

# Audiophile Style



**Inspired by Minnie and Lina** by The Computer Audiophile



Being inspired is what drives me to do my best work. Lately I've been consumed with busy work and feeling uninspired. Testing software and hardware, and finding issues when I just want to listen, make it tough to get into the music and feel inspired. There are countless digital audio roads that have zero issues and "just work" every time one taps play. But, I often like to dig into new things, old things, and possibly a mix of the two because I want to know as much as possible about all things digital audio. Sometimes this leads to very little listening. However, the last 48 hours have been delightfully inspiring. This week I decided to put down the unnamed frustrating projects, pickup my iPad running Roon, and move the dCS Lina Network DAC from the best headphone system I've ever heard into my main two channel system. I already have a dCS Rossini APEX in this system, but the Lina was calling my name. I'd looked at it every day, sitting on my desk, and frequently wondered how good it would sound in my main system. The word on the street is that the Lina is turning heads as a "regular" DAC, outside of headphone systems. Well duh, it absolutely should turn heads. It's a dCS DAC through and through, that just happens to be masterfully crafted to fit in a half-size chassis. I plugged an Ethernet cable into the Lina Network DAC and balanced Transparent Audio interconnects from the Lina into my Constellation Audio Inspiration PreAmp. I just wanted to listen to some good music on this DAC and not think about anything else. I put on Diana Krall's *The Girl in the Other Room*, sat back in my chair, and inched the volume up a bit further than normal. Dang, the Lina has serious heft, I thought to myself. Christian McBride's double bass on the opening Mose Allison track, *Stop this World*, was bold and beautiful.

Anthony Wilson's guitar, Krall's vocals, and the murderers' row of musicians on this entire album all sounded fantastic on my favorite tracks *Almost Blue*, *Narrow Daylight*, *Abandoned Masquerade*, and *Departure Bay*. It was a joy to sit back and listen the entire album, getting lost in the music while reveling in how great the Lina Network DAC sounded.



Then it hit me. I needed to listen to an album I hadn't listened to in a while, Minnie Riperton's *Perfect Angel*. Minnie Riperton is the mother of actress Maya Rudolph, who I know of from watching on *Saturday Night Live* many years ago. *Perfect Angel* is as close to a perfect album as one can get. Riperton's voice set the bar for Mariah Carey's vocal gymnastics decades later. Sadly, Minnie Riperton passed away in 1979 at the age of 31.

I pulled up the Deluxe Edition of *Perfect Angel*, pressed play and got lost, in the best way. By the time I made it beyond the original album release tracks, and into the deluxe and extended versions, I was absolutely inspired to write about

the experience. Sound this good and experiences this emotional must be written about, otherwise this wonderful hobby of ours can be a bit mathematical.

The first deluxe track is an alternate version of Riperton's signature track Lovin' You. On this version the band is accompanied by a small string section, and it takes the track into ethereal territory. The opening strings sound light and airy before Minnie's voice takes over the track and hangs right between the speakers. As if I can wave my hand through a hologram of her singing in front of me. It's just beautiful, emotional, and inspiring.

Track one on disc two is the extended version of Reasons. While listening to this track through the dCS Lina Network DAC, I can almost feel the vibe of 1032 N Sycamore Ave. in Los Angeles, the home of the Record Plant, where the album was recorded. The entire track has a great groove, but toward the end Riperton unleashes a vocal performance of which Mariah Carey could only dream. What also stood out to me was Reggie McBride's bass solo to close out the extended version of the track. A little dirty sounding, tube amp sounding, but 100% 1970s groove and fantastic.

Track three, Take a Little Trip, makes one wonder why this wasn't the version originally released. The opening vocal features Stevie Wonder, backed by Deniece Williams, Lani Groves, and Minnie Riperton! Then Riperton takes over for Stevie Wonder on the main vocal, before they duet toward the end. It's a delightful song in its original form, but this version is over the top GOLD. The backing vocal oohs and ahhs throughout the track are magical, and sound like they are floating but in support of the main vocal. The dCS Lina Network DAC lays them out there on the soundstage perfectly. Delicate, fragile, and absolutely imperative to take this song to such a high level. Mixing it up fabulously, and reminiscent of The Carpenters' Goodbye to Love from two years earlier, Riperton brings in Michael Sembello on electric guitar for Every Time He Comes Around. The extended version features two additional minutes of excellence. Sembello's guitar on this track is part Carlos Santana and part dirty grungy rock and roll. The guitar sound juxtaposition with Riperton's eloquently smooth vocals are like fire and ice, put together perfectly. Considering Stevie Wonder arranged this track, it's no wonder it's so beautiful. The Lina DAC reproduces the grunge and elegance like dCS DACs do: superbly.

