

toneAudio

The dCS Bartok DAC

A Substantial helping of excellence

By Jeff Dorgay



To the delicacy of Allison Miller's drumming in Boom Tic Boom, in my living room system, it's easy to see how this DAC can be the end of your digital journey.

Like every other dCS DAC I've owned or reviewed, they always manage to hit a perfect tonal balance, combined with wide dynamic range and a natural presentation that never feels digital at all. Good as their last entry-level piece the Debussy was (\$11k about 8 years ago), the new Bartok at \$13,500 (and \$15,000 with a built-in headphone amp) offers quite a bit more. By comparison, many of your favorite automobiles have gone up in price by a much greater percentage.

The Bartok's sonic signature is similar to the Vivaldi but the Vivaldi is further refined. The Bartok reminds me much more of my former Paganini in terms of the ease it presents. Much like my reference dCS Vivaldi One, the Bartok just sounds like music. There's no "pretty good for digital" stuff going on here. dCS' John Quick had this to say about the similarity of the Bartok in their lineup:

"Bartok and Rossini share the same processing and RingDAC analog boards, so overall, they have the same processing capacity. The differences between the units (that affect their cost and ultimately their overall performance) are literally down to the Bartok having half the power supply and the chassis being far less expensive. The Bartok's construction overall is less complicated, using thinner metal. It uses a folded metal internal chassis wrapped in aluminum side and top panels; and although the front panel

seems like a thick hunk of aluminum like everything else, it's actually a very thin cap that either includes the punch-outs for the headphone outputs or not."

A long-term investment

It's been argued elsewhere that components like the dCS Bartok will only be purchased by the wealthy, in reference to its \$13,500 price tag. (\$1,500 more, if you want the internal headphone amplifier, and I highly suggest that you spend the extra- you won't regret it) However, I submit that \$13,500 – \$15,000 isn't out of reach for all but the well-heeled (read my article on "motorcycle money" here). Call me crazy, but I'm guessing you probably didn't wake up today and say "I'm gonna buy a \$15,000 DAC today." Most audio enthusiasts don't start there. Some do, but most don't. Most of us work our way up the ladder. More realistically, you're probably trading in a \$3k-\$8k DAC and moving up to what might be your last. dCS' programmable architecture goes a long way towards making an investment as future proof as digital technology can be. Over the nearly ten years I owned the Paganini stack, numerous upgrades were only an upload away, giving me a new DAC every time. You can read more about dCS' approach and technological solutions here at their website. This is an excellent time to make an investment like this because Roon is well implemented, there are several excellent streaming services available (directly via dCS' own Mosaic App should you not go the Roon route), and all of the dCS players have proprietary fully-implemented MQA. We could have a dodgeball game to the death about MQA, but if you are a fan, rest assured that dCS has done a fantastic job at decoding MQA. I'll even put the Nomex suit on and go as far as to say they've even outdone Meridan on MQA decoding ability – these files though both of the dCS DACs here, sound more lifelike than they have on any other MQA equipped box we've heard.



Just grab your favorite phones

Because the Bartok has already started achieving a lot of fanfare in the headphone world, let's start here. As dCS' first entry into this world, they've built a brilliant product. The Bartok's full class-A headphone amplifier drives everything from my Koss Pro-4AAs that I've had since high school to the new Focal Utopias to perfection. You'd probably spend more than \$1,500 on a premium interconnect and

power cable to add a headphone amplifier of comparable performance to a Bartok based system, so it's almost like getting a fab headphone amplifier at no extra charge- and you don't need to find more rack space. How's that for justification? After exhausting auditioning with about 20 different pairs of phones in the \$50 – \$4,000 range, I don't need a better headphone amplifier than the one built in the Bartok. A couple of the top choices from Luxman (\$4,995) and Woo Audio (\$16,000) reveal a little bit more music, but nowhere near enough for this moderate headphone user to ever justify the additional cost. The front panel features a standard ¼-inch headphone jack and a 4-pin balanced jack. While this won't cover every single headphone out there, all of the premium headphones on the market have one of these two options (if not both) available (and most have detachable cables allowing for adapting to either). Headphone use couldn't be more straightforward. Plug into the front panel and switch the Bartok's output from line to headphone, and then use the knob on the front panel as volume, or control from your mobile device or laptop with whatever app you are using for playback. Even the most fanatical of my headphone pals came away highly impressed with the Bartok's performance. Those of you living in tight quarters, tight enough that you can't afford the space for a power amplifier and speakers right now, would do well to grab a Bartok, a Roon subscription, and a few of your favorite streaming services. This leads to my only complaint with the Bartok- it would be lovely if dCS would add a single analog input, so those needing just one input could use it as a standalone preamplifier, or those going strictly for the headphone experience, could add a phonostage too. If you're all digital, the Bartok is pretty incredible.



