

VARÈSE

JOSÉ VÍCTOR
HENRIQUES



dCS VARÈSE - THE DEATH OF 'DIGITAL SOUND'

HAS THE dCS VARÈSE SYSTEM FINALLY
SETTLED THE DEBATE OVER DIGITAL
VERSUS ANALOGUE SOUND?

José Victor Henriques

The Death Of 'Digital Sound'

Hificlube.net recently had the pleasure of visiting IMACUSTICA in Porto, where we were warmly welcomed by Guilhermino Pereira and Ricardo Polónia, who graciously shared their insights and recent experiences.

They had a surprise in store for me and my son, Pedro Henriques, in the main auditorium: one of those systems that makes even an experienced audiophile feel like a kid in a toy shop again—the new dCS Varèse, the Constellation Virgo III preamplifier, the Centaur II power amplifier, and a pair of Magico S5 III (2024).

The truth is that I had never heard the Varèse because David Steven, CEO of dCS, whom I interviewed for Hificlube.net in April this year, does not allow the Varèse to be demonstrated at shows and public presentations. He insists that distributors do so only under controlled conditions, without noise and distractions.

According to David Steven, and I quote:

“For us, Varèse was designed to celebrate music, get us closer to its true meaning and help us connect to the artists and those we listen with and share music with. For me listening to music is deeply personal and emotional and Varèse is simply a tool to relay music. However, I feel strongly its ability as a tool is diminished in noisy trade shows, which are not about music discovery.”

Minimalist art, Maximalist price

The dCS Varèse system comprises five aluminium blocks (six with the new CD/SACD transport), shaped and stacked like a minimalist sculpture, with a price tag comparable to that of

exclusive modern art.

The entire system costs over half a million euros, but the Varèse alone, configured with Core, two Mono DACs, Master Clock, and User Interface, is priced at around 300,000 euros!

In my interview with Steve, I explicitly refer to this ‘elephant in the room’ because I have always thought it was impossible to ignore the price of Varèse when listening to it.

But what is most impressive, even before the first note is played, is not the price: it is the feeling that we are witnessing an engineering achievement pushed to its limit – ‘organised sound’, as Edgard Varèse, the composer who inspired the name of this system, called it. The surprising choice of Varèse for the name is also discussed in the interview.

Audio Ecosystem

Varèse is a comprehensive digital audio ecosystem, designed from the ground up to optimise every stage of the signal path: from bit reception to final conversion.

The architecture is modular and spread across five chassis: Core, User Interface, Master Clock, and two Mono DACs – one for each channel. The Core acts as the ‘brain’ of the system, containing the up-sampling circuit, the main filters, and much of the noise shaping and control.

The Mono DACs are exclusively dedicated to D/A conversion, featuring the latest generation Ring DAC in differential mode, which doubles the number of current sources to minimise noise and crosstalk to near-ideal levels.

The new exclusive ACTUS link transmits the modelled data stream, clock, and control signals between the Core and the DACs. Timing is controlled by a dedicated clock system with two oscillators set to multiples of 44.1 and 48 kHz, aiming to reduce jitter to levels that, in practice, approach the limit of measurable precision.

The user interface – a dedicated chassis with touchscreen – is complemented by the new ACTUS Mosaic app, which deals with streaming services (UPnP, Qobuz, TIDAL Connect, Spotify, etc.). It offers precise control of the system, including a choice of filters and independently optimised circuits for PCM and DSD.

In practice, the Varèse is a luxurious digital hub that can, for all intents and purposes, serve as the sole reference music source. Perhaps not coincidentally, the Michell turntable remained silent throughout the listening session.

I Wish I Could

As we talked, before the demonstration itself began, Mariza could be heard singing ‘Quem Me Dera’ (I Wish I Could) at a low volume. And, in fact, the song couldn't have been more appropriate: we all wish we could have this pure source of music at home. But right there and then, I felt that Mariza's voice came across as wonderfully focused and clear against a backdrop of luminous silence.

And I don't mean black silence, as usual, because, for the first time, I realised that there is also life in silence, where the decay of the notes seems to linger indefinitely.



MAGICO S5: THE BLACK SENTINELS

The Magico S5 are no strangers to this sensation, commanding awe and respect—as silent sentinels—because the sound did not seem to come from them. This third generation of the S5 brings them even closer to the M series, both in ambition and engineering, remaining in the middle of the Magico range: above the A-Series, below the stratospheric M7 and M9.

