

# stereophile

## LINA 2.0

Over the past 12 months, we've released several performance upgrades and new features for dCS owners. We delivered a major firmware upgrade for the dCS Bartók and launched the next generation Bartók APEX. We also added digital volume control and volume lock to the dCS Lina Network DAC, allowing listeners to use the DAC as a pre-amplifier in two-channel audio setups.

The Lina Network DAC 2.0 update brings several new features that are designed to enhance performance, aid ease of use, and give listeners more control over their playback experience.

It is available to new and existing Lina Network DAC owners and is provided free of charge.

Supporting streamed and wired digital sources up to 384kHz/DSD128, the Lina DAC is the beating heart of the system, and employs dCS's proven Ring DAC technology to bring music to life with remarkable clarity and detail—while preserving your music's organic beauty.

**Now available in silver.**

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# REVIEW

dCSonlythemusic



# GRAMOPHONE DREAMS

BY HERB REICHERT

**THIS ISSUE:** The dCS Lina stack, DAC, Master Clock, and Headphone Amplifier.

## The Lina chronicles

I was at least 40' away when I spied my first dCS Lina stack at CanJam. It was black, sitting conspicuously on a table emitting a strong *Space Odyssey* Monolith vibe. I can't remember which headphones I used, but I do remember how good it felt to face the stack and experience its startling clarity, showing off the bass end of a piano keyboard with a force I could feel in my shoulders. That impactful piano bass plus the stack's matte-finish, neo-Brutalist façade, and feels-like-cashmere volume control, made a strong first impression.

We all know everything sounds like what it looks like—right? It also sounds like what it's made of, who made it, and how much it costs. Well, the \$13,500 Lina D/A converter could hardly *look* more different or *feel* or *cost* more different than the \$46,500 dCS Vivaldi. The Lina is dCS's lowest priced streaming DAC, so it *has* to sound less good than my long-term reference Bartók, or the Bartók Apex I reviewed in GD75. That's just logical, right?

I also wondered, what can the Lina DAC do that my beloved \$6500 Denafrips Terminator Plus D/A converter, or the excitement-inducing \$3098 KTE Edition of HoloAudio's Spring 3, cannot do?

### First listen

My quest to address those questions began with the first recording I streamed through the Lina via its Mosaic control app: the soundtrack to the 2023 movie *Poor Things*, which I have not yet seen. When I'm looking forward to a new film, as I am to Yorgos Lanthimos's latest, I read everything I can about it, watch the trailer, and learn the plot. I might even go to YouTube and watch talk show appearances featuring the movie's principal actors. Always, when I am extra excited about a film, I buy or stream the soundtrack. If I hate the soundtrack, I may never watch the film. If I like the soundtrack, I might play it over and over until I have it almost memorized. That way, when I see the film, I can watch how its sound and visuals are woven together and get a sense of how the director wanted the audience to respond emotionally to the narrative.

The chief reason I am stoked for *Poor Things* is that it stars three talented actors with strong faces and dynamic personas: Emma Stone, Mark Ruffalo, and Willem Dafoe. And now, after playing Jerskin Fendrix's soundtrack a half-dozen times through the dCS Lina DAC, I am fascinated by how most of the sounds, on most of the tracks, appear to suggest the dynamic real-time thinking of Emma Stone's character Bella. Each scene's sounds flow like quick-moving thoughts, making me feel like I am observing Bella's mind operating just

behind her big, wild eyes.

With the Lina DAC, the *Poor Things* soundtrack demonstrated how easily music can communicate the *inner experience*

of living—way better than words, which seem better suited to explaining ideas than describing sensations or feelings.

Nevertheless, the effect of swapping in a new DAC is simple to assess: I just notice what I notice that I didn't notice before, with the old DAC. In this case, my first impression with the Lina playing the *Poor Things* soundtrack (24/48 FLAC, Sony-Milan/Qobuz) was how spatially expansive and physically present it made the soundtrack sound, and how big-screen it made the soundspace “look.”

During my first day of listening, I wrote “feels real” in my notes. What I meant by that (I think) was *unimpinged*. The Lina was offering an extraordinarily clear view of





the “reality” of the recording.

