

Review by Lee Scoggins

The *dCS* Bartok DAC/Streamer/Headphone Amp



Every once and a while, a product will turn up at the house for review that is so special, it changes what I understand to be possible for an audio component. And let's face it; most of us don't have anything resembling "unlimited budgets", so finding something magical at a price you might (barely/one day/maybe-possibly) afford can make for a great day. For me, I found the dCS Bartok DAC to be just such an animal.

I started reviewing DACs in the headphone space many years ago and I've slowly worked my way up the food chain. My current reference is the PS Audio DirectStream DAC (reviewed here) and its companion Memory Player (reviewed here). I was curious what a more-than-twice-as-expensive (compared to my DirectStream DAC) component would sound like, and admittedly, I was a bit skeptical that I would get at-least-twice-the-sound of the superb-sounding PS Audio product. At \$13.5k for the DAC and another \$1.5k for the headphone amp version, dCS had its work cut out for it.

I find that reviewing digital to analog converters is difficult because the very best ones create a feeling that is hard to describe, but I guess that could be said for other audio hardware categories as well. How does one adequately describe the way music makes you feel? How does one adequately describe how a fine DAC presents the music? What makes a dCS product sound better than other competitor's products?
dCS Bartok rear panel



dCS Bartok rear panel

Digging in: the dCS Bartok DAC

At the Munich Hi-End show, I ran into John Quick of dCS who was running a fantastic system with Wilson Audio Sasha DAW speakers and the latest Rossini on the (sublime!) v2 firmware version. I mentioned that I'd been trying to get a Bartok in for review and John offered a unit. Soon, I was back home in Atlanta unpacking a fresh new, silver Bartok after a brief showing at our excellent local high end shop, HiFibuys for the "Guys Night Out" event. I hooked it up to my office system for a few weeks to break it in. It wasn't long before I fell in love with the sound. Unfortunately, I now had two strikes against me. I had to describe the sound AND I had to make a case for spending \$15K on a DAC.

Around this time, I was able to finally get a sports car, a Porsche Cayman. I say "finally" as I was driving the same car for many years, in part to save up. I mention this as the new car taught me a thing or two about what quality is and why we should pay for it. This new car is superb. It has all the controls in exactly the right place. The feel of steering, the engine responsiveness, and the sense of being fully in touch with the road is just perfect. Every time I search for a change in the settings, the layout is intuitive. Everything just works. It's a very satisfying feeling.

The Bartok DAC is a lot like my new Porsche. It just works. The display is super high quality. The inputs handle anything from USB to AES/EBU to SPDIF to Ethernet. The build quality is excellent. The paint on the new sports car is a metallic silver that sparkles but is not as flashy as some silvers. The finish on the Bartok reminds me of it; the silver as it is a finished aluminum that sparkles and changes in the light from white to silver to gray. It's just a beautiful effect. Being their "entry-level" converter, the dCS Bartok is missing the swoopy curves of the Rossini and Vivaldi but the finish is still gorgeous. It's really spectacular to know there are companies out there finishing even entry-level products like this.

The display is a high-resolution screen. Very clear to read, and if you adjust the volume knob, the numbers get large. And that brings us to the volume control. A light touch applied to the round, silver knob moves you up and down in 0.5 dB increments. It's so refined. It feels like silk. It's a small thing but it just speaks to the "quality mindset" of the dCS team in Cambridge.

The case itself is a big rectangular block and the fit and finish look just as good to my eye as the Rossini. It could have been just a big silver flaked box. But dCS left some stylistic thin gaps in the panel joinery to give it a more nuanced look. On the back of the unit, the connections are of the highest quality. Even the power on/off switch has a solid feel and goes "thunk" when rocked to the "on" position. 'Solid' is a good word for the Bartok DAC. Not in the sense of "bulky casework" but in terms of "really high quality"; as I said, it really looks like a team of people thoughtfully considered every detail.

At the house here, my favorite DAC-in-residence has been the outstanding PS Audio DirectStream DAC, running the latest "Snowmass" software. I run it also with the superb Memory Player from PS Audio because I have been collecting those little silver discs which seem to have fallen out of favor lately since 1983. It is my considered opinion that the DirectStream is a superb DAC. It offers up oodles of resolution and sounds at times like an analog source. For \$6K retail, it took my digital to another level. I love the DirectStream and find it to be one of the best deals in digital audio.

Now one thing that makes the comparison to the dCS Bartok interesting is the firmware upgradability of both units. Both are designed around full software upgradability. But you're thinking, "sure Lee but what a totally unfair comparison, given the vast price difference." You are not wrong, but keep in mind the DirectStream punches way above its weight, particularly after the RedCloud and Snowmass updates. And I am sure Ted Smith is writing even better code for the next update. The DirectStream is an amazing product and set a foundation or baseline for my review of the Bartok DAC.

