

dCS Lina Streaming DAC Review



Even the most affordable dCS product clocks in at a price that will be beyond what most of us will consider spending on a digital source. For those lucky enough to be in a position to buy one though, this is an astonishingly capable and beautifully realised digital source that delivers performance that is a true reflection of the state of the art.

Pros

- Truly outstanding sound quality
- Exceptional user interface
- Superbly made and finished

Cons

- Not cheap
- Looks more austere than other dCS products
- Not as flexible as the Bartok



Introduction - What Is the dCS Lina?

The dCS Lina is a network capable streaming DAC of the sort that has come to become a common implementation of source equipment in recent years. Of course, while the specification of the Lina is conventional (to a point anyway), both its design and wider implementation are a bit different to most other devices on the market. The whole approach that dCS takes to the business of digital audio is both

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wholly proprietary and driven by priorities that are subtly different to many other brands and they pursue them with absolute determination.

For a good number of you reading this, the specification of the Lina is going to be wholly secondary to the more arresting notion of it costing £12,500. We've already looked at a dCS product in the form of the Bartok which back in 2021 was £14,499 in full fat headphone amp spec. Since that review was written, the Bartok has been updated again and now offers even higher performance. The drawback is that, in the same configuration with headphone amp, it now costs a brisk £21,500. This means that the Lina now represents the starting point for dCS ownership (and that... if you squint really hard... it meets my 2023 brief from AVForums to look at value focused items because it's the most affordable device of its kind). I will do my best to cover where that money has gone but it'll be up to you to make the final call on worth. Allow me to make the Lina's case for itself.

Specification & Design



A fair bit of the Ring DAC hardware of the Lina has been described in the Bartok review so, in order not to copy and paste the material from there, I would urge you to read it. Importantly, the Lina is the same as the Bartok as described in that copy, the Bartok now uses the newer APEX specification DAC in its hardware where the Lina does not. It's possible that the Lina may get this technology in future but that's not been publicly discussed by dCS themselves.

In relative terms, this means you still have a decoding system that is designed and implemented like pretty much nothing else in the audio market. People will periodically flag the presence of a FPGA (Field Programmable Gate Array) in the Ring DAC and assume that there might be something in common with Chord Electronics who also employ them but this isn't the case. As shipped, an FPGA is a blank slate and they can be employed for different purposes and the WTA filter' that Chord employs goes after different design priorities than dCS do with Ring DAC. What dCS focuses on is the elimination of

distortion. It falls outside the scope of these reviews to measure the Lina but it has been done by third parties and you can access the results online. By any objective judgement, the figures that it puts in are beyond more conventional DACs.