My goal with these Lina DAC auditions was to keep what it drives as simple and familiar as possible. For the first part, I connected the Lina server-converter to HoloAudio’s Serene preamplifier sourcing the Parasound A 21+ power amp driving my Falcon Gold Badge speakers, with all Cardas Clear Beyond wire. For the second part, I double-checked my observations from the first part using the Lina headphone amplifier with a variety of top-tier planar magnetic headphones.

Watching movies in theaters is exciting because theater sound is engineered to power a big room. Audiophile sound is mostly faint clouds hovering between boxes.

A movie theater is a voluminous dark space where, when the movie’s going, every air molecule is charged with high-powered sound energy. You can feel movie sound on your skin and bones, even in the quiet passages. I presume the multitrack version of the soundtrack I hear in the theater is less dynamically compressed than the 24/96 “domestic” version I stream at home.

When I played the *Poor Things* soundtrack through the Lina and my LS3/5a’s, it seemed that some amount of the uncompressed theater version was coming

through. In my system, the Lina DAC didn’t just kick out some cinema-scale dynamics; it made the *Poor Things* soundtrack sound bigger — much bigger — and more room-filling than it was with my NOS DACs, like it charged the air more.

As it expressed those *Poor Things* dynamics, the Lina DAC did not sound mechanical, hard, or gray. Nor did it overdamp, discard, or dull reverberant data I knew from previous listenings was on the recording.

What the Lina did best was expose subtlety, which made listening a fuller, more complex experience, exposing the different sonics of the various tracks of my Walter Greisking Debussy piano collection, which were recorded at different times with different equipment, possibly in different places. The Lina revealed this clearly by reproducing the subtlest levels of reverb in what felt like their proper proportions.

As David Chesky says, “recordings are all about the ‘verb!’” When recorded reverb is exaggerated or curtailed, it either blurs, fuzzes, or oversharpens the sound, making very different recordings sound very much alike. That’s not high fidelity.

Compared to the Bartók Apex, the Lina’s sound (without the Master Clock) had a slightly different textural quality, not

coarser or finer grained but as though I was viewing performers under a different quality of light. The Lina’s light felt slightly more brilliant than I remember with the Apex and maybe 3° cooler. I rather enjoyed this Lina light — which changed considerably when I changed the Lina’s Filter and Mapper settings as described below.

### Lina tech

The Lina DAC 2.0 DAC came in a thick, easy-to-lift (14" × 20" × 11") cardboard box with no tape at all; its end flaps were sealed with industrial-grade rubber cement. On its broadest side, it says “dCS only the music.” On its smaller side, it says “Made in the United Kingdom.” To open the Lina’s box, I had to grasp a glued end flap on both sides with the fingertips of both hands and pull briskly upwards. More fun for me than slitting plastic tape with a box cutter.

Snuggled inside the corrugated outer box was a luxurious-looking lidded box — the kind women’s hats come in, made of black, fabric-textured cardboard with a big, silver-inked dCS logo and tagline. Under this lid, I found a black, synthetic-leather envelope containing a thick booklet of startup instructions and a clear plastic envelope holding a soft cleaning cloth for the Lina’s display. Under that partition, in

a cloth bag, was the attractively proportioned Lina DAC, which measures 4.8" high × 8.66" wide × 13.3" deep and weighs 16.3lb.

The menu of digital inputs on today’s DACs can be unpredictable. But I like it when I get all the options the Lina offers: two AES3 inputs, two electrical S/PDIF (one via BNC, one via RCA), one TosLink, one USB Type B, and one USB Type A, plus Ethernet (LAN). Both balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (RCA) analog outputs are provided. There are also two Word Clock inputs, two “Power Link” connectors via RJ45, an IEC connection, and a rocker switch for main power.

The Lina’s easy-on-the-eye display sits above four tiny white-light touch buttons that occupy the center third of a neat, smartly designed touch panel. The panel’s glossy surface responded well to my greasy artist fingers and required frequent application of the included display cleaning cloth.

For these auditions, I connected the Lina DAC/server directly to my router via its LAN input and downloaded dCS’s Mosaic network control and streaming app. So far, in my diverse DAC auditions, I’ve found dCS data delivery, operated by the Mosaic app, to result in music with what feels like a purer transparency than I get from my Mac

mini or Roon Nucleus+. Using Mosaic with Qobuz felt very minimalist.