Tomato/Tomato

Rather than seeing the Bartok as a \$15,000 headphone amp that happens to be a remarkable DAC, I see it as a destination DAC that's a steal at \$13,500 and even more so with the addition of the headphone amp. Perspective is everything. After coming off a year with the Rossini and now nearly a year with the Vivaldi ONE, the only thing the Bartok doesn't offer that the other two larger and more expensive players in the lineup offer are scale and some ultimate top-end refinement. Some of this refinement can be achieved by adding a dCS external clock. The sense of scale comes from bigger power supplies, isolation of functions to individual chassis and the added electrical and mechanical isolation that comes with taking core functions to separate chassis. The progress dCS has made here is astounding. Again, Mr. Quick chimes in, offering some more insight: "We are getting better at trickling down more of the sound of our flagship in our current offerings, and Bartok is really special in that regard. Considering it has 6-7 years of R&D ahead of it from Vivaldi and Rossini – far ahead of anything else we've done versus the 2.5-3 years that separated Scarlatti and Debussy... that definitely made a big difference. Beyond that, where we've taken the RingDAC in the latest series is also a primary contributor. We could

not have made nearly the same overall improvement in changing the mapping algorithm (as we did in Vivaldi and Rossini v1 versus v2) in the older generation products.”

It's all about resolution

Having the unique ability to compare the Bartok side by side as the anchor to a very nice \$50k system (which is where I suspect most Bartoks will end up) and my reference system, worth nearly ten times this much, illuminates the differences clearly. In my primary reference system, that has a much broader dynamic capability, more low-level resolution, and a magnificent soundstage, the Bartok makes a great showing. For many analog crazed audiophiles I know that are primarily analog, but would still like digital, this could be an excellent choice. Regardless of choosing delicate, small ensemble choral music, or the most raucous rock, starting with the Bartok feels just fine. But then switching up to the Vivaldi One shows precisely where the limits of the Bartok lie. Yet going back to the system in my living room, which is unable to resolve as much musical information, the delta between the two is not nearly as vast. The point here is that the core musicality of the Bartok is highly similar to the bigger boxes in the dCS range, and that's what I appreciate. Some manufacturers are not nearly as good at delivering a linear increase in performance as you go up the range. The Bartok is at the top of its class for the price asked, as are the Rossini, Vivaldi ONE and full-blown, four box Vivaldi – as it should be. There's no law of diminishing returns if you have a system capable of resolving the difference.



Versatility defined

The Bartok can accommodate any digital source you'd like to connect, via its RCA, Coax, or optical SPDIF inputs, single or dual AES inputs, USB or network inputs. That's right, it's got a fully capable streamer built in that will access your UPnP network and bring files in from your NAS or straight from your network. The Bartok has a fully balanced, class-A output stage in addition to the headphone amplifier, and there are balanced XLR and standard RCA outputs, that are both variable. More about that in a bit.

Our experience with the Vivaldi ONE, the Rossini, and Bartok is that the best results are streaming music files right from the network. Those not wanting to pony up for a ROON subscription can use dCS' own app, which works well and sounds excellent, though lacks the ultimate functionality of ROON. It's also incredibly handy that you can chain another network device through the Bartok. I use a Naim Uniti Core for CD ripping and offline storage in addition to my NAS, so this is a perfect way to keep the Uniti Core close by. Excellent luck was also had with a variety of different CD players as transports. Those who want to keep it all dCS might consider a used dCS transport for their disc needs, and if you use a Paganini transport with the dual AES connection, native SACD playback is possible. There are no limitations to digital playback with the Bartok. You can even connect to it as an Airplay zone!

