



dCS Rossini

Raising the Bar

By Jeff Dorgay

The subtle growl in Plastikman's "Mind Encode" rolls out into my listening room in such a sinister, encompassing way, it's almost frightening. It instantly reminds me of the aural magic that its much more expensive sibling, the four box Vivaldi, which until now was the only digital playback system capable of being this visceral. Much like that six figure star of the dCS lineup, the \$23,999 Rossini DAC raises the goose bumps in a similar way, but to be honest the \$7,499 Rossini clock is also part of the mix. For those of you still spinning silver discs, we'll talk about transports later.



Tracking through the rest of Plastikman's *Closer* album reveals so much nuance and low level detail via such a broad, multi dimensional sonic landscape, it feels as if my Big Gulp has been spiked with something hallucinogenic. Granted, this is not "real music," with a string quartet full of easily recognizable acoustic instruments, yet this recording is so full of spatial and ambient information that on a lesser player, it comes across as merely one dimensional and can be easily written off as low-fi. The Rossini handily reveals the amount of aural craftsmanship present, calling for a re-audition of a fair number of discs once considered mediocre. Playback via the Rossini changes my perspective.

Tell the average music consumer that you just spent the cost of a really nice car on a digital player and they will think you've lost your marbles. But a music lover that also happens to appreciate high performance audio understands your quest. Yes, \$31,500 is a lot of money to spend on a digital player, but like an equally expensive analog front end, you probably didn't just walk out the door and buy a similarly priced analog rig, you worked your way up to it; listening, upgrading, listening more carefully and repeating the process multiple times. So I'll stick my neck out and venture that you aren't headed from a \$500 DAC to the Rossini. And quite hon-

estly, you shouldn't, even if there's plenty of room on your Platinum Card. It would be like going from a Vespa to a Ducati 1098, the massive increase in performance might overwhelm you.

Better everywhere

Good as the four box dCS Paganini that I've been listening to for the last few years is, the Vivaldi proved to be an exponential jump in every aspect of music playback, revealing considerably more musical information than previously experienced. While I still feel the Vivaldi is worth every penny asked, it was alas, out of reach. There's no shame in that for any of us.

dCS is just like any other company making high performance goods. Canon, Apple and Audi all take what they learn out on the ragged edges of research and development and apply it to the products they sell every day. Though Audi sells every \$200,000 R8 plus they can build, they sell a ton of S4s too. And this is what the dCS Rossini reminds me of, a fully loaded Audi S4. It's no slouch in the performance department, but a \$60,000 car, though expensive, still has a much wider potential audience than a \$200,000 car does. And so it goes with the Rossini. Where the Rossini is perfectly at home in a cost no object system, it will probably make its way to a lot of \$100,000 to \$300,000 systems, where the Vivaldi will probably migrate to much more expensive systems.

Of course, dCS nails all the engineering fundamentals, and pays meticulous attention to every part of the analog, digital and mechanical aspects of their components. Much like a Formula 1 car, where this level of engineering prowess adds five horsepower here and five more there, adding up to a machine with hyper performance, nothing is left unaccounted for under the hood. Important as all these steps are, a big part of the dCS performance edge is their patented Ring DAC technology, which performs all digital functions in software, rather than just taking off the shelf DAC chips and tweaking them somewhat.

Because nearly every parameter is upgradable with software, this makes a dCS player a great long term investment. Just like my Paganini that has been upgraded multiple times over

the years, most dCS upgrades merely require uploading new software and firmware. The last time this was done to the Paganini, it was a solid, component level upgrade, all for the time it took to upload and reboot the new software. When you are making this level of investment, you *don't* want a limited lifespan product. Those wanting a more in depth analysis of dCS' Ring DAC approach can click here:

www.dcsLtd.co.uk/reviews/shelf-life-how-and-why-dcs-does-dacs-differently/

In addition to all the circuitry improvements, the Rossini now shares the same level of casework and finish that the Vivaldi introduced. The display is elegant and easy to read. The buttons are still small, in the interest of tasteful design, and unfortunately somewhat hard to read for some. Selfishly speaking, I'd still take the small buttons and elegance over large buttons and a clunky display!