### What’s inside

During a phone conversation with John Giolas, dCS’s vice president of sales and marketing, I asked him to explain how the Lina DAC is technologically different than the Bartók converters I’m familiar with. He responded that in designing the Lina, “dCS applied no limitations.” They told their engineers to do “everything they wanted without compromise” to optimize sonic performance within the Lina’s form factor and at the Lina’s price point.

John said that the Lina DAC is built around the Ring DAC in the Vivaldi with a slightly different implementation, and that the Lina employs the latest “flex-rigid” circuit board topology, like the Lina headphone amp I reviewed in GD82. As far as he knew, John said, these Lina components were the “first audiophile products” to use this cell technology, derived from phones and cameras, which reduces noise by eliminating the point-to-point wiring traditionally used to connect separate circuit board-mounted subassemblies. When I asked about the Lina’s power supply and transformer, he responded, “Same as Bartók!”<sup>1</sup>

I reviewed the Lina headphone amp separately<sup>2</sup> because in this report I want to feature the Lina DAC as a stand-alone two-channel audiophile product, to see if it is capable of going head-to-head with any other converter in its price class.

### Close listening

My first night of close listening with the Lina was highlighted by a CD transported from my Onkyo C-7030 player, connected via S/PDIF on RCA: Walter Gieseking playing the *Complete Piano Music of Maurice Ravel* (NCA CD LC 12281). On page 546 in his *Essential Canon of Classical Music* (North Point Press), David Dubal described Ravel as “an elegant Apollonian” and an “exquisite jeweler,” but for me Ravel is a more distinctly modernist extrapolation of Debussy’s dreamier, more sensation-based creations. In *Gaspard de la nuit*, Ravel’s three poems for piano, I experienced death and the abyss, a hangman standing on a gallows, plus devilish imps dancing on glistening water under sparkling lights — and all I had to do was press Play, close my eyes, and listen. The dCS Lina and Walter

<sup>1</sup> See [pcbway.com/pcb\\_prototype/What\\_is\\_a\\_Rigid\\_Flex\\_PCBs.html](http://pcbway.com/pcb_prototype/What_is_a_Rigid_Flex_PCBs.html).

<sup>2</sup> See Gramophone Dreams in *Stereophile’s* March issue, at [bit.ly/March2024Dreams](http://bit.ly/March2024Dreams).



Giesecking played these Ravel sound poems with brilliance and light-saber precision, especially on the second poem, “Le Gibet” (“The gallows”); the metronomic ticking of the last seconds of the prisoner’s life was riveting and bell-clear. By the end of this 5:48 track, it was obvious that the Lina was presenting Giesecking’s Ravel with more corporality and stronger forward drive than I get from the HoloAudio May KTE or the Denafrips Terminator Plus. The bass and treble ends of Giesecking’s keyboard were denser and more energized than with the May or Terminator DACs.

On *Gaspard de la nuit*’s last movement, “Scarbo,” the Lina exposed Giesecking’s small-note mastery of Ravel’s devilish-to-play composition. The Lina sorted Scarbo in a manner that made its tiniest parts more observable and comprehensible, something this composition requires to be enjoyable.

After spending a few days in the vision-inducing realms of Debussy and Ravel, I pressed further into the 20th century with the music of Alexander Scriabin via the album *Alexander Scriabin: The Poem of Ecstasy, Op.54, Prometheus, Op.60 & Piano Sonata No. 5, Op.53* (24/96 FLAC, BIS/Qobuz), with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra conducted by Lan Shui and with Yevgeny Sudbin on piano. I searched, as I usually do when listening to Scriabin, for what Scriabin biographer Arthur Eaglefield Hull called the “mystic chord” and scholar Leonid Sabaneyev later called the “Prometheus chord,” a chord or note sequence on which the mystical-minded Scriabin based some of his later works.<sup>3</sup> As I listened, I imagined this chord to be some form of shape-shifting tone arrangement used to suggest cosmic realms. Using the tone-precise Lina to study *The Poem of Fire*, I never found sounds I could point to and say, “There’s the Prometheus chord!” but I did notice ordered arrangements of reverberant, quasi-atmospheric sounds I felt alluded to higher realms.

What the Lina did that aided my search most was make me feel confident that I was glimpsing all, or nearly all, the musical information buried in the *Poem of Fire* file.

