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dCS Bartók APEX



Updated to APEX status, new review forthcoming. The "perfectly" named dCS Bartók—judged so by JCA for its modernist, single-box sensibility—brings an unprecedented level of thrift to the company's offerings: It is both the company's most affordable D/A processor and the one that offers the highest level of per-chassis functionality, owing to its inclusion of a headphone amplifier (which can be omitted for a \$2750 savings) and an onboard version of the dCS Network Bridge streamer, the latter allowing playback from streaming services, network storage devices, and USB-connected flash drives. At the heart of the Bartók is the manufacturer's patented Ring DAC technology, here supporting native sampling rates up to 24-bit, 384kHz and up to DSD128. According to JCA, the Bartók "consistently and unambiguously revealed the character of the recordings it played, with clarity, pinpoint imaging [and] excellent image depth, fully saturated tonal colors, and no noticeable emphasis on any part of the frequency spectrum." Although neither writer saw the other's work until press time, Jim's conclusion—"the state of the art"—was echoed by JA in his test-bench report: "In this crusty old engineer's view, 'dCS' means 'Digital Done Right!' In a Follow-Up, HR experimented with the choice of reconstruction filters offered by the Bartók. He settled on the minimum-phase Filter 3, mainly because he liked its bite and contrast structure, striking a nice balance between hard and soft and keeping the music taut and lively. "Its vibrant effect on familiar recordings was nothing short of spectacular," he wrote. HR also auditioned the Bartók's headphone output. Using the low-sensitivity HiFiMan Susvara headphones, he found the sound "squeaky-glass clean and direct," with voices "crisply rendered." With Focal Stellias, the Bartók "made an attractive, lucid, and musically rousing partnering; one I could live with forever." HR summed up his time with the dCS by writing that he was not surprised at how easily and musically it handled every headphone he tried.

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dCS Rossini APEX



The successor to the English company's well-regarded Rossini, the Apex edition is based on a reconfigured Ring DAC circuit board with an all-new analog output stage. (Earlier Rossinis can be upgraded for \$9000.) Using his preferred settings—Filter 5 for Red Book, F3 for 24/88.2 up to 24/192, F6 for higher PCM resolutions, F1DSD for DSD, and M1 for MQA, DXD upsampling, and Ring DAC Map 1—JVS compared the Apex with the earlier 2.0 version with an album of Ravel piano concertos and immediately noted that with the Apex there was "a deeper silence between notes, a greater sense of grace, flow, and warmth from string instruments, and a beautiful finish to the sound that epitomized fin de siècle elegance." With a Talk Talk track, he felt that the Rossini 2.0 "sounded thinner than the Apex, with less substance. Everything seemed diminished and less involving. There was less there." JVS concluded that the Rossini Apex DAC was "more than another upgrade; it's a major advance in digital sound reproduction, one that elevates an already excellent DAC to a much higher level." While noting that the behavior of the six choices of reconstruction filter were identical to those of the earlier Rossini and dCS Vivaldi processors, JA commented that overall, "the dCS Rossini Apex's measured performance was beyond reproach."

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dCS Vivaldi Apex DAC dCS Vivaldi Master Clock



The result of the same painstaking development process that produced the dCS Rossini Apex, the Vivaldi Apex features the same analog board and the same choice of coefficient mapping for its Ring DAC and reconstruction filters as the Rossini. However, its larger chassis allows for



allows greater flexibility in transformer positioning, component isolation, and what can be done with I/O and the control board. According to dCS, "Vivaldi's hardware represents a much more ambitious approach to D/A conversion than the Rossini's digital processing platform." As the Vivaldi Apex doesn't have the upsampling options offered by the single-box Rossini, JVS auditioned the Vivaldi Apex with the Vivaldi Upsampler Plus (\$25,500 with Ethernet network port), as well as with the Vivaldi Master Clock (\$19,500). Compared with the superb-sounding Rossini Apex and its matching Clock, JVS found the midrange richer and the highs a mite less bright. The Rossini Apex's depiction "seemed lighter and less substantial, with smaller images," he wrote. In the test lab, the Vivaldi Apex offered superb measured performance, with very high resolution and channel separation, and extremely low noise and jitter. JVS summed up his experience of the Vivaldi Apex by writing "It is rare, in a home listening room, to experience anew the full impact of great orchestral music heard in a concert hall. But the Vivaldi Apex DAC, Vivaldi Upsampler Plus, and Vivaldi Master Clock together have made that possible, repeatedly.