## Why?



I didn't set out to write an article about the dCS Lina Network DAC, given that I'd just finished writing about it in my headphone system. However, after listening to Minnie Riperton's Perfect Angel, I couldn't NOT write about the experience and how well the Lina DAC performed. The half chassis DAC is absolutely NOT half dCS. It's 100% dCS and engineered to perform as such. Why not add the Lina Master Clock? I could've easily added the Lina Master Clock to this setup, but I wanted to see how the DAC performed on its own and I wanted to hear what an entry level dCS digital front end sounds like. At \$13,650 for the DAC only, it's the entry point into dCS. Plus, adding the \$7,750 Master Clock brings the price even with the dCS Bartok APEX. The question then is one of sonic differences and size differences. I don't have the Bartok Apex for comparison.

Why Lina over another DAC or dCS DAC? Lina is a fantastic entry into dCS. It's not dCS-lite, but it's also not an APEX version of Bartok (\$20,950), Rossini (\$32,800), or Vivaldi (\$46,500). The Lina isn't as resolute as the APEX DACs from dCS and there are good reasons for that. The bigger brothers feature a larger set of filters from which to choose, new mapper algorithms, and the APEX upgrade that recently took dCS DACs to a whole new level.

Looking further at the mapper and upsampling differences, one can see why a sonic difference exists. For example, the Rossini APEX offers upsampling to DSD128 or DSDx2 in dCS terms. This is a big benefit that can be seen on all measurements and heard by listeners the world over. I'd say a larger benefit of the Rossini over a Lina is the choice of mappers. I love the 3rd mapper, which like mapper 1, runs at DSD128 and presents data to the ring DAC in a newer way than the classic mapper available in Lina and all dCS DACs. The classic mapper runs at single DSD resolution, but keep in mind that this classic mapper was originally in the first generation Vivaldi. It's no slouch!

Lina does offer what I call sneaky configurability though, and sound quality that is second to no other DAC around its price point of \$13,650. With the Lina firmware version 1.1, dCS added volume control to the DAC, even though there's no large volume knob. This is huge! The digital volume can be controlled just like other dCS DACs and it can be locked into place for perfect pairing with a preamp or amplifier. The line level voltage output on Lina and all dCS DACs can be set at .2V, .6V, 2V, or 6V. This coarse analog setting paired with a fine digital attenuation, enable Lina to excel with almost any amp or preamp on the market.

### Wrap Up



Audiophiles looking for a DAC upgrade should take a serious look at the dCS Lina Network DAC. Don't let the smallish chassis size or headphone market penetration fool you. This is a full-on dCS Ring DAC. Based on my familiarity with dCS for the last 15 years, and because history is the best predictor of the future, I'd say the Lina will receive several firmware upgrades over the years and each will take its sonic performance to new heights. That's just what dCS does.

With its plethora of digital inputs and my previous experience with its excellent level of performance in my headphone system, I figured I could plug the Lina into my system and get back to listening to music. Once in a while even I get tired of messing with computers, networks, and files, and just want to listen. It turns out I was right, and then some.

The Lina worked as perfectly in my two channel system as it did in my headphone system. I fired up Roon and let the music flow. The sound was so engaging and inspiring that I had to write it up as one of my great audio experiences of the summer. The Lina Network DAC shares many similarities with the original Rossini and Vivaldi, that's how good it is!

At much less than half the price of a Rossini APEX, and 35% less expensive than even the dCS Bartok APEX, the Lina Network DAC stands on its own as an incredibly capable component. I seriously could live with the Lina as my reference DAC, and be absolutely happy. Knowing the Lina Master Clock and headphone amp are available for further improvement would also make me comfortable in an upgrade or expansion path. Given the long life of dCS products, this crazy good level of performance, and world class product support, the Lina Network DAC is one that I will certainly recommend to friends and secretly enjoy myself (even though it's sitting next to a class leading Rossini APEX).