

part-time audiophile

by **Brian Hunter**

dCS Bartók DAC, Part 2 | Review



Last I checked, there were over 450 documents labeled “review” on my computer. Of those docs, many qualify as either digital components or straight up DACs by today’s standards. Of those DACs, many qualify as what most audiophiles refer to as “Delta Sigma” with a few less considered to be of the “Multi-bit” variety. Longtime high-end digital company dCS calls the brain of their growing list of digital products (and even their latest creation) a “Ring DAC”. The digital translation of the new dCS Bartók is just a sliver of the hot rod tech packed under the hood, which is a substantial presence in and of itself (in a physical and metaphoric sense).

This review is part two of the greater interaction on Part-Time Audiophile. You can check out Lee Scoggins take on the dCS Bartók in a more traditional two-channel setup [here](#); this article is more about the interaction with the personal audio space. It is an important angle to evaluate, as the all-in-one desktop option here is a concrete step into the headphone arena — by design. Clearly a move with purpose and direction, the recent outreach by dCS into the personal audio space from a marketing perspective is also new.

The \$16,250 DAC is categorically less costly than either the Vivaldi or Rossini product lines and can be ordered without the class A headphone amplifier section for a savings of \$2,750. Also included in Lee's review is a revealing interview with John Quick of dCS North America, who goes into more detail about their proprietary ring DAC tech and feature set.

Of course, in broad brush strokes, the piece is much more than a simple DAC, incorporating an onboard streamer and custom Mosaic app makes the single-box solution for bedside listening a stark reality – given owners have the space available on the nightstand. For those who might balk at the price, there is quite a bit more R&D going on here in the background than \$99 (or even \$1k) stripped-down options. The brand is highly audiophile at its core, which can innately hold more than initially meets the eye for some. The backside does incorporate a dual balanced AES digital connection for encrypted SACD data from dCS transports, along with a multitude of other digital intake connections. Also joining the party are one pair of balanced and one SE analog outs, but no analog inputs for those who want to isolate the optional headphone amplifier. But when you see how the streaming>app>headphone workflow moves so easy, so fluid, it almost makes any other derivative seem obsolete. That is of course contingent on a subscription to one of the high-resolution music streaming services, the Mosaic interface supports both Qobuz and Tidal. Also supported is the popular Roon interface, the dCS Bartók can be set up as a Roon endpoint with little fuss, downloaded collections rejoice! But the really cool thing about the execution here against the backdrop of our 2-channel part one is that this self-contained loom is capable of nearly any song you can imagine at a very serious level of performance. Some of that capability is filtered off the processing platform and Ring DAC, which was first engineered for the Rossini family. Also featured on the device is the dCS auto clocking architecture from the Vivaldi line, giving even more of a trickle-down tech feel to the “entry-level” Bartók.



Listening to the device is simply defined by two carefully selected words “clean” and “clear”. In a sea of audiophile descriptors, I often like to boil things down to a more simple looking glass. Still, even as the disk space on my laptop gets ever more crowded, this is a first for this combination – much like the actual sound of the Bartok. The resolution passthrough of the device is remarkable. It feels clean in the sense that you can hear what’s there, but no harsh alcohol or mesh wire scrubs were employed in its operation. The tone is unique and identifiable when incorporated in nearly any part of the chain. This is perhaps the most obvious with the use of both DAC and headphone amplifier. Much to my surprise, the \$2.7k add-on really did sparkle all on its own. Even in comparison to the reference Questyle CMA 800R, the internal amplifier summed to more sparkle, more life, and greater dynamics. Now, this could be due to several reasons, the least sexy of which is the notion that the SE analog outputs (or the analog output stage in general) is somehow inferior to that which connects the digital section and the internal headamp under the hood. This seems an unlikely scenario however, one that is impossible to test the other way around, as there are no analog inputs to reach the headphone connections on the other side independently.

In an arena where so many fall woefully short, the dCS Bartók manages to excel in the full combination package of DAC/Amp. Of course, they have padded the interaction with some worthy hardware dollars. \$2.7k can buy quite a bit of headphone amplification these days. In lower budgets, a DAC with a bonus pre or headphone jack far too often feels like an afterthought. The sound here tends to stay away from “warm” but contains its own brand of “sparkle” that entices and provides plenty of information along with finely manicured realism. Think less muddy texture and more properly adjusted earglass prescription. The “sparkle” is that twinkle of light you see now without restriction, just dancing ever so slightly on the newly redefined edges of tree leaves and car reflections on your drive home from your eye appointment. Neither the DAC nor the DAC+Amp was hampered with any coloration or any frequency finagling – a must-have, especially at the source level. One might say this idea is a little more relaxed or “peppered to taste” closer to the transducer, but the headphone amplifier section in the Bartók manages to keep the original flavor of the DAC well through the class A delivery to the headphone jack.