Up to this point, I’d been using the Lina DAC set up as it came from the box: Upsampling: DXD; Filter: F1; Mapper: 1; DSD Filter: F1; Crossfeed: Off; Max output: 2V. After a week of listening, I decided to try some other filters. I asked Giolas which settings he would recommend. He suggested some different Filter settings but emphasized the need to try Mapper 3; this change was easy to make with the Mosaic app installed on my iPad.

Per John’s suggestions, my new settings



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were Upsampling: DXD; Filter: 3; Mapper 3; DSD Filter: 4 (DSD ×2). With those new settings, the sound was immediately, recognizably different, but *how* it was different I couldn’t say without further listening.

At one point during that further listening, I felt the urge to play my cherished three-CD set of Samson François playing Debussy’s piano music. These Warner Classics discs (50999 638754 2 3) are “24-bit remastered,” and even through my iPhone, they come across as thrilling adventures. But now, with the Lina driven by the coaxial output of my almost-free Onkyo C-7030 CD player, they were more thrilling than ever because they sounded realistically *solid*. The Onkyo-Lina combo displayed an extra-ordinary amount of note-pushing force from the piano keyboard, taking my Debussy listening to the next level.

I’ve discussed a lot of piano music because the Lina DAC has a special knack for making pianos sound like large, dense structures with a tremendously powerful output, even when playing quietly. This facet of the Lina’s performance suggests it’s delivering musical information that my other DACs are not.

My listening to the Lina led me to ask, not for the first time: Why do CDs sound more *there* than streams? In my system, the acuter, denser presentation of CDs makes

most streamed 16/44.1 files sound blurry and virtual. I’m using a \$250 CD player as a transport feeding the Lina’s S/PDIF input and marveling at the obvious, qualitative difference between CD sound and streaming sound. Which one’s better? This is an aesthetic-sensibility question you must answer for yourself. What I know is, I just ordered more CDs.

What makes analog master tapes so mesmerizing is how they present recordings with what feels like complete coherence, as if every magnetic particle is being vacuumed off the surface of the tape. In a similar fashion, the Lina presented recordings with what felt like complete digital coherence. With a teaspoon of analog salt.

#### Lina DAC and headphone amp

I was enjoying how clear, solid, and expansive the Lina DAC sounded playing through my Falcons when I got to wondering if those impressions would be corroborated at higher resolutions using the Lina headphone amp (\$9750; see footnote 2) powering a few of the world’s finest transducers.

I started with Meze Audio’s 32 ohm, 101dB/mW Elite headphones playing the *Poor Things* soundtrack via Qobuz and the dCS Mosaic app. What I mean is, micro and macro dynamics were many times enhanced compared to my Falcons. What I wrote earlier about this recording was now doubly true: “some amount of the uncompressed theater version was coming

<sup>3</sup> Scholars disagree about the importance of this chord in Scriabin’s compositions.



through.” This Lina-Meze combo threw so much clarity and live energy into the sound that I texted my friend Sphere and told him, “The Lina is amazing. I feel like I’m getting everything!”

### The Lina Master Clock

All the above observations were made *without* the Lina Master Clock (\$7750). Because sequence is everything, I took my time, waiting to install the clock until my head was fully in tune with the sound character of the basic Lina DAC. And then I put it in.

Sixty seconds into the first track, I remarked to myself, “Well dang, *that* sounds real nice!” I smiled. I was responding to an easily noticeable increase in vividness, dimensionality, and transparency. It was not a loud change, but neither was it subtle. The clock-enhanced repro seemed distinctly calmer and sharper focused, with smaller, more clearly outlined molecules of sound. With the clock, I felt the music’s energy more because it occupied a larger portion of my room.

My Falcons have never sounded cleaner, bigger, or less inhibited than they did playing Andris Nelsons conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra on *Dmitri Shostakovich: Symphonies Nos. 2, 3, 12, and 13* (24/96 FLAC, Deutsche Grammophon/Qobuz). At no previous time had my LS3/5a’s sounded this transparent or awake. More than a few times, this demonstration-quality recording made me jump with surprise; I was startled by sudden loud sounds. The last time a digital recording startled me, I was using Mola Mola’s Tambaqui DAC, which specializes in push and jump factor. The Tambaqui delivered a high measure of clarity and could pound and dance and genuinely satisfy, but it could not do nuanced tone or fine lighting like the Lina, which made me constantly aware of those things. In my system, the Lina specialized in subtlety and superb left-brain/right-brain balance.

