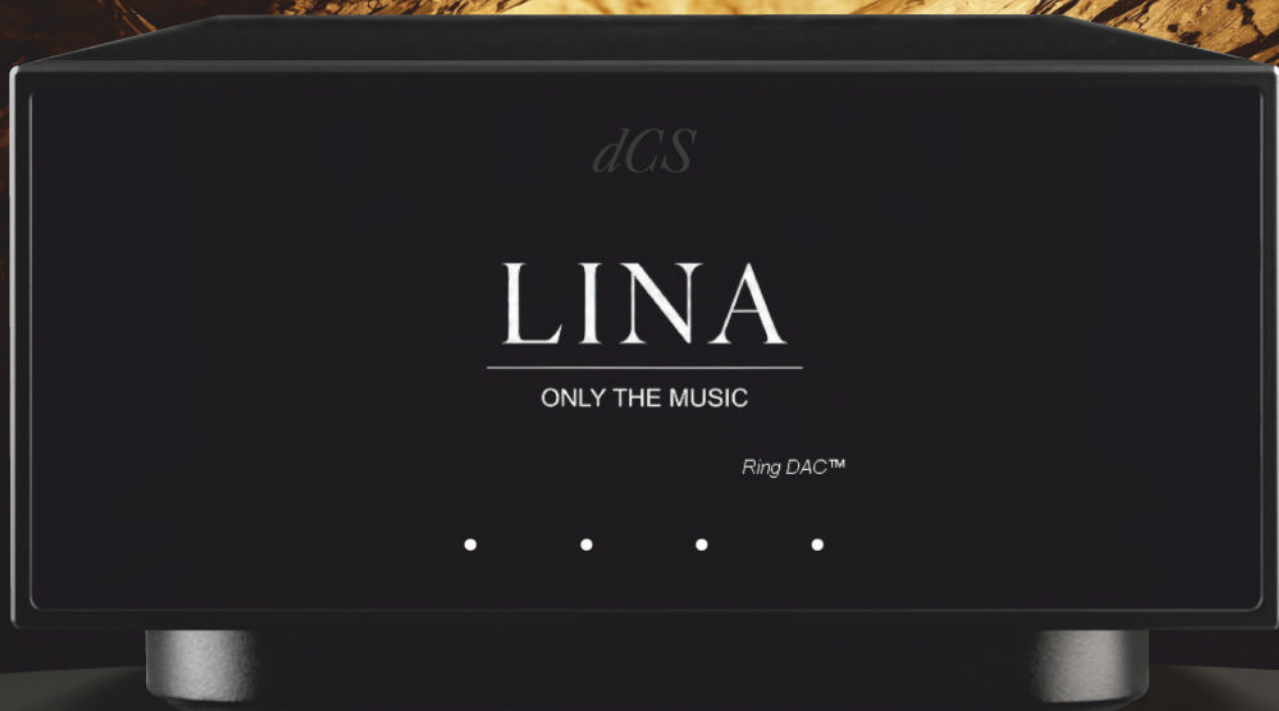


REVIEW

AUDIO ESOTERICA

HIGH PERFORMANCE AUDIO FOR THE MUSIC LOVER

hi-fi



dCS LINA

NETWORK DAC

Reviewer *Audio Esoterica* team

If the words 'dCS' and 'entry-level' spark the thought of a truly affordable digital product that embodies the qualities that have made the brand so dominant at the top end of the market, you are in for a disappointment. While buying a new Lina Network DAC is indeed the cheapest way to own something new that incorporates the brand's trademark Ring DAC digital conversion circuitry, this product certainly doesn't fall into what most people would consider the 'accessible' category.

What your \$22,000 does buy you, though, is a generous dose of dCS technology and a product that puts

all but the very best of its rivals firmly in the shade when it comes to performance. The company calls this product a 'Network DAC', though something with its capabilities can also be referred to as a music streamer.

DESIGN

Whatever you call it, this is a UPnP streaming component that packs most of the usual features and inputs you can expect from a streaming product today. Specifically, that means Spotify, Tidal, Deezer and Qobuz are on the menu, as is Apple AirPlay 2. This unit is Roon Ready for users of that now-established music management platform, too, and has the usual trio of digital inputs options — USB Type B, optical and coax (both RCA and BNC) — alongside a pair of AES/EBUs that are a reminder of the brand's beginnings in the professional world.

There are omissions of note, though, and they are Chromecast, Bluetooth and Wi-Fi connectivity. Given everything else it does, only you can decide if any of these are deal breakers for you. While acknowledging the convenience of a wireless connection to a home network, the recommendation at this serious end of the market is to go down the wired Ethernet anyway for the extra stability it provides. And, similarly, while the lack of Bluetooth is a miss, it's more acceptable in a product that puts performance so high on the list of priorities.

General standards of build are as high as you'd expect at this level. The Lina's casework feels incredibly solid and, at 10.3 kg, has a pleasant heft to it. Take a look inside and it's hard not to be impressed by the quality of construction and obvious care in the way the circuit is laid out. The front panel display looks a little basic but shows all the important information and remains readable from a distance. It doesn't show album art, though, which is a bit of a shame, but not exactly a major loss given the art will appear on the phone or tablet running the dCS Mosaic control app.

You can access the unit's set-up menus from the front panel as well as the aforementioned app. If you're using the main unit controls for the job, note that it isn't a proper touchscreen and that the four dots work as the controls. The app has been developed over the years into

something that's pretty comprehensive, but can feel a little slow and clunky at times. It is probably time for the company to have another look at this one!