During any review process, a myriad of songs is used to put the product through the paces. However, one song, in particular, is unusually embedded into my head. The sound of Norah Jones Don’t Know Why is forever burned into my memory, resulting in a scar that actually helps get the job done in times like these. This song more than others helps guide as a baseline of sorts, I can practically close my eyes and hear all the different ways I’ve heard it represented, but most importantly, the collective mean of those experiences as well. For some additional comparisons, the balanced outputs of the Bartók were connected to the ZOTL LTA Z10e amp (\$6,950). Through the single-ended headphone connections, it was an interesting jump to hear the difference in the edging around Norah’s voice, the backup singers and the piano hammers striking those long copper-wound strings. While the Z10e offers a dash more romance to things like vocals and piano, the Bartók struck hard with authority through its own internal amp section. dCS has made a very strong argument for a true bedside all-in-one product, it doesn’t really leave much on the table in terms of fidelity, sonic energy or usability – just think how much you could save on cables. The directness of the heart and soul of the music is very much present from file to final output, wherever that might meet the end-user. To regurgitate a more well-worn review cliché, it brings you one step closer to the music. It’s intimate and well-formed. Now, will lovers of tube harmonics feel more at home connecting something a touch more analog to the back? Possibly. But the internal amplification in the Bartók casts a very wide net into the audiophile market with the current voicing. And the internal DAC gives a solid baseline

to grow your sound from – for any system. Music is clean and close, like a whisper in your ear. For some of the headphones we tested, that equates to more width in the space around the head than out in front, but results varied from can to can. Power from the amp section was enough to drive any of the headphones we had on hand, and the output levels can be gain-switched with 4 levels of reduction via an internal menu.



As for the rest of the Bartók's menus, there is a lot of tinkering that can be done in addition to a wide section of digital filter settings. But inside that thoroughness, there is a simplicity to the device that really stands out when it just works. Digital devices, especially bespoke audiophile products like this, often have a way of catching the occasional bug or blip or hangup. The UI experience was as smooth as the top end was. Granted, this obviously isn't a launch day version of the app or firmware, but the single loop of song demand to high fidelity playback was shockingly intact for the heavily aluminum-cased device. Perhaps the casework could be a touch smaller, but if the 17.5" x 17" square contributes anything to the sound, the juice is well worth the squeeze. For comparison, the only other component with that size footprint was a now discontinued Oppo BDP-105 that was lying around. That unit does stand just a bit taller than the Bartók and the Z10e integrated even taller than both.

As a preamp, the only time I've ever seen this type of performance in a DAC is usually from the likes of MSB. Connecting directly to a pair of Schiit Aegir power amplifiers in dual mono configuration to the variable pre-out of the dCS Bartók (including Black Cat cabling) proved to be a delightful combination. The sense of air and breathable presence around the treble region set it apart from many of the other combinations put together to evaluate a pair of QLN Signature 3s in for review. Extremely high resolving power allowed voices to hover and micro details to wriggle loose from the dirty smear of background noise.



So...value. To call the Bartók a simple DAC is far too limiting. If one were to seek a value proposition at this price point the idea of a single-box offering is where you might find the most leeway. Where many reviews might offer gains based on solely acoustic betterment of similar product, I offer you this: The product sounds amazing, and its functionality pushes well into the territory that encroaches on other categories. Is almost \$17k for a silver metal box a large ask? Of course, but those last scrapes of fidelity are often the ones that prove to be the most elusive. The Bartók isn't a product looking to break into the budget sector, the rest of the lineup clearly indicates who dCS intends to market towards. But streaming box, pre, and decoder all line up for an all-in-one that could entertain those with the budget, and in a more simple fashion than a mishmash of separates might be able to for the same price. This especially rings true for the headphone amp and DAC combo. Call it synergy, or maybe just proper R&D connecting the two – the headphone jacks sound fantastic. A rare occurrence for single box solutions, at any price tag. Now, add on the workable streaming functionality and the equation ratchets up another notch. So is there value to the proposition? For those who shop in this range, absolutely.

Highly recommended

