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Price: £32,500

dCS Varèse Transport

Completing the now six-box Varèse 'stack', dCS's latest CD/SACD transport caters for those who want physical media as well as streaming. But does it have a 'sound'?
Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

It's tempting to imagine a Frankenstein-like cry of 'At last our creature is complete!' emanating from the Cambridge HQ of dCS. The arrival of the company's Varèse CD/SACD transport, retailing for £32,500, should come as no surprise to followers of the company's flagship digital solution [*HFN* Feb '25]. Bringing the complete Varèse 'stack' to a total of six units – the User Interface, Core, Master Clock and dual Mono DACs – the eagerly anticipated Transport also lifts the all-up price just north of £260,000.

Now it's here, what exactly is the Varèse Transport? And does it have a place in the brave not-so-new world of streaming music? To answer the second part first, the answer must be a resounding yes. There'll be many buyers – 'many' being relative in the context of a digital player solution costing over a quarter of a million quid – with extensive collections of CDs, and quite possibly more than a few SACDs.

PRIZED POSSESSIONS

Agreed, those collectors could have ripped their discs to network storage by now, even if doing so with SACDs is something of a faff, typically involving an elderly Sony PlayStation. Yet there are still those who relish the ritual of finding and prizing open a jewel case, and popping a disc into a physical player. Moreover, given the total price of the complete Varèse front-end, the add-on cost of the Transport may not be a stretch for those who want the complete experience.

So, back to the 'what is it?' question, and while the name is self-explanatory, there's a lot going on inside what dCS calls its 'quietest, lowest-vibration' disc transport to date. Playing 44.1kHz/16-bit CDs and SACDs in their native formats, the Transport interfaces with the Varèse Core using the company's ACTUS link. It's controlled from the touchscreen of the Varèse User Interface module, the Varèse remote control [p65], or the dCS Mosaic ACTUS app [see boxout, p63], where it simply appears as another input option, from which tracks can be selected for playback.

> 'The Transport interfaces with the Varèse Core via an ACTUS link'

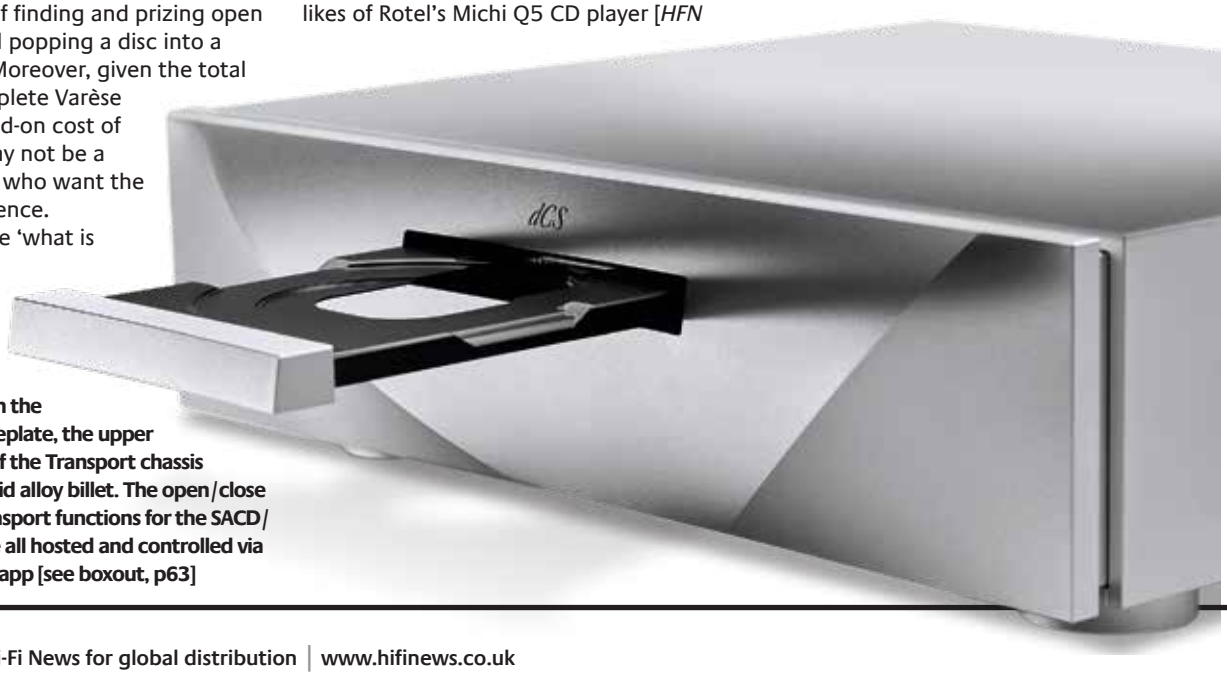
Here one hits a foible of the new unit – the disc mechanism, sourced from Marantz/Denon parent Sound United, and also used in the dCS Rossini and Vivaldi Mark II transports, does not read metadata. As a result, the only information you get via the Transport and Mosaic ACTUS app is a list of track numbers, with no artist/album/track title information, and not a sniff of any artwork. It is a little surprising, given that the Varèse system will be network-connected, that dCS hasn't included an element of online metadata look-up to add this information to the listening experience. After all, the likes of Rotel's Michi Q5 CD player [*HFN* Apr '25], at 'only' £5499, manages this trick in some style via its Ethernet port.

