

dCS Rossini – MQA updates

by Chris Thomas

This is the review I was beginning to wonder if I would ever write. Back in 2015 Alan Sircom wrote a very comprehensive take on the then-new dCS Rossini CD/DAC and clock with the thought that I could follow it up with a user experience piece some time later. Now, much later than we originally anticipated, here it is. Since Alan's review it became clear that the Rossini, as a full blown streamer in its own right, would be looking at future software/format updates to add to its already superb musical qualities. Exciting things were beginning to happen in the world of streaming and Roon has since arrived. As the subscription service Tidal has grown in quality and high-def downloads and MQA have been coming of age, the Rossini has been looking like a different proposition altogether. Initially and from outside dCS, it looked like it might be a scaled-down Vivaldi that had inherited some trickle-down of the top model's DNA. The Vivaldi I believe could well be thought of as the greatest CD player that was ever made, when the history of the silver disc is written. But its price, especially for the full-blown four-box extravaganza, is prohibitive. Rossini, especially with its clock is no bargain basement device either for, but, as streaming has accelerated its own development and sound quality exponentially, it is beginning to look like a much more comprehensive proposition. Considered alongside the aforementioned Roon/Tidal axis, its appeal has grown. Especially when you consider the fact that exciting upgrades are being developed by dCS itself and that these will become available to their customers as free downloads then the whole idea of a future-proof, high-end digital music machine becomes a serious reality.

The usual prescribed upgrade path of changing hardware simply doesn't apply within this digital framework now. Rossini is currently on its third major software update as work on the streaming side has now incorporated the inclusion of MQA encoded material and there are always tweaks to the company's remarkable Ring DAC, a technology initially developed by the company many years ago. One of the things about this DAC architecture is its uniqueness and the company have the engineers who are constantly looking at ways of improving the sound quality. It's one of the bonuses of in-house development as opposed to off-the-shelf DACs. These software updates are no small things either. The sonic improvements that the mapping and filter enhancements brought to the Vivaldi a couple of years ago were nothing short of remarkable and increased the potential of that great machine considerably. When you buy a dCS, you're buying into an ongoing commitment to improved sound quality and this hopefully goes some way towards softening the blow of the initial financial outlay.

dCS has been a development partner in MQA and the latest software updates have bought the decoding of these files on board. This enhances still further the Rossini's formidable number-crunching abilities. Alan's review considered it primarily as a high-end CD player with excellent streaming possibilities, but like most of us, he found that, at that time, the quality of the streamed material and rips played a definite second string role to the CD side of things. The balance has changed now though and the rise in quality available from Tidal has grown surprisingly to the extent that I think it now sounds extremely good, especially as part of a system that incorporates Roon as its traffic cop.

The Rossini is emphatically a dCS product. It is beautifully constructed inside and out with a simple elegance to its design. It sports the full range of AES/EBU connections, balanced and single-ended outs, USB and Ethernet inputs and of course clock connections. There is also an excellent analogue volume control for those who might want to forgo a system preamplifier and operate directly into a power amplifier. The machine can be controlled by a comprehensive app while the latest dCS remote control is entirely logical and fit for purpose in a way that the previous hunk of metal never really managed. It is the first dCS player not to include SACD due to the shenanigans of the Esoteric brand and its supply to those who incorporated it. But dCS, having sniffed danger from afar, availed itself of sufficient stock to cover all eventualities. The Rossini utilises a Stream Unlimited drive and as a standalone CD player it is, in my experience, second only to the Vivaldi. But it has many more strings to its bow and is available with and without the drive itself which leaves potential customers with a large CD library with a stark choice. Do I buy the CD version or might I perhaps rip my entire collection onto a NAS drive and go with the DAC? Up until relatively recently, this was not a relevant question as comparing

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ripped files to the disc would in the vast majority of cases, bring a thumbs up for the disc, but not any longer though. If you heard streaming and files ripped onto NAS drive a few years ago you will, like me, be astounded at how much better the whole technology has become.

So what does a Rossini high-end streaming and NAS based system actually look like? The simplest way to explain is probably to run through my domestic set-up and the solutions to everyday situations that I was presented with when the system was installed. It would have been nice if the router was next to the audio side of things, but it wasn't so I needed a decent cable – an Audioquest in this case – that runs to the system and straight into a five-way

ethernet switch. This small (and cheap) device becomes the switching hub into which I have plugged a NAS, the Nucleus that runs the Roon software and the Rossini. There are no USB connections into the DAC as it's all done via its ethernet input. That's about it and it is a very compact yet powerful interface that has proved itself remarkably stable and glitch-free since the Nucleus took over the Roon processing responsibilities from my MacBook. ▶

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▶ There is something very special about the way the Rossini deals with digitally stored and streamed files. It is a full blown digital system hub in itself. It doesn't need a separate Upsampler or the dCS Bridge to open the world of Tidal, or other subscription-based music software. It is all done internally. The unfolding and decoding as well as the conversion is achieved within the Rossini and this is a very good thing indeed. Files from a NAS drive also sound very good and the high res files, in my opinion, are the best of all. Ripped files are more impressive than I have ever heard before and I have been dipping my toe in and out of this particular pool for years. So, unless you have a very high quality CD replay system I would suggest that ripping your CD collection will bring superior results but would also strongly suggest you try and get hold of some of the higher res files that are becoming more obtainable these days. I have been staggered at a 192kHz / 24bit *Pet Sounds* [Capitol] as well as a copy of Bill Evans' *Waltz For Debby* [Riverside/OJC] at the same resolution. I don't know how many times I have heard different versions of the Beach Boys' famous old album over the years. I thought I knew it but the new file has allowed me to understand the whole thing much better. All the vocals and instrumentation are so vastly different from what I assumed from listening to the

original vinyl and subsequent CD's, even the re-released, re-mastered marketing nonsense that has provided the record companies so much extra revenue over the years are sterile, flat and rather crude in comparison. The aged quaint and thin sound is all but gone and the vocal harmonies are a revelation. The Bill Evans file merely enforces what a wonderfully tasteful and expressive player he was. Nothing superfluous, just the language of music, now heard with a greater range of tonal colours and extraordinarily beautiful dynamic pushes and sustain than I have ever enjoyed it with before, except perhaps on a very high-end record player some years ago.