While this writer is not a fan of DSD per se, dCS has always offered exceptional DSD performance, and the Rossini is no exception. However, the past Paganini offered the ability to upsample redbook files to DSD resolution, and the Rossini can upsample to DSD or DXD resolutions internally without the need for a separate, outboard upsampler, and this can be controlled via the dCS Rossini App from your smartphone or tablet.

One of the most fun aspects of owning a dCS player is the amount of options and flexibility they give you; upsampling and a range of digital filters, all easily accessed. *(continued)*

This will either be joy or purgatory for you, depending on how OCD you might be. I enjoyed DSD upsampling on the Paganini, but having the two formats to compare with the Rossini has me leaning towards DXD, which feels slightly more relaxed and natural. Of course, your mileage may vary.

Adding the Rossini Clock

The first two months of listening took place without the Rossini Clock in place, and even without it the Rossini still offers a slight improvement over the exemplary performance of the four box Paganini- especially in the area of low level detail and its ability to be used without a standalone preamplifier.

To grasp the effects of the Clock with the Paganini, dCS's John Quick was kind enough to pay me a visit and set the system up a box at a time, starting with the DAC by itself, then adding the Upsampler, and lastly, the Clock. The effect of the Clock with the Paganini and Vivaldi DACs is anything but subtle, and the Rossini follows suit. dCS even mentions on their website that "listening tests show there is no substitute for a high quality, dedicated master Clock."

Initial listening proved excellent, yet once the Clock was in place and switched on, the soundstage increased in all three dimensions markedly, but the level of refinement takes a major jump. It's definitely enough to be an "a-ha" moment, but even more flabbergasting when the Clock is removed – everything just seems to collapse slightly. While the Rossini DAC is excellent without the Clock, the improvement offered is a significant upgrade, and once you've heard it, it will be tough to go back.



A quick note for those that are sans vinyl

Many of us enjoy and embrace vinyl, yet we seem to meet more and more music lovers that have no investment in the analog disc. Should you be in the latter camp, the Rossini DAC is an even better value, or should I say, bargain. All dCS products from the original Elgar on have had variable outputs, but when the Vivaldi came along, the quality of the analog output stage made a marked improvement.

Where the Paganini was acceptable as a source run direct, the Vivaldi really eliminates the need for a preamp if you don't have a phonostage, or other components requiring a line level preamplifier. Paired with certain power amplifiers, the Paganini could sound thin and slightly lacking in dynamics. The Rossini carries on the performance benchmark set by the Vivaldi in this respect.

Considering that this DAC/Clock combination means that you don't need a \$10,000 or possibly more expensive linestage, along with the necessary interconnects and mains cable, the Rossini could be considered a steal. I'm sure this will generate a fair amount of angry email, but it's true.

Plugging the Rossini directly into the Audio Research GS150, Conrad Johnson LP125sa+, the Nagra 300i and Pass Xs300 power amplifiers at my disposal- all proved heavenly, though providing different presentations unique to each amplifier's sonic signature. *(continued)*



The three world class preamplifiers at my disposal did not improve or subtract from the sound of the Rossini; you will only need one if you must integrate analog sources into your system. While I hate to tell others how to do their job, the addition of a solitary analog input would make this the perfect preamplifier.

Not only is this cost effective for the strictly digital music enthusiast, it makes for a lot simpler system configuration. It's worth mentioning that where the Paganini and Vivaldi needed about a dozen signal cables to connect all four boxes together, the Rossini DAC and Clock only requires two 75 ohm cables to go between the Clock to the DAC. As with past dCS players in my system,

this task is handled by a Nordost Frey 2 cable.

And for those still embracing the silver disc...

Should you be a music lover with a large collection of discs- that does not want to deal with a NAS, and all the labor associated with that- you may want to consider the one box Rossini Player, which at \$28,499 incorporates a CD transport. dCS does not make a standalone transport for the Rossini, though a used Paganini or Scarlatti Transport is a great option, just requiring a few more cables. Should you have a large collection of SACD discs, this will be your only all-dCS option besides the \$41,999 Vivaldi Transport,

as the Rossini Player does not play SACD.