KEEP IT CLEAN

The Varèse Transport's mechanism was chosen for its ability to offer 'bit-perfect disc-reading and output', and is controlled here by dCS's own VCXO clock circuitry, reducing jitter [see PM's Lab Report, p65]. Additionally, great care has been taken in the mounting of the mechanism to mitigate against vibration and get the cleanest possible read of the disc – especially critical with the higher rotational speed and finer data pit structure of SACDs.

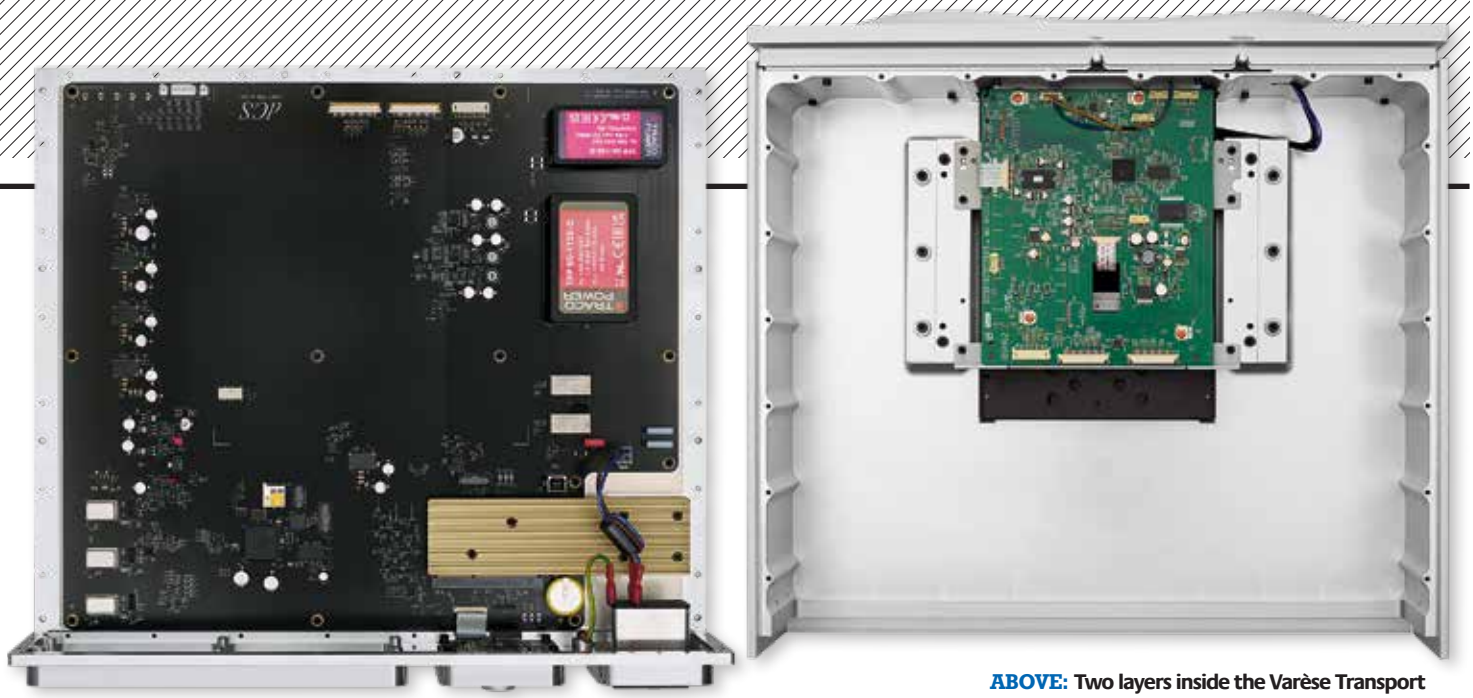
The Transport uses massive two-part casework milled from solid aluminium [see p63]. One part comprises the top, front and side panels, and mounts the transport using a solid alloy subchassis, while the section forming the base and rear panels carries the unit's electronics.