There are a range of set-up adjustments available, from setting the Lina's output voltage to picking the ideal digital filter for your taste and system. Thankfully, dCS has chosen to pare back the number of filter options from its pricier models and here there are two that work with PCM streams and four for DSD signals. You can also decide whether the Lina switches the signal to DSD or DXD during the conversion process. The differences between all these choices are relatively subtle, but during our testing, the F2 PCM filter setting was the most favoured. As for the various DSD filters, the preference tended to shift according to the music being played. Needless to say, your own experimentation is advised here — to reveal your preferences, yes, but also to have fun doing it! The choice between DSD and DXD processing, meanwhile, was pretty clear, with the former option coming out on top.

The Lina DAC didn't have a volume control when it was launched, though a subsequent software upgrade added that functionality so that now the Lina can front a wonderfully minimalist system by driving a power amplifier or pair of active speakers directly. The ability to change the maximum output voltage, within the range of 0.2v to 6v, allows the unit to be optimised for use with a wide range of products, too.

That volume control software upgrade is an important point to note. dCS has an established record for making



This is an even-handed and transparent performer that stays faithful to the recording for better or worse

software upgrades available for older products, even those out of production. These upgrades can add functionality or even improve performance, and where possible, they tend to be free. This is certainly something the company should be commended on.

PERFORMANCE

Any product at this level demands a top-class system, and for this test we plugged the dCS into a Burmester 088/911 MkIII pre/power combination, driving either reliable veteran ATC SCM 50 speakers or Wilson Benesch's new A.C.T. 3Zero floorstanders (to which our sister mag *Australian Hi-Fi* recently gave a glowing review). Yamaha's exceptional YH-5000SE headphones also come into play to test the Lina DAC's various headphone cross-feed processing modes.

The Lina DAC holds true to the brand's honesty-first philosophy. It doesn't deal in sonic fireworks or 'wow' moments unless they are already in the recording. This is an even-handed and





THE HOLY GRAIL OF HEADPHONE PLAYBACK? THE LINA NETWORK DAC CAN BE ENJOYED IN A FULLY FLEDGED HI-FI SYSTEM, BUT dCS HAS TARGETED HEAD-FI FANS HERE BY ROUNDING OUT THE RANGE WITH A DEDICATED CLOCK AND HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

more delicate changes in intensity are reproduced with the finesse they deserve.

There's no need to break down the Lina's performance by input, either. While there has never been any question about the quality of dCS's DAC designs, there hasn't always been the sense that the streaming module performs to quite the same sky-high standard. That isn't an issue here: the Lina is just as good as a music streamer, across any of its sources, as it is using the digital inputs.

Regarding the various headphone processing modes, the standard crossfeed setting works particularly well, as does the first 'Expanse' option. Both of these manage to shift the Yamaha headphones' soundstaging more to that which you get from loudspeakers, and there seems to be very little in the way of distracting phase effects. Of the two, the dCS 'Expanse' is the one selected for most of the test. The second 'Expanse' mode doesn't work so well, for the record, sounding a little disjointed in comparison.

CONCLUSION

The Lina DAC is a hugely talented unit that performs to an excellent standard. It's a fine entry point into the world of dCS and certainly gives a large dose of the performance of the company's pricier products. While there's the odd question mark over the omission of certain features that might disappoint some, this remains a terrific unit and one that is easy to wholeheartedly recommend. It may be 'entry level' in dCS's world, but the Lina DAC still serves up a huge portion of the company's magic. **£**

CONTACT

dCS Lina Network DAC

RRP: \$22,000

Warranty: Three years

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transparent performer that stays faithful to the recording for better or worse. Feed it a bright and slightly aggressive effort such as Eminem's *Recovery* and that's exactly what you get. There isn't an exaggeration of the flaws of the recording, but the Lina DAC makes them pretty clear. Equally, it doesn't over-egg things, as some can, and still allows you to enjoy the good parts.

The Eminem/Lil Wayne duet *No Love* thunders along with plenty of verve. Earlier dCS designs, for all their neutrality and insight, could sound a little soulless and sterile, but that's not the case here. The Lina DAC sounds surefooted with rhythms and conveys the hard-charging momentum of the track well. It captures Eminem's passion brilliantly and delivers every syllable of his rapid-fire delivery with the clarity anyone — including Eminem himself! — would hope for. More than that, his voice comes through with naturalness and proper expression. There is natural warmth on display, or at least as much as he is willing to show while he shoots missiles in all directions.

Elsewhere, there's plenty of punch and a generous dose of power and authority in the lows. This is a coherent performance from the top-end, which is crisp and refined, to the deepest bass notes which remain taut and tuneful.

Those qualities are equally apparent when it's fed Beethoven's 9th Symphony. Here, the dCS conveys the scale and authority of the orchestra brilliantly. It keeps a firm hold of low-level instrumental strands even when the music gets demanding, and its sense of composure never falters. This is an organised and controlled performer that ticks every box when it comes to the mechanics of hi-fi, from having a focused and beautifully layered soundstage that remains stable regardless of the complexity of the music to deliver the sound with an utterly neutral though not sterile tonal balance. Detail levels are excellent, as is the convincing, unexaggerated way this unit handles the leading edge of notes. And large-scale dynamic shifts are rendered with skill while