Besides more finely formed detail and less-fettered dynamics, the clock-locked Lina projected a more evenly lit, cloud-free space than it did without the Master Clock. The Lina’s clock-enhanced spaciousness



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seemed similar (visually and tactilely) to what I routinely experience with the Denafrips Terminator Plus, except in my system, the Denafrips’s space is sparkling deep-water moody while the Lina’s space was brighter, more straightforward, and more intensely energized.

I judge the quality of digital playback not by its resolution but by its density, rhythmic force, and the beauty of its space and light. The Lina excelled at all three.

Comparing the Lina to HoloAudio’s Spring 3 DAC was difficult, because the Spring 3 has its own distinct *vivo*, PRaT, and jump factor that I find quite engaging. Every time I put the Spring 3 in my big system, it runs over, jumps up, and greets me like a just-washed dog. It plays clear, fleet of foot, and vigorous. But it can’t match the Kodachrome transparency of its more costly sibling, the HoloAudio May DAC, or the sparkling depths of the Denafrips space, or the solid unmitigated realism of the Lina. With the Lina, I always felt I was getting the complete picture, presented

with absolute authority. And that’s something I’d pay extra for.

### The wrap

The chief thing I’ve learned from reviewing is how the best audio products are the ones that achieve *long-term relevance*. It’s not for nothing that the Klipschorn, Denon DL-103, Technics SL-1200, the Koetsu, the Ongaku, the Linn LP-12, and several versions of the BBC LS3/5a are still in production.

If any digital products that require periodic software upgrades could ever pass the long-term relevance test, it would be Data Conversion System’s Lina Stack. The Lina 2.0 DAC, Master Clock, and headphone amplifier feel like they are operating on a performance plateau that will not easily or quickly be surpassed, which is what the above-mentioned products felt like when they were introduced.

The first audiophile “stack” I ever used was the Marantz Model 9 amplifier supporting the matching Model 7 preamp, crowned by the nearly peerless 10B tuner. Like this Lina tower with its fancy DAC, that Marantz stack performed at a higher level than its contemporaries. Though long out of production, the Marantz stack has held its status and value for 60 years because it still looks amazing and sounds amazing, and because Saul Marantz, Sid Smith, and Dick Sequerra were engineering leaders with a shared long-term vision. I believe the minds at dCS are operating with a similar long-term vision.

My recommendation: get ye to a dealer or audio show and face the stack. ■

### CONTACTS

**dCS (Data Conversion Systems), Ltd.**,  
Unit 1, Buckingham Business Park,  
Anderson Rd., Swavesey, Cambridge  
CB24 4AE, England, UK.  
US distributor:

**Data Conversion Systems Americas, LLC**,  
PNC Bank Bldg.,  
300 Delaware Ave., Suite 210,  
Wilmington, DE 19801.  
Tel: (302) 473-9050.  
Web: dcsaudio.com.



### The dCS Lina headphone amplifier

Established in 1987, dCS is a British company that today projects a products-for-the-educated-class aura similar to the ones Linn and Naim have projected since the 1970s. Linn and Naim became famous for making analog products then later mastered digital. For nigh on 36 years, dCS has been widely respected for the sonics and engineering quality of its *digital* products. While it's part of a suite of products that includes digital parts—a DAC and a clock—this dCS Lina headphone amplifier is dCS's first all-analog amplification product.

The luxuriously matte-black Lina retails for \$9750 and is designed to be part of a trio of matching components. The others are the Lina 2.0 Network DAC (\$13,650) and its associated Master Clock (\$7750). When used together, these components make up a three-tier, monolithic stack of serious-looking black boxes that weigh almost 50lb and that, purchased together, cost \$31,150. dCS seems to have created this iconic-looking black monolith to further establish their brand in the global community of headphone aficionados. Walking around CanJam NYC 2023, it was easy to spot these unique, triple-decker monoliths from across the room. In use, it felt like an end-game headphone system. For this column, I

listened only to the headphone amp and not to the DAC/Master Clock combination.

According to published specifications,<sup>1</sup> the Lina amplifier is a solid state, class-AB design capable of delivering 2W into 30 ohms or 0.48W into 300 ohms with balanced 'phones, or 1.6W into 30 ohms and 0.2W into 300 ohms with unbalanced. dCS doesn't specify the Lina's gain, which can be switched between Low and High from the front panel. Low is for sensitive, easy-to-drive headphones and IEMs.