dCS says the Transport's solid mounting was determined after measuring the vibration caused by spinning discs, during which the use of various bushings was ⇨



RIGHT: Fitted with the familiar Varèse faceplate, the upper and lower halves of the Transport chassis are milled from solid alloy billet. The open/close and other disc transport functions for the SACD/CD mechanism are all hosted and controlled via the Mosaic ACTUS app [see boxout, p63]

'The CD/SACD Transport brings the complete Varèse "stack" to a total of six units'



ABOVE: Two layers inside the Varèse Transport with [above] the Sound United/D&M disc mech and control PCB mounted into the top of the chassis and [left] the main PCB, mounted into the base. This includes two switchmode PSUs, dual 22.5792MHz and 27MHz VCXOs, and an NXP iMX8 CPU for all ACTUS encoding/decoding

discounted in favour of mass to damp the transport. Hung using mounting plates from pillars extending down from the top-plate, the mechanism in the Varèse Transport is said to generate substantially less vibration than the more conventional mounting in other dCS transports.

The electronics here are combined on a single circuitboard, with only the ACTUS connector and front-panel LED being separate. The VCXOs, running at 22.5792MHz and 27MHz, control the audio and mechanism, respectively, with the former synchronised to the Varèse Core or optional Clock through a Tomix clock signal fed via the ACTUS link.

With all that, it's impressive that dCS has made setting up the Varèse Transport so simple. By contrast, installation of the Rossini Transport requires five connections to its matching DAC – three AES, one RS232 and one clock – while the Varèse system does it all with a single ACTUS link [see p65]. The Transport outputs data from discs in its native form, with any upsampling or format conversion the user requires carried out in the Varèse Core. Similarly, operation of the Transport's functions – play/pause/stop, track skip and eject – is carried out via the Varèse system's various interfaces because there are no physical controls on the unit itself.

ALL SYSTEMS GO

The quick and easy answer to 'how does the Varèse Transport sound?' is that it doesn't. Comparing CDs to streams at the same resolution from Qobuz and Tidal showed any differences to be so vanishingly small, if even there, as to be entirely irrelevant, leading to the conclusion that the main influence here was the digital capability of the full Varèse ensemble. The Transport, just like the Varèse's streaming implementation, simply offers a clean datastream to the Core and DAC(s), and they just get on with the job of delivering a world class musical performance.

Playing Brahms' First Symphony from the Danish Chamber Orchestra/Adam Fischer boxset of the complete symphonies [Naxos 8.574465-67] saw the Varèse, feeding Constellation Revelation 2 amps [*HFN* Jan '25] and Wilson Audio Alexx Vfx loudspeakers, revealing the clean, bright and detailed performance and recording. There were fine dynamics, punch and lyricism in the playing of the chamber orchestra – smaller forces than are usually deployed for these works.

At the time of writing, the three-disc box set was less than £20, which is a real bargain for an account of the works so insightful and involving. Nevertheless, switching to Tidal's lossless stream showed the presentation lost nothing in translation to streaming over wired Ethernet.