For the first, few weeks I listened to the dCS Bartok in isolation in the office system which has Wilson Audio TuneTot speakers amplified by either my own highly modified Audio Research VT-100 amp with KT-120s or a Schiit Audio Vidar and Aegir amp. I find the best gear takes a while to settle in so I did not take any listening notes for a couple of weeks. I ran a Synergistic Research Galileo USB cable from a new MacBook Pro running Roon and largely playing my own hirez recordings or Tidal and Qobuz. This sounded amazing right out of the box but after a few days, a veil of fuzziness lifted from the Bartok DAC's sound. It's hard to describe but it just became more musical. It always had the resolution but everything became more round in a way that great audio offers. Frankly, I kept the unit in the "upstairs system" longer than anticipated because I enjoyed listening to it so much. Things were off to a really good start.



DAC SPDIFerences

As I moved the dCS Bartok down to the main system, I heard even more magic from it. The resolution and detail had me spinning those antique silver discs again. I ran an SPDIF out of the PS Audio Memory Player and into the Bartok DAC. I put in Phil O'Hanlon's demo CD from a year ago and teed up track 19. Leonard Cohen's "Nevermind" sprung to life. A few things stood out right away. Cohen's voice was superbly fleshed out in his guttural rolling, slightly foggy vocals. The decay of the notes from his voice trailed off into infinity. The backing singers were well to the far edges of the soundstage. Instrument and vocal separation was just spectacular. The vocals were deeper in the soundstage than I heard with the DirectStream.

Another good listen is "Children Go Where" by the Fairfield Four, featuring Lee Ann Womack. The voices on this recordings just sound damn realistic. They hang in space, separated by air, just like a live performance. Lee Ann's amazing voice anchors the performance. Whoa. This is quite realistic on the Alexias. My wife loves the sound, saying "that's just like real life!" Yep. The Ring DAC technology is the real deal. Listen to the room reverb. Listen to the trailing off of the notes. Listen to the bass notes from the Fairfield Four. Perfect. So here's what we hear: superb resolution of the recording details, a wide and deep soundstage, a gorgeous midrange.

Network Effects

I switched over to my ATT router to listen through a Starlight 8 ethernet cable from WireWorld going into the Network connection on the back straight from my townhome's router. Let's give the Tidal and Qobuz accounts a workout, shall we?

I pick up my trusty iPad which is running Mosaic, a nifty app that is downloaded from apple's app store and serves as dCS' music app. This music controller interacts with the

Bartok DAC much like my Roon app on the MacBook does. You log into a variety of streaming service options (Tidal, Qobuz, Deezer, Spotify, etc.) and it simply acts as a controller where you can play individual albums or build “queues”. The track “Celestial Echo” from Malia’s album Convergence has deep foundational bass notes at the start of the track. These are deep and well defined. Surprisingly so, in fact. This is another character trait of the Bartok...well-articulated bass and strongly deep bass. It is pure ear candy that really lays a foundation to the song that contrasts perfectly with Malia’s voice. “I Feel It Like You” is the third track on this album. I love this song as it’s very catchy and romantic. A celebration of a great relationship between Malia and her man. Now we hear another trait of the Bartok DAC, the coherence from the bass to the highs. Clarity and openness are words that come to mind. I dare you to not move your feet on this gem! This song swings in an elevated pop music way. Boris Blank, of Yello fame, collaborated on this album and the usual atmospheric layers are present and add to the effect as does the refined percussion. A genuinely musical and fun presentation. The next case study is dynamics, the MQA version of Sinatra and Swingin’ Brass. Listen to “They Can’t Take That Away From Me”. The dynamic brass is full and steep in attack. Frank’s perfect phrasing provides a soothing narrative to another big band assembly by the great Neal Hefti. “I Get A Kick Out of You” is flawless. The real star of this MQA show is “Tangerine”. The opening brass is visceral on the opening notes. Maybe due to tape quality and/or mastering, this track is a real standout sound quality. There is a compelling illusion of a big band laid out wide in front of me between and beyond the speakers. Absolutely marvelous.