High, on the other hand, is for difficult-to-drive headphones, including such planar magnetics as the 47 ohm, 89dB-sensitive Abyss or HiFiMan's 80 ohm, 83dB-sensitive Susvara. According to the section labeled "Drive" on the dCS website,<sup>2</sup> "The Lina amplifier's design is optimized for 60 ohms, as that is where the headphones on the difficult to drive end of the spectrum sit."

dCS says that the Lina amplifier will drive "the full 14VRMS"—RMS is for root-mean-square, which you can think of as the average voltage output; the peak output voltage will be higher than this by a factor of about 1.4—into impedances as low as 45 ohms, to ensure that headphones that require voltage are adequately driven. "The Lina Headphone Amplifier employs a topology that is sometimes called Super Class

A or Class AA. This allows the amplifier to drive an impressive maximum of 4.5W per channel continuous into 45 ohms, while maintaining the excellent linearity typically associated with a Class A amplifier," John Giolas, VP sales and marketing at dCS, told me in an email.

"Like the rest of the dCS range, the Lina Headphone Amplifier uses a hybrid power supply. It features a toroidal mains transformer. This is then followed by switch-mode power supply elements, which work well at supplying the consistent DC voltage the circuitry inside the amplifier requires. The only flying lead connection inside the unit is from the transformer to the power supply circuitry—everything else is contained on the single flex rigid circuit board."

The Lina headphone amp includes three analog inputs: one stereo pair of unbalanced RCA, with an input impedance of 48k ohms; one stereo pair of buffered (high-impedance) balanced XLR; and one stereo pair of "unbuffered" balanced XLR for use with low-impedance source components including the Lina DAC. The unbuffered input utilizes shunt feedback to reduce common-mode distortion.

<sup>1</sup> See [moon-audio.com/dcs-lina-headphone-amplifier.html](https://moon-audio.com/dcs-lina-headphone-amplifier.html).

<sup>2</sup> See [dcsaudio.com/edit/lina\\_amp\\_drive](https://dcsaudio.com/edit/lina_amp_drive).





On the front panel are three headphone outputs: two 3-pin XLR—one each for right and left channels, plus one 4-pin XLR—and one 0.25" (6.35mm) headphone jack.

### Tools for fun

My plan for this Lina report was to keep my listening system stable and reproducible by others. That meant using Denafrips's Terminator Plus DAC feeding AudioQuest's Thunderbird interconnects, alternating with the HoloAudio's Spring 3 DAC connected with Cardas's Clear Beyonds.

### With HiFiMan HE R10P

When I played *Stravinsky: Histoire du soldat (version française)* (24/96 FLAC, Harmonia Mundi/Qobuz) through the Lina, powering HiFiMan's \$5499 HE R10P closed-back headphones, I felt as though I was listening to a live French radio drama ca. 1920. Isabelle Faust's violin, Alexander Melnikov's piano, and Dominique Horwitz's narration were presented as if each had their own recording track and those tracks were skillfully combined into an engrossing, faux-live mix, well-suited to headphones. The sound was sharp, lucid, and emotionally affecting in a way that made me want more spoken-voice radio drama. So I switched to Antal Doráti conducting the Royal Philharmonic in a 1965 performance of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* (16/44.1 FLAC, Decca/Qobuz), with Sean Connery narrating. With the Lina driving the R10P, the crisp period sound from this Decca *Peter and the Wolf* raised hairs on the back of my neck.

To every listener's glee, *Peter and the Wolf* recordings anthropomorphize the sounds of oboes, flutes, clarinets, and bassoons in a way that gives them special powers that can last a lifetime. Listening through HiFiMan's 30 ohm, 100dB/mW-sensitive R10P headphones, those instruments' magic powers seemed greater than they did when I was a child. At any age, it's hard to have a bad day if you take time out for a big wolf, a little boy, a dumb duck, and cat sneaking through the grass.

### With the Abyss AB-1266

Any claim to being a premium-level headphone amplifier must be backed up by an extraordinary listening experience with JPS Labs' Abyss AB-1266 Phi TC. The Lina did a fine job with that—but only after I remembered the gain switch on the right bottom of the front panel. Moving that switch from Low to High woke up the Abyss's planar-magnetic diaphragms, allowing for more clean volume than I would ever need. Say Hallelujah!