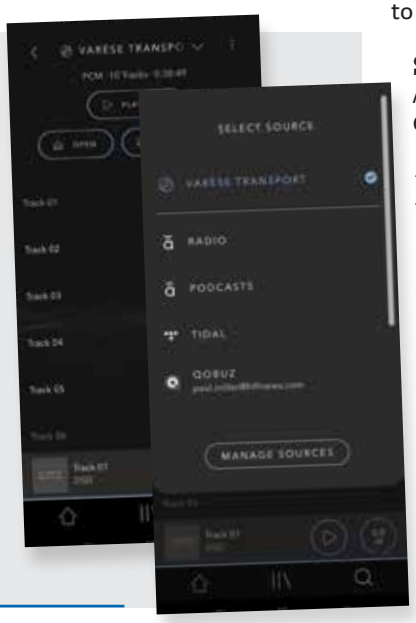
SACD LEADS THE WAY

A more intimate piece, pianist Jan Gunnar Hoff's take on The Beach Boys' 'God Only Knows', showed the quality of the recording, with both a close focus on the instrument and obvious ambience on a CD-quality stream, just the same as the CD layer on the hybrid SACD release from 2L [*Stories*; 2L-131-SABD]. However, switching to the SACD layer delivered both additional warmth and space in the piano and a more organic sound overall. There was a greater feeling for the ambient acoustic as notes decayed, and simply more body in the piano. The SACD gave more of that 'instrument in the room' impression.

Salif Keita's rendition of Cole Porter's 'Begin The Beguine', on the 1990 *Red Hot + Blue* compilation [Chrysalis CCD ⟳

ACTUS FOR DISCS?

As with the rest of the dCS Varèse 'stack', the Transport can be controlled by the system's remote handset [p65], the control interface module's full-colour touchscreen, or the Mosaic ACTUS app, to which the disc player, labelled as 'Varèse Transport', appears as an extra input [see screenshot, far right]. When selected, this will show the tracks on the disc loaded – but as noted in the main review, only as track numbers, with no album/artist/track title information. It all makes for a slightly old-fashioned experience, playing back music with the disc jewel box or booklet insert to hand to be able to see and select tracks. Disc playback therefore loses out to streaming in this respect, lacking the wealth of information that's typically on tap from network-stored music and streaming services. This area, at least, is a definite 'must try harder'.



ABOVE: No S/PDIF or USB ports here – the Varèse Transport hosts a single ACTUS connection that carries control data (play, pause, eject, *etc*) and a synchronising Tomix clock *into* the transport while outputting native CD and SACD/DSD audio data

1799] sounded joyous and vibrant streaming from Qobuz, with crisp driving percussion. The same track played from CD proved just the same, with nothing added or taken away. Similarly, U2's cover of Porter's 'Night And Day' failed to elicit any repeatable differences between disc and stream, despite its powerful, droning bass, Bono's recessed vocal and The Edge's guitar interjections.

VITAL ORGAN

With the 2015 Michael Stern/Kansas City Symphony recording of the Saint-Saëns 'Organ' Symphony [Reference Recordings RR-136], the Varèse stack, fed from the new Transport, delivered fine attack in the orchestra allied to excellent scale and warmth. Big bass chords erupted beneath skittering strings and woodwind. Then there was that momentary pause before the organ crashed forward in magnificent style, along with the radiant piano contributions in the final movement. I didn't have the SACD release [RR-136 SACD] for comparison, but the Qobuz stream at 176.4kHz/24-bit just about edged the CD sound from the Varèse Transport. The organ was bigger and more characterful, and emanated from a greater space.

The sound was also tight and clean, with abundant detail, on Joe Stilgoe's *Theatre* [Westway Music WWMCD005], despite the overall lushness of the balance in songs like 'Does Anybody Have A Map?' from the musical *Dear Evan Hansen*. There was also a lovely sense of scale and drama on Stilgoe's medley from Stephen Sondheim's 'Into The Woods', with his rich voice sweetly set against the Metropole Orkest.

This performance was matched by the better streaming services, as was the sound of the all-star AngelHeaded Hipster tribute to Marc Bolan [BMG 538605850]. Joan Jett's 'Jeepster' lacked the impetus of the original but had a brief, killer, guitar stab, while Lucinda Williams' take on 'Life's A Gas' was bonkers, but superbly focused. One possible advantage of the disc? Streaming services don't have the set's overblown version of 'Get It On' by U2 and Elton John – although on reflection that's perhaps a mercy.

> 'With the SACD there was more "instrument in the room"'

The Transport fought back with its rendition of Vivaldi's 'Violin Concerto in A major' [*The Trondheim Concertos*; 2L 2L-172-SABD]. The stream via Tidal matched the CD playback, but the SACD layer opened up the sound, making even more of the reverberant church acoustic in this exemplary recording by label founder Morten Lindberg.

