HIFICRITIC

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE: B&W 800 D3, Apple MacMini, Auralic Altair, Arendal Monitor, Fostex HP-A4BL, Fostex TH610, C.E.C. CD5, Totem Sky, Teddy Pardo HPN, Teddy Pardo TeddyDAC, Musical Fidelity M6 Encore Connect, CH Precision A1, Google Cast, Chartwell LS3/5, Allnic H-3000, Clearaudio Concept MC, Q Acoustics 3020, QED Supremus, Teddy Pardo UnitiServePS, Mutec MC-3+ USB, Gustard U12, iFi S/PDIF iPurifier, Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series 2, Roon, HiFiBerry

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Editor | Paul Messenger

Writers
Colin Anderson
Chris Bryant
Martin Colloms
Stan Curtis
Greg Drygala
Andrew Everard
Nigel Finn
Kevin Fiske
Chris Frankland
Paul Messenger
Julian Musgrave
Bob Pyle
Rafael Todes

Publisher | Martin Colloms

Design | Philippa Steward

This has turned out to be a most interesting issue, as I've managed to pass many of my digital audio responsibilities over to the excellent Andrew Everard. I've never really had much personal enthusiasm for the digital stuff, and while that wasn't really a problem through the '80s and '90s, when CD was the only significant digital game in town, a subsequent proliferation of digital sources, devices and software have made my analogue preferences feel more than a little isolated. (Despite recent news that the UK sales value of vinyl discs had actually overtaken download sales for the first time since the 'vinyl revival' first began!)

I'll carry on experimenting with new digital sources as and when they become available – indeed, this very issue sees me trying out 16-bit streaming for the first time, and with some rather positive results (see also Auralic review, pp12-13, and Subjective Sounds, p60). But I'll no longer feel obliged to keep up to date with the latest digital developments, which, to be honest, is quite a relief.

Instead I'll be able to bang on about some of my favourite hobby horses, such as the premature death of rock music, the ludicrous and totally unjustified price inflation that seems to have afflicted hi-fi (and house prices) in recent years, and so on. (And I should manage to come up with some other issues before we go to press, I'm sure.)

Although it's neither finished nor ready for publishing yet (hopefully it'll appear in our next issue), I've started writing a piece with NVA's Richard Dunn, who has some very radical ideas about where the hi-fi business is heading. To summarise his views, he reckons that the effect of the internet has barely started yet, and to a great extent will undermine the role of the traditional specialist dealer.

He's very critical of the way prices have increased, and claims that this rise is often down to increasing trade margins to compensate for a shrinking marketplace. That's as may be: it may well be true but I'd have to undertake some further investigations to confirm it. (I do, however, believe that money itself has been dramatically devalued by something that we're supposed to call 'quantitative easing'; I prefer the phrase 'printing money', but maybe that's another story.)

Dunn's arguably most contentious claim is that internet forums might have rendered regular hi-fi journalism – and indeed the traditional specialist hi-fi dealerships – effectively redundant. He may have a point, inasmuch as every hi-fi enthusiast out there now has a voice that he/she can use to discuss equipment and its performance.

It's a powerful argument, as the availability of space for anybody to express an opinion has certainly expanded, and should allow a more democratic discussion on the merits or otherwise of specific items or combinations of equipment. Dunn's theory is that this will lead to sale-or-return deals on equipment *via* eBay and forums, and dramatically shake up the profit margins, which is certainly an interesting point. We shall see...

Paul Messenger
Editor

Digits is Digits? Maybe Not…

JUST GOT YOUR HEAD ROUND THE SIMPLICITY OF CONNECTING YOUR COMPUTER TO A DAC? RE-CLOCKING MAY BRING IMPROVEMENTS, SAYS ANDREW EVERARD

The biggest trend in DACs of late has been the appearance of asynchronous USB inputs. Not only does this simplify the route for music from hard disk to hi-fi – all you need is a USB-A-to-USB-B cable – but it also opens up the whole world of ultra-hi-res music. Indeed, provided the DAC can handle it, and a software player on your computer is compatible with the files, anything up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM files, or DSD256/11.2MHz (4x standard SACD).

It's all very simple: if you have a Windows PC you might need a driver to unleash this capability, but a *Mac* running something like Audirvana or Roon will handle it natively, and then it's just case of plugging into the DAC, and off you go.

Except….it's not quite that easy, and the direct connection isn't the only way. Neither is that home computer you use for everything from e-mail to online banking always ideal. Which is why I've been looking at some add-ons designed to improve the sound of 'computer audio', and even exploring the odd alternative.

Mutec MC-3+ USB

I first became aware of the c£800 Mutec *MC-3+ USB* though someone else raving about it. A couple of friends asked me if I'd come across this little black box from a German-based pro audio company, which could make a huge improvement when placed 'twixt computer and DAC. As I've recently been putting together (or indeed taking apart) a *MacMini* computer as a dedicated audio digital audio source (elsewhere in this issue), I was intrigued.