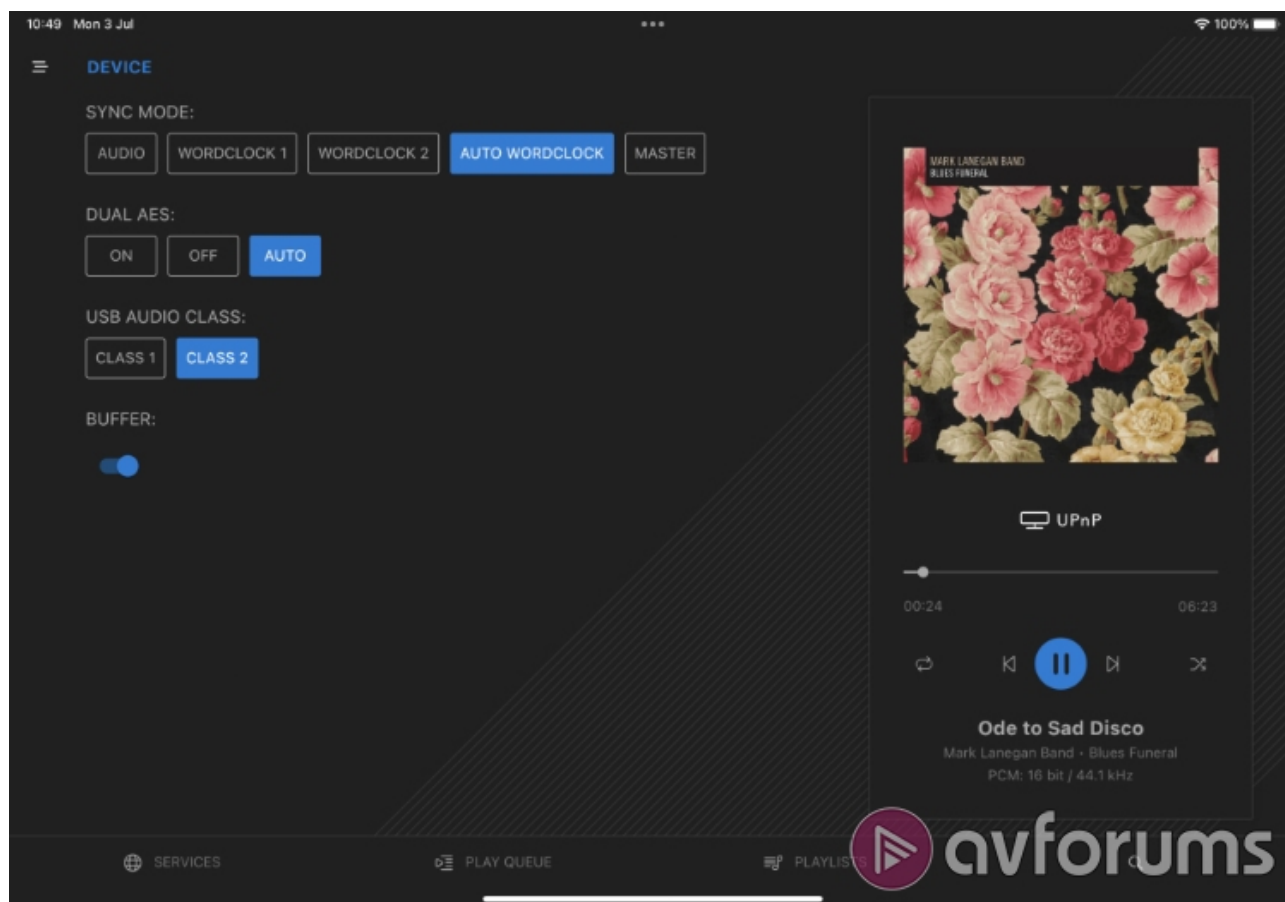
While the basic platform of the Lina is similar to the Bartok, it's simpler; with a smaller (but I must stress, still considerable) selection of adjustable settings and slightly lower connectivity. This comprises two USB-B (and a USB A connection able to read memory sticks) AES inputs which can run as a dual input), one RCA Sp/Dif, one BNC SP/Dif and one Toslink. There are also connections for an external clock which is also part of the same range.



More significantly, the Lina is also network capable. Connected over ethernet, it can access content on network libraries as well as Qobuz, Tidal (for which the Lina has MQA support) and Spotify (dCS pops a Spotify Premium flyer in the box which is one of the more mentally arresting Venn diagram intersections- that of compressed streaming service and twelve grand DAC ownership- I can think of) together with internet radio access. Everything is controlled by the 'Mosaic' app which is a genuinely pleasant bit of software to use. It's stable, logically laid out and attractive. There's no bells and whistles, just the sort of thing you can get your head around in two minutes and show family members how to use as well. With a view to convenience, you can also access the Lina over AirPlay and it is fully equipped as Roon endpoint too.

Everything outputs to XLR and RCA connections. The actual sample rate handling of the Lina is comparatively 'normal' for 2023; being as it is PCM to 384kHz and DSD to 128. This is lower than a number of more terrestrial devices but I am at pains (as ever) to stress that content available in resolutions beyond this is vanishingly rare but how much this matters to you in the event of buying one is something you'll have to decide for yourself. Something else to consider is, while the Lina has a volume control- added after launch via software update, it operates exclusively via the app which puts it in a slightly different place to the Bartok. It's part of a range of Lina components; the aforementioned

clock and a headphone amp that form a trio of units that are in with a reasonable shout of being the ultimate expression of headphone listening. This does mean that the Lina DAC on its own isn't as flexible as a Bartok but, if you have a volume control elsewhere in the system and listen via speakers, you aren't doubling up on features you don't need.