ABOVE: Spin the Varèse remote's centre rotary for volume. Touch-sensitive glass screen around the edge offers pause, play, skip and mute via a finger tap

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

A fine performance, but it's hard not to form the impression that the rest of the Varèse 'stack' is doing the heavy lifting here, so close are streamed files to the sound available from CDs. Nonetheless, the physical disc player shows its true abilities with SACDs, when it really shines, and so for a Varèse owner with a large disc collection, this really is a no-brainer. It's the ganache icing for the Varèse cake!

Sound Quality: 94%

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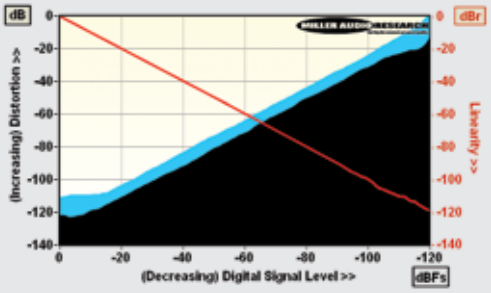
LAB REPORT

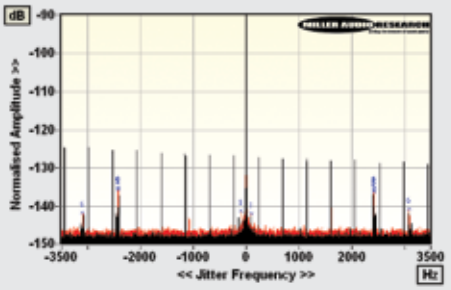
DCS VARÈSE TRANSPORT

Testing the Varèse DAC with 16-bit CD and (DSD64) SACD via the new Transport necessarily shows up slight differences versus 48kHz-192kHz/24-bit streams [*HFN* Feb '25]. The maximum 5.9V output and sub-1ohm balanced source impedance are obviously unchanged but the wide 118.1dB A-wtd S/N ratio with both CD and SACD also holds true. However, there are minuscule differences in distortion. SACD matches the 48kHz/24-bit result of 0.00003% over the top 10dB of the Varèse's dynamic range (re. 1kHz), while CD is fractionally higher at 0.00008% [see Graph 1]. The 20kHz figure increases from 0.0001% (48kHz/24-bit) to 0.0003% with CD and to 0.075% with SACD, this latter figure entirely dominated by the swell of ultrasonic requantisation noise that persists above 20kHz with DSD64 encoding.

Differences in low-level resolution are significant for while 16-bit CD manages +0.1dB at –100dB and –0.9dB at –110dB, SACD betters even the 24-bit result of ±0.2dB/–120dB with mere errors of +0.1dB/–120dB and a phenomenal –0.2dB/–130dB. CD jitter is governed by the 116psec J-pattern residual (and just 5psec at ±100Hz) while SACD has a mere 25psec at ±2.43kHz [see Graph 2, below]. Freq. response(s), stopband rejection and time domain behaviour all depend on your choice of dCS's six custom digital filters. F1-F6 all deliver a flat ±0.04dB/20Hz-20kHz response with CD, and with stopband artefacts suppressed to –125dB, –35dB, –12dB, –6dB, –127dB and –120dB, respectively. All filters are linear phase except the minimum phase F5. Filter F1 delivers the flattest –0.5dB/80kHz and –8.4dB/100kHz response with SACD, with F2 at –8dB/80kHz and F3 at –23dB/80kHz. F4 is the most attenuated, rolling away early at –23dB/40kHz. **PM**



ABOVE: Distortion versus signal level over a 120dB range (CD, 1kHz, black; SACD, grey; CD, 20kHz, blue) plus CD resolution/linearity (1kHz, red trace & Y axis)



ABOVE: High resolution jitter spectrum via Varèse Transport and DAC (CD, black; SACD, red with markers)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level / Impedance	5.88Vrms / 550mohm (XLR)
A-wtd S/N ratio (CD/SACD re. 0dBFs)	118.2dB / 118.2dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.00008% / 0.0003%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFs/–30dBFs)	0.00028% / 0.0005%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/SACD to 100kHz)	+0.0 to –0.02dB/–8.4dB
Digital jitter (CD/SACD)	116psec / 25psec
Resolution (1kHz @ –100dBFs/–110dBFs)	±0.1dB / ±0.1dB
Power consumption	30W (2W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / **Weight**	444x131x437mm / 20.1kg