Both the Paganini and Vivaldi systems produced a slightly more lifelike, more natural recreation of the digital data when playing files back from the optical disc- even comparing a ripped file of the same disc- in my system. Yet endless comparisons of disc vs. file with my Paganini Transport into the Rossini DAC revealed the gap has closed so dramatically with the Rossini that it's probably a moot point. However, the Transport is still pretty handy to have around in case of network gremlins! That said as more and more music becomes available in high resolution formats, the need

for a traditional Transport will probably lessen further.

Go direct if you can

Probably the biggest reason for closing the gap between disc and file playback is the Rossini's ability to work directly with your NAS or even USB drives. A laptop or Mac Mini is a pretty noisy device no matter how you tweak or isolate it- but with the Rossini, you merely plug a network cable in the back panel, download the dCS App and roll.

In addition to being a basic music player, the Rossini App allows you to control all of the DAC's functions from your listening chair, making it a lot handier

to change inputs, digital filters, upsampling and phase. This can be especially handy when trying to hear subtle differences, vs. getting in and out of the chair to adjust.

The Rossini App is Tidal ready, so those of you with large Tidal libraries will have an easy go of it, searching as you normally do and saving to your "favorites." The dCS App does the rest, sorting by artist, album or track. When investigating a lot of music, or if you plan on adding a fairly large number of albums to your favorites list, this will go a lot faster than browsing Tidal on your laptop and adding favorites there. They will instantly appear in the favorites section of the phone/pad App. *(continued)*



While the dCS App does not have the GUI or functionality of a Sooloos or Roon player, dCS are “Roon Ready” partners, and at some point in the near-future the Rossini will be a Roon endpoint, meaning you can stream to the Rossini directly from your Roon Core system by Ethernet. When this happens, the Rossini will be the ultimate musical death star, combining phenomenal playback capability, with an interface worthy of its musical performance. Watch for a follow up review, the minute this becomes available.

Interface aside, the audio performance aspect of eliminating the outboard computer is a wonderful thing. Comparing the same tracks played back via Mac Mini and USB pales in comparison to going network direct. Even Sigur Sigur Sputnik’s “Love Missile F1-11” sounds great rendered directly through the Rossini. I was very surprised at how much better recordings I thought were poor to marginal sounded when going directly into the Rossini via network. Again, moving to high resolution content widens the gap dramatically.

A new level of excellence

Up to now, the emphasis has been on 16/44.1 playback, and the Rossini shines there, bringing new life to legacy files, but that’s only part of the story. Just like a great analog front end that takes you to another dimension with great pressings, the Rossini provides an equally immersive journey when fueled with great digital recordings. Whatever your favorite music might be, it’s like going from a five dollar yard sale pressing to a first stamper imported pressing.

That monster bass riff at

the beginning of McCartney’s “Let Me Roll It” is spectacular; this is another instance where the 24/96 digital version is so lovely, you find yourself wondering if you really need a turntable after all. Not only is the level of detail and resolution that the Rossini provides stunning, this model has made a quantum leap in the ease by which it presents music, much as the Vivaldi before it did. Long gone is the age old phrase, “this sounds really good for digital,” music is as involving through the Rossini as it is on any platform, provided the recording is up to task.

In the end, dCS Rossini is a winner, not only in terms of the sheer performance delivered, but in its timeless physical and electronic design along with an architecture that will be easily upgraded in the years to come. Like the nearly 20 year old Elgar that we revisited on page 40, I suspect that the Rossini will still sound fantastic 20 years from now. Combining all of this with the fact that digital-only music lovers no longer need a preamplifier to build a high performance system, I feel the Rossini is more than worthy of one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2016. ●

The dCS Rossini DAC/Clock
\$23,999 (DAC)
\$28,499 (Player, not reviewed)
\$7,499 (Clock)

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PERIPHERALS

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