Pre or not to pre

The ultimate question for some will be whether to use the Bartok as a standalone preamplifier, forgoing a linestage/preamplifier, or putting one in the system. Conventional wisdom suggests that less is more, but digital volume controls are always a touchy thing. At extremely low listening levels, they tend to lose resolution. Where the Vivaldi One can, in fact, be used without a line stage, if you are only concerned with digital playback, the Bartok is pretty good.

Ultimately, this is the other area where the entry-level Bartok is bested by the top dCS player. In my living room system when playing the Bartok directly into the BAT VK 56SE power amplifier and Focal Kanta no.3s, adding a preamplifier made a slight difference, offering up a little bit more spaciousness and definitely a smidge more warmth at very low-level playback. It was easier to notice the minute level of flatness there at the lowest level after going back to having a tip-top preamplifier in the system, but it will depend on your needs.

However, switching from the Kanta no.3s to the much larger and more resolving Focal Stella Utopia Ems, the jump in performance added by our Nagra Classic Preamplifier was unmistakable, especially in the area of tonal contrast and saturation. And of course, low-level playback is warmer and more full-bodied.

It's about music

As I've said before, the dCS DACs have always deliver supreme musicality, and I have hung my hat on their products, using them as a reference tool for over a decade. However, what I love about dCS is the way they serve the music and not the other way around. This is a player than I can listen to for 12-16 hours a day (and have on many occasions) with zero fatigue.

dCS does an outstanding job at presenting music with a tonality that is dead center in the middle of the scale. Their products (and the Bartok is no exception) are neither warm and romantic nor overly bright, bleached or harsh. Hitting the tonality bullseye is tougher than it sounds, but they manage to pull it off every time.

Every other musical parameter is equally well represented. Rather than go on at length with tracks you may or may not know or like, the best way to see what I mean is to go to your dCS dealer and give the Bartok a listen.



Is it for you?

Returning to our original conversation, you don't have to be an aristocrat to have a dCS Bartok of your very own. If you love music, and you want a top-quality digital front end that will offer enough performance to stay put, the Bartok is a winner. The performance that it provides more than justifies the price asked. dCS has put a considerable helping of their top technology in a package that outperforms many far more expensive boutique DACs.

Best of all, the customer service and ongoing support that comes with a dCS product assures that this is a digital player you will enjoy for years to come. Highly recommended. And yes, spring for the headphone amp!

The dCS Bartok: Take Two

... More perspective on the dCS Bartok

Editor's Note: A short introduction is in order for readers who haven't always followed our narrative.

Bob Gendron has been a contributor to TONE for almost 12 years and was also the magazine's editor in chief for a considerable period. His knowledge of and enthusiasm for music is boundless – beyond that of anyone I know. Even though he's never professed to be an audiophile, he's always had a great system in his home to get closer to the musical experience.

We've had countless discussions about analog vs. digital, and whether digital truly delivers enough of the emotional component to be on par with analog source material. As someone who has embraced a high-end, high-quality, and high-dollar digital front end for more than a decade now, I am convinced it is, and when Bob was considering his next upgrade, I suggested the dCS Bartok. Having lived with one for nearly a year, and spent countless hours comparing it to my dCS Vivaldi One, I knew this was the solution.

Unfortunately, the current COVID crisis has made it much more difficult to audition gear in person. So, after a number of "are you sure I'm going to like it that much?" conversations, Bob took a leap of faith and purchased a Bartok. It didn't take long for the experience to sink in. What follows is the account of a die-hard analog disciple. Again, this is NOT about one format vs. the other, it's about getting to the point where you engage the music and get past the gear.

Mission accomplished. And now, on to Mr. Gendron...

"This machine kills vinyl addictions."

dCS Bartok DAC By Bob Gendron

The dCS Bartok DAC doesn't come with that declaration. But the U.K.-devised, -engineered, and -built device certainly could. Variation on the Woody Guthrie guitar slogan aside, the 36.8-pound box supports the claim with utmost conviction and wondrous ease. A natural match with TIDAL and other high-resolution streaming services, the MQA-certified and Roon-tested Bartok flips long-held beliefs about digital like a pancake.