The Mutec *MC-3+ USB* is one of a range of studio-oriented digital clock devices, and while it does a lot more than I could want, what got me interested was its ability to take in a digital stream on a range of connections (including asynchronous USB), re-clock and convert it, and then output it via conventional S/PDIF or AES/EBU to an external DAC.

That got my interest as two of the digital converters I use (a Naim *nDAC* and the digital inputs of an *NDS* network music player), have no provision for a direct computer connection. Yes, you can stream music at up to DSD64 to the *NDS* over a network, but that didn't help my experiments with the *nDAC* much.

With the Mutec inserted and connected using a USB cable, it's possible to use the unit's (only slightly confusing) menu system to set it up, so that it not only re-clocks incoming PCM data and outputs a cleaned-up form to the DACs, but also converts DSD into a form that's usable with DACs without native 1-bit capability.

I have tried various programs to convert DSD to 176.4kHz or 88.2kHz 24-bit files (including the excellent free DSDtoFLAC), but somehow such conversions don't sound as convincing as those processed through the Mutec. Put simply, this little unit gives the sound more punch, more conviction and less 'grain', revealing more detail and ambience, better slam in the bass, finer textures in bass strings and drums, and just that bit more character on voices and lead instruments.

What's more, trying it with a variety of DACs able to take USB input reveals that even with 16-bit/44.1kHz CD-quality files (not to mention higher-sampling-and-bit-rate PC content), it manages the same trick of making the music sound more natural and less mechanical.

Certainly the *MC-3+ USB* isn't cheap. It will cost around £800 either online or *via* UK pro audio distributor Affinity Audio. But it has had a welcome effect across a wide range of DACs with which I have tried it over recent months, and it does prove rather addictive. If only Mutec could make a simpler version without all those word-clock inputs and outputs, aimed at the audio enthusiast rather than the studio professional and at a lower price, it might well be a runaway success. Even as is, Recommendation is clearly mandatory.

HIFICRITIC RECOMMENDED

Contact:
www.affinityaudio.com
Tel: 01923 265400

Subjective Sounds

PAUL MESSENGER

I'm not sure whether it's really appropriate to use this column to bang on about a means of receiving music over the internet, but Qobuz and TIDAL have loomed large in my leisure activities over the past couple of months, and have actually proved a generally positive experience.

I could see the attraction of streaming services when I visited the children, who had relatively small collections of pre-recorded music and seemed happy enough listening to compressed MP3-encoded files. They seemed perfectly content, streaming off Amazon via the TV and a pair of tiny B&W *MM1*. But I couldn't really see the relevance to my own situation, in view of my large music collection and dislike of MP3 encoding.

I was therefore rather surprised to find myself quite seriously impressed when recently experiencing the 16-bit streaming delights of Qobuz and TIDAL, courtesy Auralic's *Altair* (see pp12-13). Journalists get to play with such things without having to pay a subscription, which is certainly a worthwhile bonus, and it does mean that I can try more than one streaming service without the usual cost penalty. But I'm still not certain I can sensibly advise which one is the better. Auralic rates Qobuz, but on my explorations it seems a trifle less capable than TIDAL.

The bottom line is if course that streaming involves computers, and computers do have a will of their own, and if you don't like them (and I don't), they don't like to cooperate. I was happily listening to a live Ry Cooder concert from San Franscisco when the stupid thing simply stopped. I did eventually get the concert starting again, after spending about an hour restarting several things several times. But it was a frustrating experience that did nothing for either my blood pressure or my attitude towards computers.

Still, I suppose I'd never have heard Ry Cooder's version of Wooly Bully if I hadn't had access to a decent streaming service, so I ought to be grateful for such a merciful experience….only for the damn thing to crash again a few minutes later. Maybe I'd just chosen a 'difficult' album... who knows.

When everything's working fine, I have to say that streaming has a lot going for it, because of the way it can expand even a reasonably comprehensive record collection. I'm particularly fond of live recordings, and found a number of alternative versions of familiar (and sometimes not so familiar) tracks. Quite often I've acquired a studio version of an album without realising that live performance versions were also available from around the same time.

Being a Deadhead at heart, I was particularly pleased to notice that a whole collection of live recordings had now been released from the *Europe '72* tour. I've had the vinyl triple album for many years, but had never expected to hear the set that I'd heard live at the Bickershaw Festival more than forty years earlier. (I do remember the sun coming out for the first time that weekend, just as the Grateful Dead took to the stage!)

At the same time, I did try to play four Rolling Stones albums (including my all time favourite *Let It Bleed*), only to be told that none of my selections was available. It all seems to be rather random, as I had no trouble finding some very rare Beatles tracks, along with the regular mainstream material. It all seems to be very unpredictable.

What really matters, however, is that streaming is all about the music, not the hardware. The 16-bit/44.1kHz services like Qobuz and TIDAL sound just fine to these ears *via* the Auralic *Altair*, so what's not to like: it's a golden opportunity to expand your record collection dramatically for £20/month.