Listening to that Sean Connery Decca through the Lina-Abyss combo, the sound



was a touch dry compared to the tubed Feliks Envy and LTA Z10e amplifiers but well-formed, brisk, and super-transparent, with assertive beat-keeping and state-of-the-art vocal intelligibility. Plus! The Abyss and Lina were a hip, Bed-Stuylish combination. Recommendable.

### With the Susvara

I'm not sure when I first heard it, but the song "Sitting on Top of the World," written by Walter Vinson and Lonnie Chatmon of the Mississippi Sheiks, seems more perfect every time I encounter it. I sense infinite meaning hidden between its lines. It was first recorded in 1930 and has been covered by everybody from Bill Monroe and Cream, to Howlin' Wolf, Jack White, and The Grateful Dead. But the version that coddles my heart most is the one by Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley on *Original Folkways Recordings of Doc Watson and Clarence Ashley* (16/44.1 FLAC, Smithsonian Folkways/Tidal).

This was the first track I tried with the Lina amplifier driving HiFiMan's renowned Susvara open backs. Watson's vocals sounded incantatory, but before I start blathering about the Susvara's easy-flowing bell-clear sound, I am required to remind you that *you* could experience this Doc & Clarence performance through the Susvara headphones powered by this dCS amp at virtually any CanJam. So don't take my word for anything—go to a CanJam, sit by a Lina stack with your ears covered by Susvara's gold-deposited nano-membranes, and listen to any type of music. Then write in and tell me if you were sitting on top of the world.

The thing the Susvara does better than its peers is expose pulsing layers of finely rendered atmospheric energy, the kind large orchestras make to power large ven-

ues. Of course, the Susvara can do pop rock and reggae, but so can lots of less-pricy headphones. But only a few elite headphones can express the subtle densities, mood shifts, and enormous scale of works like Chausson's 1896 composition "Poème, Op. 25 I & II," from the album titled *Secret Love Letters*, performed by The Philadelphia Orchestra under the direction of Yannick Nézet-Séguin with Lisa Batiashvili as violin soloist (24/96 FLAC, DG/Qobuz). With the Lina driving the Susvara, this surprise-filled Chausson unfolded with *smooth* dreamy melodic ease, a feeling of poetic grandeur, and goosebump-level violin tone.

### With the Dan Clark Audio Stealth

While listening with the Susvara, I got this hunch the dCS Lina might be the exact right amp to power Dan Clark Audio's \$3999 Stealth planar-magnetic closed-backs. I imagined that the Lina's strong drive and bright, sharp-focus clarity would bring out those same qualities in the 23 ohm, 86–87dB sensitive (not easy-to-drive) Stealth. It wasn't a hunch; it was a prophecy. The first recording I played, *Dock Boggs: Legendary Singer and Banjo Player* (16/44.1 FLAC, Folkways/Qobuz), came through in a manner that made Boggs's voice and banjo unusually distinct and fully formed. The air and light surrounding Dock's words were clearer and lighter in mass than I remember it being with other amplifiers. More than once, in the middle of a recording, I smiled and nodded in happy appreciation of how effectively the Stealth and Lina complemented each other.

I like it when reviews have a high point, where some component pairing exceeds my expectations and shows both products in a new light. This was one of those moments. The Lina made the Stealth play brighter,



better defined, and bolder, while the Stealth made the Lina more nuanced and painterly. A divine match.

### vs the Feliks Envy

In the February 2023 Gramophone Dreams, I described how unstressed the Susvara sounded when driven by Feliks's Envy 300B headphone amp. "With most amps, the Susvara's character leans towards dark and serious," I wrote, "but the Envy erased that melancholia, substituting clear skies, sunshine, and flowers."

Not surprisingly, when I switched from the dCS Lina to the 300B Feliks Envy (with the Susvara), I first found the Lina a little dry and overcontrolled. But the Lina didn't care what I thought: It knew its overt transparency made the Envy seem hazy by comparison.

Remembering how the component that played before has a strong effect on what I notice when the new component begins playing—that order is everything—I switched back to the Lina from the Envy, whereupon I noticed how grainless the Lina was and how the Lina sounded more relaxed and less overtly declarative than I had previously thought.