It is a sealed, three-way speaker with four drivers:

- a 1.1' (28 mm) tweeter with a diamond-coated pure beryllium dome,
- a 6' midrange
- midrange driver and two 10" woofers, all from the latest Graphene Nano-Tec Gen 8 generation, mounted in a thick aluminium sculpted enclosure.

In the A5, Magico introduced a long-lasting foam suspension, replacing traditional rubber, to mechanically 'loosen' the cone: the foam is lighter and less restrictive, improves cone/suspension integration, shortens settling time, and thus helps reduce distortion.

This concept has been transposed to the S5's 6" midrange driver, now featuring a 3-inch pure titanium voice coil, two large neodymium magnets and a copper dust cap to linearise the magnetic field.

The Magico S5 is a true full-range speaker, capable of reaching down to 20 Hz with authority and control, without relying on reflex tricks, which look impressive on paper but are unconvincing in typical rooms that are too often incompatible.

The fact that the S5 2024 remains true to Magico's sealed enclosure philosophy results in fast bass with

impressive 'start-up' and no 'drag' or boominess. It is the king of bass that ignores the room and focuses solely on the music.

In his presentation, Ricardo Polónia mentioned an incredible sense of 'airiness' created by the foam in the midrange cone suspension. From the Varèse to the Magico S5, nothing appears to be lost in translation.

"I left convinced that the issue is no longer the digital genesis of sound, but rather the costs of playing the bits correctly."

Constellation Virgo III

The Virgo III preamplifier features Constellation's exclusive Line Stage Gain Module: a fully complementary and balanced design with two symmetrical circuits, one for the positive phase and one for the negative phase, to keep the signal as clean as possible.

The power supply is dual-mono, featuring separate R-core transformers for each channel and a third transformer for the control circuits, ensuring dynamic channel independence.

The Centaur II, in its stereo version, is one of those amplifiers that seem undersized for the Magico S5. However, it delivers 250 W per channel into 8 ohms, 500 W into 4 ohms, and 800 W into 2 ohms, with a response from 10 Hz to 100 kHz (+1/-0.5 dB), and employs fully discrete, balanced bridge circuits.

According to Ricardo Polónia, it is his amplifier of choice for extended listening sessions, due to its refined power and tonal neutrality.

Audiophile Demographics

Conversations are like cherries; once you start, you can't stop. Therefore, we spoke a lot before, during, and after each track we listened to. Perhaps because our brain doesn't need to process the music played by Varèse, leaving it free to focus on more pleasant thoughts. Since the musicians are there with us, we no longer need to imagine them.

We discussed, for example, audiophile demographics and how it is becoming more challenging to attract young people to this mainly senior cult.

Young people today are passionate about computer games. The only way to attract them, according to Ricardo Polónia, who speaks from experience, is to let them listen on a high-end system like this one, not to the 'Jazz At The Pawnshop' and 'Cantate Domino' of yesteryear, but to soundtracks from games such as 'Expedition 33'.





Let There Be Light

I felt young again when I heard the track ‘Lumière’ from the album ‘Clair Obscur’, performed by Lorien Testard and Alice Duport-Percier, whose hypnotic voice is mesmerising. The soundtrack consists of 154 tracks totalling eight uninterrupted hours of music!

‘Lumière’ creates a contemplative, emotionally charged atmosphere, ideal for assessing not only the system’s transparency but also how it conveys the mood of the performer or character, influencing our own mood in a nearly spiritual communion.

Note: Clair Obscur: Expedition 33 is a dark fantasy RPG developed by Sandfall Interactive (France) and published by Kepler Interactive, released on 24 April 2025 for Windows, PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X|S.

Lucid Delirium

Varèse is not a machine; it is a metaphor. It embodies a kind of lucid delirium that exists only in art, never in science. It symbolises the human drive to continually push boundaries and, at the same time, becomes a form of reconciliation with the analogue tribe. Not because digital has overcome analogue, but because the discussion no longer makes sense. Peace, brother!

Varèse embodies a suspension of time. When the final note dissolves into silence—that living, pulsating silence, where decay resists premature death—we realise that we are not merely hearing better; we are hearing more deeply.

Varèse does not defeat ‘digital sound’: it transcends it. It invites us into a kind of intimate liturgy, where technology becomes invisible and only the pure presence of music remains, stripped down, luminous, and absolute.

If there is a gateway to the sacred in high fidelity, it is Varèse. Sadly, this gateway remains closed to ordinary mortals like us, except on that special day at IMACUSTICA - Porto

"Varèse is not a machine; it is a metaphor. It embodies a kind of lucid delirium that exists only in art, never in science."



VARÈSE

Website: www.hificlube.net

