

Computer Audiophile



We've all had those weeks that never end, stress us out, and leave us feeling shattered by the time the weekend rolls around. This has been one of those weeks for me. I'm not complaining, there are many worse jobs and places to live in this world, rather I'm leading into the antidote to stress and exhaustion. Some people sooth with substances, but I've found a reference HiFi system can be much better. Right now my reference system is quarterbacked by the dCS Rossini digital to analog converter.

This evening I sat down in my listening chair for a final listening session with the dCS Rossini. All the lights were out. The blue glow of the power indicators on my Constellation Audio amplifiers could be seen as well as the front panel of the Rossini. Other than those items, the room as pitch black. I leaned back in my chair and tapped play through Roon on Bob Dylan's The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan album.

As soon as the unmistakable acoustic guitar began in the right channel, my body eased up and started to unwind. Dylan's unique voice emanating from dead-center between the TAD CR1 loudspeakers put a smile on my face. The antidote was kicking in. By the time Dylan played the track out with his harmonica I was in a much better place physically and mentally than when I walked into my listening room.

The MoFi DSD remaster of The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan ripped to dsf files and played through the dCS Rossini sounded so organic, so realistic, so full, so lush, that I listened to the first 11 tracks without as much as a volume adjustment. When something sounds this great I don't make changes. Why fix what's not broken?

Perennial skip-over tracks such as Down the Highway had me sucked-in. Dylan's acoustic guitar through the dCS Rossini had incredible depth and dimensionality down through the lowest frequencies. As Dylan strums and plucks, each string can be heard as it should be heard, as a distinct different sound with unique tonal characters and richness. And to think I usually skip over this track. I guess hearing it in all its glory, as it was meant to be heard, can change one's mind. It's a great song that sounds great through the Rossini. This experience gives me pause, to think about why I skip certain songs when listening on other components. The dCS Rossini has made previously skipable tracks part of my must listen regimen. Yes, my listening regimen. The audio antidote to stress is a great HiFi

system with great music. It's capable of restoring one's health after days and weeks we'd rather forget.

regimen | 'rejəmən |
noun

1. a prescribed course of medical treatment, way of life, or diet for the promotion or restoration of health.

Still in a folky mood, I queued up the Audio Fidelity version of Peter, Paul and Mary's 1963 album *In the Wind*. Some of the tracks on this album aren't typically what I'd consider in my wheelhouse, but damn they sounded great. I couldn't stop listening. Again, the music continued reduced my anxiety and stress from the week by transporting me into another era. The song *All My Trials* was nothing short of amazing through the dCS Rossini. The full bodied and rich vocal harmony sounded so good it was like a drug of which I couldn't get enough. Listening to each individual vocalist when I wanted and listening to the magical blend of the group together most of the time seriously set me at ease. I don't know that I've ever heard a more touching version, a version that got to me this much, or a better reproduction of this track on any component or system I've heard to date. This is what HiFi is all about for me, listening to music and letting it get to me on many levels. The better sounding the system the better I feel.

A few weeks ago a good friend sent me an email suggesting I listen to Melody Gardot's new *Live in Europe* album. I gave it a digital spin at the time and wrote back that I was underwhelmed. Fast forward to this afternoon while I was driving in my car down I394 listening to Jazz 88 FM radio. The track *My one and Only Thrill* from this album came on and I was hooked. Upon returning home I email my friend back to say I was now onboard with the album.

Pressing play on this album through the dCS Rossini, connected to the direct input of my Constellation Audio Inspiration amplifiers, brought me much enjoyment. Listening to *My One and Only Thrill* through this system rather than my aftermarket car system gave me an even better feeling. The track opens with a piano but it's the very emotional sounding cello that sets the tone. Through the Rossini this cello sounds rich when out front, and mystically airy when backing Melody's vocal throughout the song. About 6:50 into the track the cello comes back to prominence and has this incredible smooth yet gritty sound that's extremely haunting. It's amazing that this is a live recording and it sounds so good considering it was released in 2018. Kudos to Melody Gardot for delivering the album and to dCS for enabling us to hear all of it as it was delivered by the artist.

A Bit About Hardware, Software, and Filters

Before continuing with my listening experiences, I should at least get into the hardware and software of the dCS Rossini. This DAC is the opposite of typical DACs that use off the shelf parts assembled according to application notes. dCS uses its proprietary Ring DAC, custom user selectable filters, custom mapping algorithms, and custom software platform all developed in-house. In addition, when many manufacturers of storied HiFi brands are cutting corners, dCS has managed to improve the quality of its products both inside and out.

dCS continually improves its products via software / firmware updates. With custom "everything" onboard, the company is free to add features and extend the life of its products until the hardware just doesn't have enough horsepower. During the review period I upgraded the Rossini with the click of a button that checked for the upgrade over the internet and automatically installed the newest version.