Both amps displayed the kind of transparency we pay extra for, but the Envy infused its clarity with a touch of warm breathiness and a slight glimmer of luminosity. Listening to *Ellipses*, with Anastasia Kobekina on cello and Thibault Cauvin playing guitar (24/48 FLAC, Mirare/Qobuz), with Dan Clark Audio's Stealth powered by the Feliks Envy Performance Edition amplifier, I reveled in the artificial thrillingness of the recording's sound. With the Lina, my brain noticed more about the compositions and performances.

Neither the Lina nor the Envy had trouble powering the stubborn-to-drive Stealth. With both amplifiers, gain, volume, and dynamic headroom were more than sufficient. Playing *Ellipses*, the chief sonic difference between the \$8995 Envy and the \$9100 Lina was in the force and solidity of the sound. The Lina presented performers' images with a sculpted mass that contrasted with the Envy's gentler, more holographic presentation.

### vs LTA Z10e

Linear Tube Audio's 12W Z10e integrated loudspeaker/headphone amplifier plays my Heretic AD614 speakers with rich-toned EL84 tube finesse, but it can also play electrostatic, dynamic, and planar-magnetic headphones with high levels of resolve and naturalness. It retails for \$6950 and is the epicenter of my everyday music listening. Typically, the Z10e sits at arm's reach



on a shelf above my desk, but for this report I installed it in my floor system, driving my Heretics, receiving music from HoloAudio's overachieving Spring 3 DAC.

I was anxious to make this Z10e-to-Lina comparison, because there is no better way to describe the character of a new amplification product than to compare it to a well-known competing product.

For an amplifier with 10 tubes (that never seem to wear out), the Z10e does not sound noticeably tubey. The tube part of the Z10e's sound is peripheral and nonpervasive. I notice it only when it's putting a nice, slightly wet sheen on electrostatic headphone reproduction or enhancing the breathy parts of female vocals.

I noticed this vocal enhancement while enjoying Argentina's charismatic chanteuse Susana Rinaldi, who was born in 1935 and is famous for being the first woman to sing tangos. The album I'm stuck on is named after tango poet/lyricist Homero Manzi, *A Homero Manzi* (16/44.1 FLAC, RP Music/Qobuz). I'm loving it, because Rinaldi's vocals make me feel under her spell in a sensuous, intimate way. Played through the LTA-Stealth combo, Rinaldi's frisson-rendering vocals effectively accented the poetics of Manzi's lyrics. The effect was mesmerizing.

When I switched to the Lina, its superior drive better presented the cabaret drama and rhythmic dynamism of Susana Rinaldi's performance. This album's intense pathos felt more accessible with the Lina.

The chief difference between the dCS Lina and LTA's Z10e was in how they presented rhythm and transients. I would describe the Z10e's sound as *relaxed resolution*—presented with an easy flow and a touch of glow. In contrast, the dCS Lina presented detail and momentum in a more firmly structured way. Images in the sound-space were more conspicuously crystalline,

and the space around them was emptier.

### Conclusions

None of the above-mentioned products are inexpensive. But they are all spectacular performers, mindfully engineered to extract extraordinary amounts of low-signal truth and make listening to recordings intense and pleasurable.

I encourage all readers to audition every headphone, amp, and wire I've discussed in this article. And while you're doing that, watch out for goosebumps, tears, and laughter, because that's how you'll know if they can please for the long haul. ■

### CONTACTS

#### JD Ikigai

Lorentzstraat 75  
Roosendaal NL  
Tel: +31(0)620626025  
Email: info@ikigai-audio.com  
Web: ikigai-audio.com

US distributor

**Analog Matters/Big Ear Consulting LLC**  
1453 Rt US 1 North, Unit 32  
Ormond Beach, FL  
Tel: (800) 752-4018  
Email: analogmatters1@gmail.com  
Web: analogmatters.com

#### Data Conversion Systems, Ltd.

Unit 1, Buckingham Business Park  
Anderson Rd., Swavesey, Cambridge  
CB24 4AE,  
England, UK.  
US distributor

#### Data Conversion Systems Americas, LLC

PNC Bank Bldg.  
300 Delaware Ave., Suite 210  
Wilmington, DE 19801  
Tel: (302) 473-9050.  
Web: dcsaudio.com