dCS Network Bridge Review

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Data Conversion Systems recently celebrated its thirtieth anniversary, having launched in the late nineteen eighties to do specialised digital signal processing packages for – among others – the UK's Ministry of Defence. When the Cold War ended at the beginning of the nineties, it transplanted its technology to the sometimes more peaceful surroundings of the recording studio, where it supplied analogue-to-digital – and then digital-to-analogue – converters to discerning music producers and engineers.

Its pro DACs and sampling rate convertors became coveted by Japanese audiophiles, so dCS began to market domestic versions of the same. Then, because the company's unique Ring DAC core was – and still is – firmware-upgradeable, it was the first to upgrade its consumer products to hi-res capability. By the end of the nineties, it was quietly ensconced in the uppermost echelons of high-end hi-fi – and there the company has stayed ever since.

In 2017, dCS launched a product that didn't come in the usual huge sculpted case, and nor did it have the traditional five-figure price tag. Instead, the Network Bridge cost 'just' $6,995. According to Chris Hales, dCS Director of Product Development, the company made it as a favour to its existing customers, many of whom have kept their DACs for decades but who had no access to high-end streaming. Yet this little box has grown legs and walked beyond the company's traditional customer base, with many thinking it to be the best sounding standalone streamer around.

As we delve ever deeper into digital audio, we have long since moved past the "bits are bits" and "they all sound the same" stage. Most enthusiasts have heard the often quite profound differences between DACs, and are now beginning to realise that streamers can be just as deleterious to sound quality. A poor one will tend to flatten the soundstage, lose the vitality needed to convey a convincing performance, and/or add opacity or hardness that's not natural. With this in mind, dCS set out to make the best it could with today's technology. The result is a small, unassuming box that gives access to streaming services including Spotify, Qobuz and TIDAL, plus Networked Attached Storage drives, and it's also Roon-compatible.

Its compact case (360x245x67mm, 4.6kg) sports a solitary blue LED on the front fascia. Inside is effectively the network board of the company's Rossini streaming DAC, a StreamUnlimited board with a more powerful processor. Careful attention has been paid to clocking and power supplies. It plays digital files either from a USB hard drive or via TIDAL, Qobuz, Spotify and Airplay. The single AES and S/PDIF outputs deliver up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM and DSD64 (DoP), while the dual AES outputs work up to 24-bit/384kHz and DSD128; also around the back are word clock ins and outs. Its user-selectable downsampling is a gift to owners of older DACs, and everything is controlled via the excellent dCS app, available in both iOS and Android flavours.

Listening was done with both a Chord Electronics DAVE DAC and a dCS Bartók DAC, to get a sense of how the Network Bridge works with these two 'affordable high end' references. In both cases, I used the S/PDIF output; my reference system is a VAC Signature preamplifier and VAC Phi 200 monoblocks, driving B&W 802D3 loudspeakers.

SOUND QUALITY

The finest standalone digital streamer I have heard so far, it has everything that almost all other network music players do not – a sense of scale, vibrancy and power. It delivers anything but the usual flat, drab, plodding sound that characterises most streaming. Hearing Solti conduct Mahler's 5th Symphony via TIDAL on the DAVE was seriously special. I loved the way it layered the orchestra in the hall so that each row of players was etched in space. At the same time, it gave an unexpectedly wide palette of tonal colours, particularly cellos and basses – which are so often a problem – which sounded crisp, tangible and full of body. It wasn't just a case of them having greater attack; there was an organic, almost technicolour feel. Dynamics are superlative too, giving a great sense of drama to the proceedings.

Interestingly, it wasn't a case of the little dCS box bringing any sense of euphony to the sound. It doesn't airbrush things into appearing artificially 'beautiful', that would be downplaying what it actually does. Rather, it presents the orchestra as a series of subtlety differentiated colours – some beautiful, some earthy – which are above all accurate. In addition to this, it excels in the time domain, delivering a wonderfully animated presentation; for example, the timing of the slamming bass was impeccable, being perfectly coherent and correct. Put the Network Bridge up against a serious silver disc source, and things get very interesting. Normally my Esoteric K-05 CD player via S/PDIF into the Chord DAVE DAC will dispatch any streamer in the blink of an eye, as it delivers a far more natural and less processed sound. However, when listening to Ray Gelato's Basin Street Blues off silver disc, versus a NAS drive feeding the Network Bridge going into the DAVE, to my complete surprise I struggled to hear any difference at all. There were, when all was said and done, some minuscule differences in the spatiality of the respective versions, but I really couldn't say that one was better than the other.

Indeed, the dCS brings its multitude of talents together to deliver an unerringly natural presentation of any recording you care to play. Listening to a hi-res rendering of Mozart's ever-youthful and charming 29th Symphony – with the late Charles Mackerras conducting the Scottish Chamber Orchestra – I was reminded of the 'mastertape' sound you get from top-notch open reel. Solidity, punch, tautness and grip are just some of the adjectives that spring to mind. The music was presented as if I was in the presence of a live orchestra – a sound I am very familiar with, being a professional classical musician. I heard it in a way I don't often get from digital kit; it sounded earthy and visceral, as if that invisible barrier between the hi-fi and the recording had been pushed down. By contrast, most streamers are mashed-up and squashed in their presentation, with the overcooked sound that digital all too often dishes out.

Indeed, when playing my own 24-bit, 96kHz live recordings of my ensemble, The Allegri String Quartet, I have never heard them better. These are completely unprocessed and as nature intended, so have blistering transients and vast dynamic range – yet it was water off a duck's back for the Network Bridge. It didn't baulk at the challenge in the slightest. Most striking here was the expansive spatiality, with the little dCS box delivering the proverbial 'walk around soundstage', masterfully conveying the scale of the occasion.

I was fascinated to try this little box with its stablemate, the excellent dCS Bartók DAC. Oscar Peterson's You Look So Good to Me sounded even tighter and more precise than through the Chord DAVE. Instruments were more accurately defined in space, and also seemed to have greater individual colour. The timing of the Network Bridge via its sibling DAC was absolutely immaculate – sharp, tight and highly expressive. This conveyed an almost subconscious frisson of energy between the musicians – you can almost feel the electrical force-field between them!

Indeed the Bartók really unlocked the Network Bridge's sense of physical power. Benjamin Britten conducting his own virtuoso composition the Sinfonia da Requiem – Dies Irae, is a spectacular recording that shows Decca at its all-time best on the original vinyl. This time though, I played an MQA digital version via the Network Bridge and found the transfer to be formidable. Indeed, it had all the power of the LP – and then some. It sounded noisy, boisterous and intense, showing orchestration that few composers are capable of. These two dCS boxes really let rip into this manic piece of music, and I could feel the rawness of the recording, the menace of the music and the sheer power of the piece.

THE VERDICT

I have had a number of dCS products in for evaluation over the years, and always admired and respected them – but recently the company seems to have bounded up to a whole new level. The Network Bridge is no exception; it may not be a mainstream dCS product, yet it's no afterthought. To my ears, it's the best product of its type on sale right now.

I so love its combination of performance, packaging and price. Add a NAS drive and/or a streaming account, plus the best DAC you can, and you have an exceptional digital music source that's more affordable than you might expect. I do love how it brings TIDAL and Qobuz to life, showing just how superb these services can sound – all courtesy of a little box plus a clever app on your smartphone. An essential audition, if you're serious about streaming.