropped it (Sony dropped it a few years ago). So for consumer use, USB may be a safer bet.

Also my friend who worked for OEM with BridgeCo said BridgeCo has stopped the consumer side of the Firewire development (was there ever a consumer side of Firewire from BridgeCo?) and focus all their resources on AirPlay now. Their USB solution is basically too late to the market and its solution is only adaptive and not Asynch USB.

Also I have tried ripping my vinyl to 24/96 files (using Audacity),and then compared the ripped 24/96 file (playing back via a DAC) with the original vinyl on a A/B test, the results were very interesting indeed, but this will be another story for another day.

Digital Sources: Optimised HP TouchSmart PC/CEC TL-1X CD Player/AMR DP-777
DAC/Theta Digital DS Pro Basic II (old)

Analogue Sources:Koetsu Jade Platinum MC Cartridge/Tri-Planar arm/Kuzma Stabi
Reference turntable/AMR PH-77 Phono Stage

Amplifiers:The Gryphon Elektra Preamplifier/Convergent Audio Technology JL2 Signature
Mk 2 Stereo Amplifier

Speakers:Kharma Grand Ceramique Midi

Cables:Nordost Valhalla (interconnect and speaker cables)/Shunyata Research power
Snakes power cables