

Busking the dCS Bartók

SITTING BELOW THE VIVALDI AND ROSSINI SERIES IN THE dCS RANGE, THIS DAC IS ALSO A STREAMING MUSIC PLAYER, AND HAS A HEADPHONE AMP OPTION. RAFAEL TODES LISTENS

The name Bartók conjures up a composer whose music was rhythmic, often folk-derived or inspired, with a level of sophistication and intellectuality that would put off all but the most hardy. As a teenager, I once went busking to pay for my first audio purchase, a Teac reel-to-reel. I found a vacant pitch at Bond Street Tube Station, and began playing a movement from Vivaldi's "Four Seasons". I looked up to see the presence of a police officer listening intently. At the end, I switched to a piece of Bartók, and the officer duly moved me on!

The Bartók is a new arrival to the dCS offering, sitting below the Vivaldi 4 box system at the summit, and also the Rossini range, which contains an upsampling CD/network player, and an upsampling network DAC. Bartók comes from a similar place to the latter, as it too is a networking upsampling DAC, and while it contains one fewer power supply than the Rossini, it employs the same network card as the top-end Vivaldi. Priced at £11,999 for the Bartók including a serious headphone amplifier, or £10,000 without, it appears to represent astonishing value for this ultra high-end brand.

The Bartók is physically weighty, nearly 16kg, and feels like it's built of solid aluminium. The sculpted wavelike presentation of the Debussy is eschewed in favour of a flat frontage, with a high-resolution screen. There are 6 small control buttons and a dial which navigate through a set of menus. Both balanced and single ended headphones are provided for, but which should not be used simultaneously. Most of the control menus are reproduced on the Bartók iOS App, which works well, and covers the important features of the unit. It however doesn't include selection of the phase tests and white noise burn-in, (important for a reviewer to facilitate getting the unit up to speed).

At the rear, there are balanced and unbalanced outputs, three S/P DIF inputs (one of which is Toslink optical), dual AES balanced inputs, and 2 USB inputs: Type A for a drive and Type B for a computer. There's also scope to connect a reference clock unit if desired. The DAC can operate in USB class 1 or 2, i.e. up to 384kS/s or DSD/128. So, all in all, a comprehensive set of inputs, which is what you'd expect from a class-leading DAC.

There are two Apps which pertain to the Bartók. A recently released dCS *Mosaic* App is modern and easy to use, but doesn't have the full suite of features found in the *Bartók* App. Once the unit is up and running, the presentation of the *Mosaic* App makes music selection simpler, for example when streaming Tidal, the album covers presented are much larger, and for my limited middle-aged eyesight consequently easier to use.

Sound

Connecting the Bartók straight into my VAC Phi 200 valve power amps using XLR cables, driving my B&W 802d3 speakers, playing from a hard disc track of my quartet (Allegrì Quartet) on a 96kHz/24bit recording of the Roth Quartets, expertly recorded by Tony Faulkner (using a dCS ADC), there is an uncanny sense of being taken back to the day of recording. The soundstage is huge and to use an often abused word, truly holographic. The piece (the third movement of Roth's 3rd Quartet) starts with a set of pizzicatos, and *col legno*, where the strings are beaten by the wood of the bow. Achieving the precise sound of the complex after-shock of this transient, eludes most DACs. This is the first time I've heard this as accurately produced as it was when I played it in the session!

There is snap, and grunt, the cello registering its presence with authority and taut accuracy. This hi-res track is bursting with the dynamic energy of a live concert, the timing of the ensemble immaculate. The colours of the different instruments are instantly recognisable, the 1st Violin's Amati, bright and sweet, my ancient Maggini, made in 1590, darker and richer. There is an absence of mush or fuzz, the jitter being completely undetectable to my ears. There are DXD and DSD options: I plump for the DSD option as it sounds more natural to my ears.



RAFAEL TODES

There are a host of alternative replay filters, to which my 18 year son reacts and describes swiftly and articulately. I'm afraid these differences elude my 53 year old hearing. I wonder whether there are many under 45's who will have both the desire and the economic firepower to buy this unit!

