



HEADPHONE.GURU

dCS Bartók with APEX Ring DAC

By Frank Iacone



dCS's engineers reconfigured the Ring DAC circuit board on the Bartók and developed a new analog output stage further reducing distortion while adding better detail and more dynamic range. The APEX Ring DAC is compatible with all major file formats, it provides instant access to music from a wide range of streaming services, including Roon, TIDAL, Spotify, Qobuz, Deezer, and Internet Radio. It also plays files direct from personal devices or storage drives via USB, AES, or S/PDIF inputs, and from Apple devices using Apple Airplay. All major lossless codecs, along with native DSD and DoP are supported, and true 24-bit resolution is maintained when streaming via ethernet. dCS Mosaic app allows streaming from all major sources through a single interface. Designed to work on Android and iOS devices, it gives you software upgradability and access to future platforms that may develop. My initial review of the original dCS Bartók located [HERE](#) is full of technical information and the APEX review is a follow-up to my previous review.

dCS has posted on its site all the new features listed below:

Bartók APEX DAC with Headphone Amplifier Key Features

- The latest generation dCS Digital Processing Platform brings state-of-the-art signal processing and flexibility.
- dCS Ring DAC™ fitted, as used in the dCS Vivaldi digital playback system
- High-quality streaming from TIDAL, Qobuz, Deezer and internet radio via the dCS Mosaic Control app
- Roon Ready, AirPlay, Spotify Connect and UPnP compatible

- USB, AES, Dual AES and S/PDIF digital audio inputs
- Headphone amplifier with balanced and unbalanced outputs, suitable for high and low-impedance headphones
- Accepts encrypted SACD data from dCS Transports via Dual AES inputs. Oversampling design with switchable DSD upsampling; user-selectable PCM and DSD filters
- Multi-stage DXD oversampling design with switchable DSD upsampling; user-selectable PCM and DSD filters
- Auto clocking system improves ease of use and minimizes jitter.
- Multi-stage power regulation and twin mains transformers to isolate the DAC section from the headphone amplifier
- Firmware-upgradeable for future functionality and performance upgrades

Listening



Starting with Ennio Morricone's excellent "Cinema Paradiso" I was treated to a magnificent soundstage with the Dan Clark Audio EXPANSE using the Bartók APEX headphone balanced amplifier section. Music flowed virtually uncolored and dCS neither added nor subtracted from the original recording. Instrument separation was exceptional and fully layered. Noticeable was inner detail improvement and the transducer, one of the most comfortable planar designs, disappeared on my head. The Bartók APEX lured me in and made me forget about the gear and Morricone's music touched my soul as if

I had disappeared and become part of the performance. An exceptional experience for me while listening and one to be remembered. Wow!



Billie Eilish's "Bad Guy" is loaded with dynamic range. "Bad Guy" has exceptional inner detail, and I found myself hearing deep into the recording, the legibility of the background vocals was realistic, and the bass, when paired with the DCA STEALTH, was explosive with exception detail. Billie's vocal was transparent and I could hear every syllable in the performance. Background vocals were all audibly within the soundstage and the music beat was alive, the STEALTH easily reproducing this track effortlessly.



Prince's "1999" really got me moving my body. The sound coming from the title soundtrack was exceptional. Prince was playing and was located in the center of the stage. HIFIMAN's SUSVARA with the DanaCable Lazuli Reference cable is a difficult transducer to drive but the Bartók APEX had no problem driving this without a hitch.

"Little Red Corvette" brought me closer to the music once again. I found myself increasing the volume when I switched from the SUSVARA to the AUDEZE LCD-5, I was once again treated to a wide soundstage, and the transducer disappeared. Sound once again sounded alive, and the music flowed with exceptional detail and transparency without coloration that brought me to a live performance and brought the music and performance of Prince back to life.



Springsteen's "Darkness on the Edge of Town" is, in my opinion, one of Bruce's best albums. "Badlands" was the song that made me a huge Springsteen fan back in the year of 1978, and the Bartók APEX made me realize why I love the music Springsteen and the E Street band play. As a young man, I would go to all the clubs with my wife in the Hamptons and we would rock to Bruce's music performed by cover bands late into the night. Bruce Springsteen's performances are legendary and having been at the 4-hour 44-minute show with my wife on the floor we experienced legendary performances for the ages. Badlands came to life on the Focal Utopia, and the music delivered a flawless performance as if it was performed live.

Switching to "Thunder Road" from "Born to Run" it sounded incredibly alive with the E Street band and listening to the tune was exceptional. Clarence Clemons's sax playing was detailed and the track showed me how great he was, the band had synchronicity and sounded as if they were playing in my listening room. Rhythm and dynamics were all presented flawlessly.



Listening to Lisa Gerrard's "Song of the Stars" from "Spiritchaser", Dead Can Dance came to life performing the 10-minute plus track in all their glory. Percussion came alive and the treble extension was endless. Sound within the soundstage was musical and never harsh. The music heard on this track requires exceptional amplification and the sound never disappointed. Once again, I was treated to a musical experience I had never heard with any other system. Dead Can Dance was visually in the room and the sound recreated a new musical experience that I will never forget. DCA's EXPANSE

blew me away with this flawless recreation.

Listening to Madonna singing "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" brought tears to my eyes with her astonishing vocal performance. Her vocal was transparent and it connected with me emotionally. I was treated to a flawless performance. If you love a female vocal listen to this track on the "Evita" soundtrack and Madonna will lure you in with her seductive and transparent performance. Beautifully composed and delivered by a superstar, APEX magic was apparent with its delivery and the single-box streaming player never failed to amaze. Exceptional and a major wow moment with the orchestra and background vocal all clear and once again the transducer disappeared.



Conclusions

Listening over three months to the dCS Bartók APEX made me realize how far digital has come over the years since when it came out in 1984. dCS located in Cambridge has been to work over the years creating the best digital products on this planet. Sound this good, on the Bartók APEX, is world-class. Priced at \$22,900 this is the very best digital reproduction I have experienced.

Music comes to life as it has never before in my listening sessions, Bass is textured and explosive, the extension is endless and it extends deep, is super fast, and always explosive. Treble is the best I have ever heard. Extension seems to be endless, but always musical, never harsh, always involving, sound that makes large-scale recordings or recordings like Dead Can Dance come to life like no other playback device.

People pay similar prices for a luxury Swiss watch. Bartók APEX is a musical instrument constructed by hand by artisan engineers in Cambridge, England. Constructed with the finest parts, the Bartók APEX will pay for itself with exceptional reproduction. Headphone Enthusiasts can pick the best headphones and recreate a live experience with a product that never fails to amaze me.

dCS has created a product that will always be upgradeable via the Mosaic application making the Bartók APEX futureproof. dCS continues to benchmark new digital products. Like a fine Swiss watch, the Bartók APEX is a finely handbuilt musical instrument that always provides an unbelievable musical experience. Rare products, that defy all logic, such as the Bartók APEX, I believe will achieve legendary status. Music lovers looking for the ultimate sound in musical reproduction should look no further than the Bartók APEX. I can never imagine being without this reference unit in my studio.

Highly Recommended!