You can now stream MQA through Tidal Masters. I was supplied with enough MQA encoded music to be very impressed, but

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I was also running a separate portable HD crammed full of hi-def files too and if you are looking for the ultimate in streaming quality, then both these and MQA are the future, alongside whatever new formats might come along later. MQA certainly brings a cleaner presence and sense of reality but its main lure for me is the generous increase in colour and enriched tonality. It is more precise too and deals with silences much better. Heard with all the latest dCS software updates it has that rare combination of extreme detail and musical and rhythmic integrity and this runs through listening sessions. It strikes a very attractive balance between dynamic articulation and a real sense of instrumental and vocal warmth, presence, and shading. The way it copes with high-stress musical passages where the soundstage is crammed full of musical happenings is quite easily the best I have heard from any equipment with a digital source.

The Rossini handles the increased resolution of MQA and high-res material just as it does with standard resolution files. Any digital product that you can hook into the Rossini through any of its myriad of inputs will sound about as good as it gets. When my wife questioned me as to what the clock did, she asked if it told the time, which was an interesting question. Its inclusion

certainly brings a more solid sense of timing which is to be expected from the addition of a separate clock of such accuracy. But, like all dCS boxes, its effects are firmly focussed on the power and presence of the music. There's a further increase in articulation and dynamic swings that the single-box can't quite manage. CD or streaming based material simply comes alive and this means more expression, especially way down into the background of the mix, that lets you look deeper and deeper into the music. It is more focussed and certainly more nuanced. I guarantee that, if you hear it you will want it. You can always add it at a later date.

I said, at the beginning of this piece, that I had wondered if I would ever be able to write it. I had grown weary of people ►

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► citing streamed or ripped music as being a serious alternative to listening to CD. Some of the sounds I was hearing bellowing and screeching out of the speakers over the past few years were excruciatingly bad. Was it me? I had thought, “What are these people talking about?” Progress seemed to be slow but, over the past year or so, something happened. Tidal jumped from strength to strength and with the arrival of Roon and their resultant axis, a new dawn broke for me. I still firmly believe that the music should always transcend the format but I reckon we are at the beginning of a new age of high-end quality music in the home and the good thing is that it can only get even better. Indeed, it has got better during my few months with the Rossini. There is a lot of equipment out there that can take advantage of this and the dCS machines, from what I have heard, are right at the cutting edge. The Rossini, with or without the clock, is certainly expensive, but it provides the perfect gateway in the world of music and it has no built-in redundancy as the software improvements will no doubt keep coming as and when they are needed. With or without CD transport is up to you and the sales show about a 50/50 split at the moment I am told. But I am giving serious consideration to ripping my entire CD collection to a NAS, whether this will be physically inside or outside the Roon Nucleus is yet to be decided so I doubt I will be buying many CDs from now on. These are truly exciting times for those who need access to high quality music at home.

The revolution has been going on for sometime now; it's just that it has taken a while for it to have anything really relevant to say. It does now. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

dCS Rossini Player

Digital Inputs: 2x AES/EBU, 3x S/PDIF (1x RCA, 1x BNC, 1x Toslink), USB A and USB B, 2x RJ45 (one network loop out). Accepts data streamed from an iPod, iPhone or iPad via Apple AirPlay

Digital input precision: RJ45: FLAC, WAV, AIFF to 24/384, DFF/DSF formats to DSD 128. USB A: PCM to 24/384 or DoP to DSD 64, Asynchronous, USB B: PCM to 24/384 or DoP to DSD 128, Asynchronous, Class 1 or 2 mode. AES/EBU: Singly, PCM to 24/192 or DoP to DSD 64. Used as a Dual AES pair, PCM to 24/384kS/s, DoP or dCS-encrypted DSD to DSD 128. S/PDIF coaxial: PCM to 24/192 or DoP to DSD 64. S/PDIF Toslink: PCM to 24/96

Supported formats: PCM, DSD (DoP/DFF/DSF), MQA, FLAC, WAV, AIFF, WMA, ALAC, MP3, AAC & OGG

Analogue outputs: 1x RCA pair, 1x XLR pair. 2V or 6V rms for full-scale input, set in the menu

Upsampling Rates: DXD as standard or optional DSD upsampling

Filters: PCM mode: up to 6 filters. DSD mode: 4 filters

Crosstalk: Better than -115dB0, 20Hz–20kHz

Finish: Silver or Black

Dimensions (WxHxD): 44.4x43.5x15.1cm

Weight: 15.6kg (17.4kg with CD)

Price: £17,089 (DAC/Streamer), £19,999 (with CD transport)

Rossini Master Clock

Clock Frequencies: 44.1kHz/48kHz

Accuracy: Typically +/-0.1ppm

Word Clock I/O: 3 independently buffered outputs on 75Ω BNC connectors. Output 1: fixed at 44.1kHz Output 2: fixed at 48kHz Output 3: 44.1kHz, RS232 controllable

Finish: Silver or Black

Dimensions (WxHxD): 44.4x43.5x6.4cm

Weight: 8.2kg

Price: £5,519

Manufactured by: Data Conversion Systems Ltd

URL: dcsltd.co.uk

UK Distributor: Absolute Sounds

Tel: +44 (0)20 89713909

Url: absolutesounds.com