Listening to the celebrated Carlos Kleiber recording of the *Fledermans* Overture, but now using the new Townshend Allegri Reference pre-production sample, a passive preamp, yields an interesting result. Now the Bartók is on maximum output, i.e. with no internal digital attenuation, and the colours of the orchestra become exquisite, and the sound stage is at its optimum. Bringing the volume down on the Bartók and up on the Allegri Reference as a test, shrinks the soundstage and greys in the colour of the orchestra. I assume this is caused by the number-crunching in the digital volume control.

For the ultimate mind-blowing experience I would therefore not recommend using the Bartók directly into the power amps, but use the best possible preamp. There is a facility on the Bartók to adjust output voltage, but invariably, there will be some truncation required of the digital word. When heard 'direct', the sheer dynamic force of the Bartók just grabs me by the scruff of the neck. Arresting, revealing and above all, truly musical. I can honestly say that after a decade of reviewing hi-end fare, I've not heard something as musically captivating as this.

The headphone amplifier section of the Bartók adds £2000 to the cost of the basic unit. The amp is an extension of the circuitry used in the preamp section. Using some Meze Empyrean headphones supplied by the distributor, it is clear that the headphone amp has the same characteristics that the DAC is supplying to the power amp. In other words, combination of forensic detail, punchy rhythmic dynamics, and that telling signature, many cubic metres of space in my head.

Listening to the fifth movement of their ever-wacky Messiaen *Turangalila Symphony*, with Jean-Yves Thibaudet on Decca, this musical orgasm is bombastically brought to life with instruments firing from all around. The textures are beautifully presented, with fast percussion, racy brass and the Ondes Martenot blasting all corners of my head!

Swapping to some Focal Utopia headphones and moving to the Simon Rattle/Berlin Phil recording of Haydn's eccentric but rather brilliant *Sinfonia Concertante* gives a lighter style of presentation which is equally good but very different. The qualities are there as before, fast and punchy, very well timed but with a different angle on timbres of instruments. This is one of the hallmarks of a really fine

headphone amplifier, it doesn't stamp its character on a pair of headphones, it lets them get on with the job they have to do without getting in the way. This is no ordinary headphone amplifier that's an afterthought: the care that has gone into the design and implementation is obvious. It has the matching qualities to the DAC.

The dCS Bartók DAC/headphone amp sets a whole new standard of performance for this price range, and indeed virtually any price range. For me it demonstrated a clarity, an energy and a musicality which is groundbreaking, with imagery which is life-like, not omitting a dynamic clout which combined with the most delicate finesse. It shares the groundbreaking elements of the composer after whom it is named, together with the universality of composer Vivaldi. Its performance snaps at the heels of its older brothers, and I feel that it represents an incredible high-end sonic bargain.



Colloms on the dCS Bartók

Rafael Todes brought his run-in review sample Bartók to try out in my Reference system - Magic0 S5II, Naim 500DR, ND555/PS555DR etc. After powering up the Bartók for a warm up, we initially tried out a few passive auto-transformer volume controls, noting the finer subtleties in their performances before engaging with this new DAC, which was supported on a matching top glass tier of a four stage Naim FRAIM rack.

First impressions were most promising, with powerfully extended crisp bass, well timed too, an analytical yet essentially neutral timbre and very clean and extended high frequencies. Image depth, width and focus were top class, and here it proved quite hard to separate from the '555 in absolute quality. Dynamics were very well resolved and the performance was well upbeat, both for rock and classical: undoubtedly a *result*.

While still very neutral in the now familiar dCS vein, here the sound was less clinical and more musically organic than I had previously experienced with this genre, and thus the Bartók could be a shoe-in for the big Naim streamer in many systems, so close is the overall quality of these two. However I also tried the Bartók volume control and would not for myself accept the sacrifice in sound quality: it significantly affected clarity, timing, image depth, micro detail and subjective dynamics, so I would leave it at one of the several fixed levels and use a top class external control instead. For non-critical party and background listening, by all means use the touch slider conveniently located on the dCS App screen, but be sure to reset to zero afterwards. Also, I did not try the filter option and on this sample the headphone output had stopped working.

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