Certainly (in some circles) the most controversial part of the latest upgrade was the addition of MQA decoding and rendering. However, the Rossini isn't just another MQA capable DAC. But first a little about filters. The Rossini features six dCS PCM filters, one MQA filter, and four DSD filters. All "designed" by dCS. I put the word designed in quotes because it isn't entirely true but it isn't entirely false. dCS (Andy McHarg) worked with MQA to develop the first implementation of the MQA Reference filter. What this means is the dCS M1 MQA filter perfectly meets all 16 possible MQA filter coefficients exactly without having to be tailored to offset limitations or errors in the D/A converter. Because of speed, linearity, and frequency response of the RingDAC dCS was able to exactly match the ideal MQA reconstruction filter coefficients all the way up to 768k. So in other words, MQA came up with the theoretical ideal filter coefficients, and the flexibility of how dCS does things allowed the company to code those in to allow ideal filter responses.

There are two other aspects to the dCS MQA implementation that are different from most other manufacturers. First, with many other implementations, if MQA encode is turned on then all audio passes through the MQA filter. With the Rossini and all other dCS devices the DAC or streamer determines whether MQA encoded music is playing before applying the filter. Second, having a choice of filter responses is in the dCS DNA. From the very beginning, when the company approached the MQA project it was important that dCS users still had the ability to select traditional dCS filters with MQA material. Again, it's about flexibility and personal choice for dCS customers.

Control of the Rossini's features, including filter selection, can be accomplished most easily via the dCS iOS app (an Android app will be explored down the road). The app also enables the user to play music from a UPnP/DLNA server, Tidal, or a USB stick connected directly to the Rossini. In the true dCS spirit of flexibility for its customers, the company has also enabled AirPlay and Sotify playback.

During the review I used Roon for playback much of the time because of the tight integration between Roon's iOS app and the Rossini. Adjusting volume within Roon also adjusted the volume directly on the Rossini and vice versa. Two-way communication between the Rossini and Roon is a very nice feature.

The analog outputs of the Rossini, like all dCS DACs, can be set at 2V or 6V. I used the Rossini at 6V output connected to the Direct input of my Constellation amplifiers. This Direct input bypasses a gain stage inside the amp and is to be used with Constellation preamps or a limited number of DACs. Some DACs work well with this input, but most sound pretty flat. The Rossini is a great match for this input. Other DACs connect to the XLR input of the Constellation amps and carry on without any issues.

The Rossini has a complete menu of options and features that most DACs can't come close to matching. The user can customize it until content or have a dealer set it and forget it. Like the Vivaldi, the Rossini is one of, if not the most, versatile DAC in the industry.



Back to Listening

Finishing up my listening session I put on some classical music, Michael Stern and the Kansas City Symphony. The Reference Recordings release of Britten's Orchestra (out of print) is a favorite of mine and is capable of transporting me into another world through a transparent audio system. Don't get me wrong, I could enjoy this album on any system. However, it takes exceptional components to reproduce all of this Keith Johnson 24/176.4 recording in a way that enables me to get completely lost in the music and hear each instrument individually as I drift through the performance in my listening room.

At times I can be a stickler for good transient response in the audio components I use in my system. When listening to 176.4 kHz classical music such as this album I prefer the dCS filter number 5. This filter has a Gaussian response with no overshoot on transients and relaxed roll-off. As a side note, I prefer filter number 4 for 16/44.1 music because of its good transient response.

The opening track on this album, The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, is a 17 minute mix of loud crescendos and soft sweet violin followed by violent percussion and stern yet smooth horns. This track touches all the bases and all frequencies for those listening to judge a playback system. Fortunately I listen to this for enjoyment as I really love the music (this coming from a Pearl Jam type of guy who'd rather not listen to much classical).

The dCS Rossini didn't disappoint throughout this track and the entire performance. The opening transients weren't memorialized, the violins were wispy yet rich in tone and texture, and the horns were brash when appropriate. The Rossini reproduced the complete performance with a full, rich sound that made it possible to hear the entire symphony as one or each individual instrument as a single piece of the larger whole.

Closing out the first track, with about 1:30 remaining, the symphony picks up steam enabling one to hear the whole sound much greater than the some of the parts. With about 30 seconds remaining the musicians are firing on all cylinders with loud transients, soft yet audible flutes, and crashing yet controlled cymbals. Through the Rossini this performance is reproduce at a level second to none. OK, second to nothing I've had in my listening room in recent memory.

Conclusion

This wonderful hobby of ours isn't often about restraint but rather excess. The Rossini DAC is the sweet spot in the dCS lineup. It's \$23,999 price tag doesn't scream moderation to many music lovers, but I assure you the Rossini is much more capable than the dCS Debussy (\$11,999) but not up to the level of performance that's possible with the dCS Vivaldi (\$35,999), the Rolls Royce of digital to analog conversion.

Given the complete control that dCS has over hardware and software, the digital wizards of Cambridge, England continue to find ways to improve the Rossini's capabilities and level of performance. Through software and firmware updates, available at no cost, new features have already been added to this fairly new DAC. These updates and product enhancements extend the life of dC products as far or further than any other digital product of which I'm aware.

The bottom line for many enthusiasts is performance. The dCS Rossini offers high performance, in addition to build quality, that's as good or better than anything I've heard in my system in recent memory. Whether one listens to folk, rock, vocal, jazz, or classical the Rossini is completely capable absolutely stellar music reproduction. I've had and continue to have more DACs come through my system over the years than I care to admit. Based on performance, support, and future upgradability the Rossini is one of two or three DACs that I'd really love to keep. When dCS finally comes calling for this one, at least I can keep it on the C.A.S.H. List for a long time.