Aesthetically, the Lina range differs from the rest of the dCS family but that isn't necessarily to its disadvantage. The front of the unit is- at first inspection at least- devoid of controls. There are in fact a row of buttons on the underside that combine with the display on the front panel to allow you to move through menu functionality. The display itself doesn't show album art but instead tells you most of things you might realistically want to know about the content you are streaming at the time. Like the Mosaic app, it's clear and logical; I would argue more logical than the Bartok is. It's not showy or designed to impress your mates- there's no VU meters or the like- but it reflects the learned experiences of people who stream a lot of music.

And then there's the way that the Lina is built. In the pictures, the dCS looks like a slightly austere black box but the physical reality is a little different. For starters, it comes in packaging that is an unalloyed delight. If you think you can't get excited over a box, you might want to unpack a Lina. I can imagine the potential for buyer's remorse when you are twelve and a half grand lighter is considerable but the dCS does a fine job of offsetting it. The unit itself is exquisitely made. Like the control app, it's not showy but the level of attention to detail in the dCS as a whole is genuinely impressive.

Is it pretty though? Well, that's a tougher call. There isn't the drama that some other devices at this sort of money bring to the table and some people might find the half width casework to be slightly jarring

with otherwise full width equipment so I don't feel the Lina gets unqualified approval. It has appealed to me the moment it left the box though and the quiet, understated aesthetic has continued to grow on me the more I used it.



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How Was the dCS Lina tested?

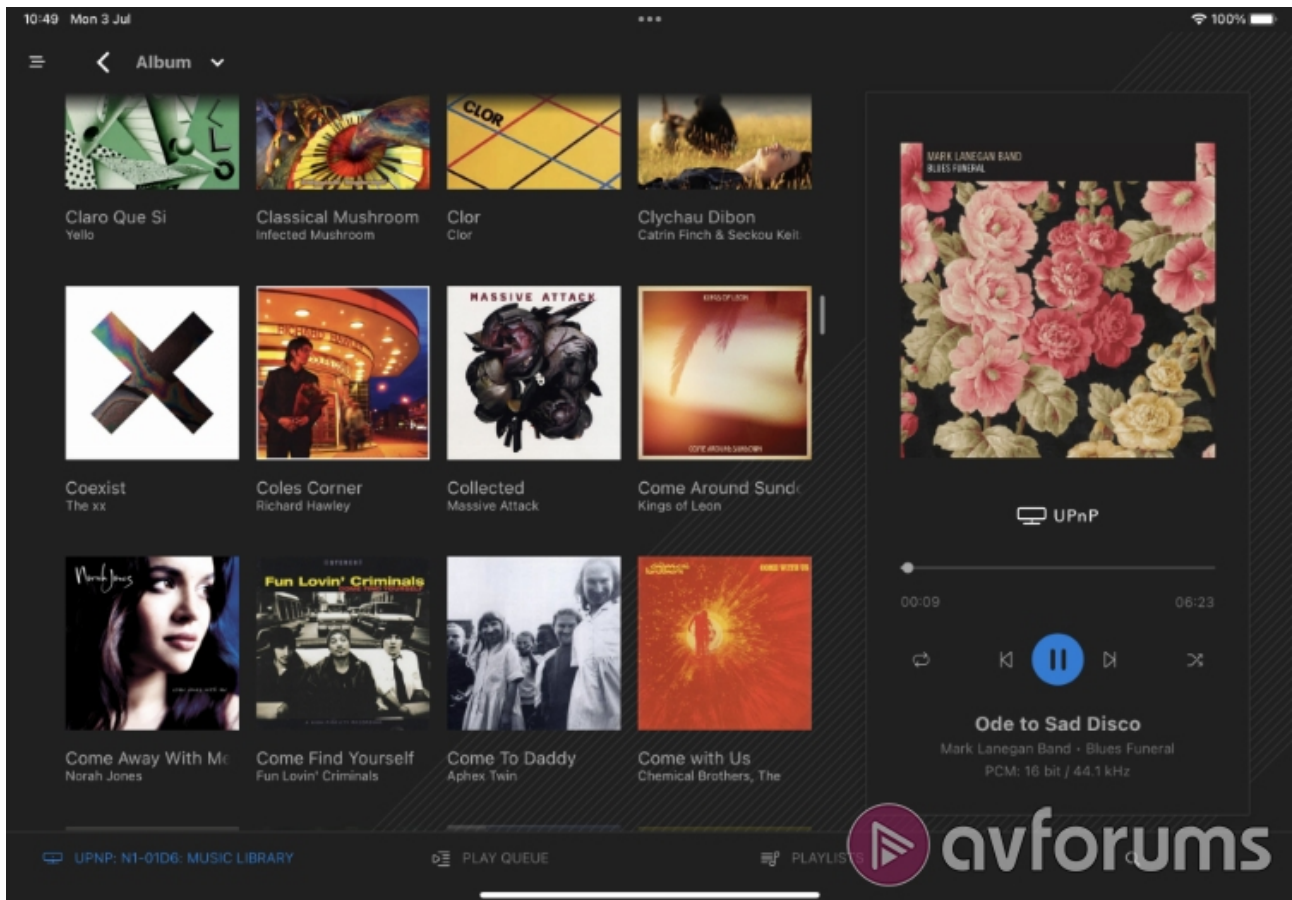
The dCS has been used connected to the XLR input of a Cambridge Audio Edge A integrated amp running into the Kudos Titan 505 and, for a short period of initial running for the latter, the Epos ES14n. It has been tested both via the Mosaic app and as a Roon endpoint over network and via the USB-B input. AnLG 55B7 OLED has also been connected over optical for a short stint too. Material used has been FLAC, AIFF, DSD, Tidal Qobuz, Spotify (mainly to say I have) and a limited amount of on demand TV viewing.