Bartok USB Input

Now we move to a third input, that of USB1. I attach my MacBook pro to the device with the sublime Synergistic Research Galileo USB cable and fire up Roon. Cue up Yello's Toy album and select "Limbo". This MQA version really swings. The bass is deep and present. Midrange is crystal clear. The female backing vocals, "I will be cruising through that night...", are natural. Dieter Meier's vocals are lifelike and realistically slightly raspy. "Cold Flame" is another diamond performance. It starts slow and builds momentum. Malia guests on this song and, as usual, is perfect. Ethereal sounding vocals that fade off into space. A driving bass and percussion track with synth notes overlaid keeps my toes tapping. Listening to the Bartok DAC is a bit like a ride in my sports car: exhilarating! This is the beauty of dCS build quality: every input tried was dead neutral and musical. Fully transparent sound across the board. Music as clear as I have heard. Everything I threw it as a source of ones and zeros was handled with aplomb.

Comparison with the PS Audio DirectStream DAC

I compared the Bartok DAC running its current software with the DirectStream with the latest "Snowmass" software. Both sounded great but the Bartok had two distinguishing advantages: more resolution and a much deeper and wider soundstage. I felt it had the most transparent and neutral sound, whereas the DirectStream had a more smoothed-out "analog" sound. Both scored high on musicality but I believe I heard another level of detail and air between instruments on a perfectly laid out soundstage when I had the Bartok

playing. I marvel at what PS Audio can do for the money, but I long for the much more expensive Bartok as it really was a new level of sound. Everything was just more clear to my ears. I listened to the Wailin' Jennys' "Beautiful Dawn" from their 40 Days album. The guitar has a more natural sound and presence on the Bartok DAC. The vocal harmonies are magic on this track. The Bartok gets them more right than the DirectStream.

The Great MQA Test

One of the great features of the Bartok, and all dCS gear for that matter, is the implementation of the MQA filters. My understanding is that dCS and MQA worked very closely together. When I mentioned I was getting a Bartok in for review to Bob Stuart, a smile came over his face and he said I would be impressed. He was right. MQA files played through Tidal are spectacular on the Bartok. And I have an engineer's test files where there is music in both unencoded format and MQA-encoded format.

The MQA files, level adjusted, have more presence and clarity on the instruments. The Bartok does a really good job of highlighting these differences, more so than three other MQA DACs I have tested with these files. From Khatchaturian to Yello, the Tidal Masters files never let me down with the exception of a couple of poor masterings. It may be the best \$20 a month I spend on music. The Bartok is so resolving that with high-quality MQA files, you can tell instantly (sometimes even by the "room tone" before the music(!)) whether you are listening to the non-MQA or MQA version. The Bartok takes the advantages of MQA and highlights them even more than a good MQA-capable DAC. I believe that is due to a more linear and robust implementation of the MQA filters.



Product Features of Note

Another aspect of the device is the ability of software from dCS to upgrade the sound performance. There are firmware upgrades for the DAC every one-to-two-years, not unlike the DirectStream's. I believe this is important as a \$15K investment should be future-proofed to a large degree. It's not a DAC where, every year, a new Sabre chip comes out and all of a sudden one has a nice "doorstop DAC" that is now dated. That gives me comfort.

As well, a device at this price point deserves a solid build. It's heavy — almost 37 lbs! As I mentioned, the casework is very well constructed. Look at my accompanying photos to see the casework joinery and thickness. It's also somewhat inconveniently big with a very wide and deep chassis (17.5" x 17.0" x 4.6"), but it's a beast in the best possible way. Even the feet are well designed and solid. It feels like no detail has been ignored. Even the owner's manual is readable and well designed. Geez.



dCS Bartok rear panel join

“Epic Failures”

What don't I like about the Bartok? Uh, give me a minute...okay...the print on the tiny buttons up-front is hard to read unless you are very close. But it looks kind of British modern cool anyway in its sleekness.

“That's all you got, Scoggins?”

Well sadly, yes. This is one thoroughly executed product.



Wrap It Up (For Me)

This type of product is one that causes a reviewer to pause and consider the price of purchase. And then reconsider. Unfortunately for me, the timing was bad, having just purchased the car. However, Christmas and bonus season are not too far away.

I'll be honest, I want a dCS product. To be even more honest, if the Bartok is this good, I'm now daydreaming about what a Rossini might do.

The Bartok sounded amazing in Munich paired with those Sasha DAWs. My time with the Bartok has confirmed that this is

“reference-quality sound”. Combined with it’s Swiss Army knife-like flexibility, incredibly solid build quality, and firmware future-proofness, it starts to feel like a reasonable deal. I have to admire dCS offering this much sound quality in their entry-level product. Indeed, the Wilson Alexias have spoken. The Bartok will one day soon be mine. Bank on it.

So there you have it...my over the moon, rave unto the sound fantastic, highest possible recommendation. If you are anywhere near this price category, get yer butt over to the local dCS dealer with some discs and files.

I know you’ll enjoy the ride.