Let's face it: Age-old debates surrounding analog versus digital will never abate. And that's okay. A major benefit to owning a Bartok is that it doesn't force you to choose sides or give up one medium for the other. Rather, it levels the playing field while providing options a great majority of DACs only dream about in their marketing hyperbole. Digital music rendered with levels of body, tonality, depth, presence, dynamics, detail, and liveliness on par with those furnished by a five-figure analog front end – coupled with SACD-like refinement, clarity, smoothness, extension, and ultra-low noise – without the harshness,

sterility, brightness, and soullessness often associated with digital? Believe it. Or, embrace your inner skeptic. That's fine, too, because once you hear Bartok in person, you will be even more elated.

There's one hitch. Price. It lingers as the only potential drawback attached to this spectacular piece. Selling for \$14,500 without the optional built-in headphone amplifier (which adds \$2,750 to the ask), Bartok remains off limits to a large segment of the populace. Yet it's important to put everything in context. Bartok exists in an industry in which five-figure power cables are touted by "experts" as being worth every penny and six-figure speakers are championed on the covers of magazines – the very same whose highfalutin editors seldom write a check to pay for what they praise and who still get to keep that exorbitantly costly gear in their personal systems under the justification of "needing to hear the cutting-edge."

Which isn't to suggest Bartok is a "bargain" or [insert your favorite audiophile-press cliché here]. Rather, it indicates price has become an end-all-be-all in audio, sponsoring a "keeping up with the Joneses" race that more often than not has nothing to do with performance improvements and everything to do with boasting about how much something costs – and/or, in the case of folks with walls of glowing power amplifiers and the like, how it looks. Call the practice what you want. By any name, it functions as a barricade to entry that both preserves the pleasures of superior music playback for a very select few and fuels denigrating discourse in which less-expensive gear gets treated with thinly veiled condescension in reviews and showrooms. "Oh, you can't afford X? Well, Y is fine, I guess."

Bartok flips a large, fat middle finger at that trend. How many of today's components change someone's listening habits overnight? How many save valuable time and let you hear what you want in seconds – no washing or delicate handling required? How many help provide immediate access to vast libraries and present said content in a fidelity that transforms what you sense? How many stave off obsolescence via over-the-air firmware updates that enhance operation and sonics? How many DACs feature field-programmable architecture? For that matter, how many tout their own streaming app? (And how many manufacturers take proprietary technology developed for flagship products and put it in their lower-cost offerings?)

The collective answer to all of the aforementioned questions amounts to a number you can count on one hand. Bartok is in that class. TONEAudio Editor Jeff Dorgay authoritatively covered the unit's flexibility, connectivity, and features in his original review [here](#); ditto its build and construction. He also correctly made the observation that it functions as a long-term investment – another Bartok trait that rails against high-end audio's obsession with constant replacement.

As much a digital audio product can, Bartok comes on as the equivalent of a '60s McIntosh tube amplifier or '80s JBL horn speaker – classics to which people keep returning because they are that good, that reliable, that fun. Another incentive: Its seamless interfacing ability with Roon, particularly now that the platform's 1.8 software makes streaming on Bartok an easier and smarter experience. It also should go without saying (again) that using a Bartok doesn't mean you'll stop spinning records. Instead, it serves as an equalizer: Granting added access, increasing options, bestowing convenience, and bringing sought-after analog qualities to digital while spotlighting albums that sound better digitally than they do on a turntable (and vice versa).

For all but the wealthiest, \$15k constitutes a hefty sum. So, a bit of gentle advice. If you're looking at a certain tier of DACs – even models selling for half as much – pause. Then, dig a bit deeper and take the plunge on a Bartok. Or, save up and bide your time. If you opt to do the latter, Tom Petty might be proven right – the waiting is the hardest part – but the payoff will reward your patience tenfold. As for the dreaded upgrade itch that inevitably circles around shortly after you make an audio purchase and encourages you to get the proverbial newest, latest, and greatest? It'll never graze your skin.

Peripherals

- Amplification Luxman L-590AXII
- Analog Dr. Feickert Woodpecker with Jelco tonearm and Ortofon Cadenza Bronze cartridge
- Digital Oppo BDP-105
- Cabling Shunyata Delta interconnects and power cables
- Speakers Klipsch Cornwall III