Performance

When I tested the Bartok, I noted that it is not a shock and awe device. It's not about making things 'more real than real', it simply sets about being better than you felt a digital device could be. The difference when I was getting the Lina in and running was that I have experienced the 'dCS effect' in this room. There were more expectations this time around.

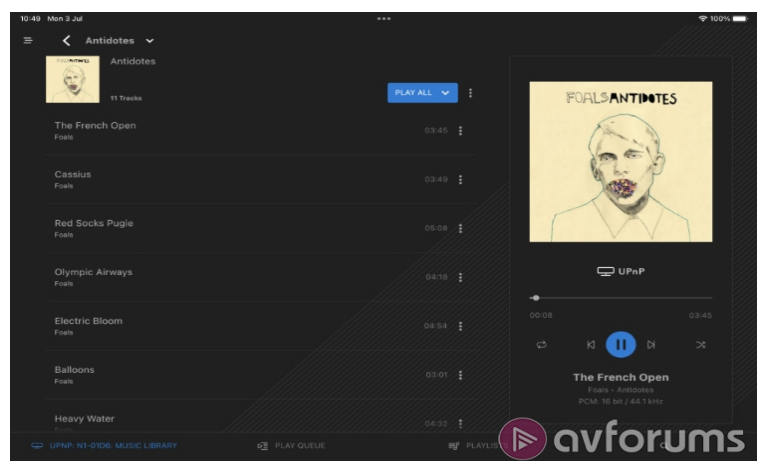
First up though, setup is painless. Connections are logical and everything does exactly what it the manual says it will. Some aspects of the Lina's menu setup are a little less clear than the Bartok; activating the video mode for the optical input without which it has the lip sync of a badly dubbed kung

fu movie on ketamine is not the work of a moment for example, but, once set, you can get everything done in Mosaic.



And... even with that increased sense of expectation, the Lina DAC delivers the same experience that so delighted me with the Bartok. In the first two hours, I potted through a wide selection of material. At one end was dense, mechanical electronica of Warrington Runcorn New Town Development Plan's The Nation's Most Central Location while at the other was the utterly pared back instrumentals of The Tel Aviv Sessions by the Toure-Rachel Collective. Beyond both being 'music' (and there will be those that query that descriptor with WRNTDP), there's no points of similarity. They generate different responses and require different attributes to shine. In both cases, the dCS sounded like it was built for that album and that album alone.

What the dCS does is bring an order, a sort of base principles of what is happening on the recording that sounds blindingly obvious as a concept; what piece of audio equipment is not doing this? The reality is different though. Even when I switch between the dCS and the resident Chord Electronics Hugo TT2 and Mscaler, the dCS manages to make the instruments of The Tel Aviv Sessions sound more effortlessly



believable and to frame them in a space that just feels like they're at the end of my room. It's not embellished, more that tiny points of performance that the Chord duo have that shape the performance are not there with the dCS.

This does make the Lina a bit of a pig to describe because it puts very little of itself into what you hear. It might best be likened to receiving a new pair of glasses after you've lived with the existing prescription for *coughs* maybe a little longer than the recommended two years. The world you're viewing hasn't changed but what felt like how you saw it before is sharper, more vivid and better defined than you ever remember it being. Precisely because there is so little character to this approach means that when the stunning instrumentals are packed away and the massive, brooding noise of Warrington Runcorn's Rocksavage is put on in its place, the dCS uses the same abilities to dig microdetail out and make everything make that little bit more sense than it did before.

In as much as the dCS does have a definable attribute, it is the bass response. Digital bass has come on in leaps and bounds in more recent years; you only need listen to older CD players- even ones that were fairly pricy beasts- to experience it. What the Lina does is not so much add more bass to its reproduction; that would go against the basic tenets of what it was trying to do. Instead, the Titan 505- a speaker with formidable low end anyway, seems to go that fraction deeper and the bass response itself has that same absolute clarity as the upper registers. Going back to almost anything else afterwards feels like your ports have been attenuated.



This absolutely even handed approach also means that the dCS is as emotionally engaging as the music you choose to play and- you have to hope anyway- that you chose your music collection because of how it moves you. I've found my notes littered with these moments of joy. During The Hardest Part, a Blondie track on Eat to the Beat which achieved little when released as a single but is one of my very favourite Blondie tracks, Debbie Harry does the best version of her lyrical snarl, ever committed to a recording (it's at 2:33). I've listened to it hundreds of times over the years but the rendition via the Lina was still a 'what?!' moment. Likewise, the amazing 'whun whun' noise in Four Tet's Locked (at the 3:00 mark) is weighty and tangible; you feel it as well as hear it. Living with the Lina is being given one of these moments every few minutes for as long as you keep feeding it music.

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Conclusion

In the hard light of day, you will have to decide if my witterings in any way make sense of this device and whether it can possibly be 'worth' (to whatever value you ascribe to that word in high end audio terms) over fifteen Eversolo DMP-A6s. The dCS might be the most affordable of its kind but it's still a lot of cash and it needs more in the way of supporting hardware than the Bartok does. You're going to need equipment that is pretty formidable in its own right to get the best from it too.

And yet, for me at least, the Lina DAC tugs at my heartstrings more than the Bartok did. I'm a vinyl person which means I adjust my volume in the analogue domain so the lack of volume knob is not a huge impediment to me and much as I don't doubt that adding the headphone amp will be mind blowing in the best possible way, I have speakers and I like using them. This then is everything I loved about the Bartok in a more focused and more appealing package. It's the digital source I would happily spend the rest of my days with were I not roughly £12,450 short at the time of writing. The Lina is the entry point to a whole different world of digital but for many of us, it would also be all the digital source we'd ever need. The Swiss Army knife functionality of the Bartok means the simpler Lina is not the all conquering Best in Class but it is an unquestionable Best Buy.

Scores

