

the absolute sound®

dCS Vivaldi Version 2.0 Evolution



Digital reproduction has long been the Achilles' heel of the high end. The promise has always been there. A supernaturally low noise floor. No pops and ticks and cracks. Ease and convenience of use. But the actual execution has been another matter, which is a roundabout way of saying that “perfect sound forever” has suffered from more than its share of imperfections. The digital nasties, as they have come to be known, scarcely require enumeration.

One of the leading high-end companies that has been striving to relegate those nasties to the dustbin of history, if that's not too grandiloquent a phrase, is dCS of England. For several decades, its team of engineers has been toiling in the digital vineyards to extract headier performance from CDs, servers, and streaming devices. My first real encounter with dCS came several years ago when its indefatigable North American representative John Quick dropped off its then-flagship Scarlatti system. Next came the dCS Vivaldi, which I first heard when it was premiered in 2012 at New York's EarsNova with Rockport loudspeakers. Even in a system I was unfamiliar with I could tell that the dCS system constituted a considerable upgrade, particularly in image stability and overall musical coherence. Fast-forward to today, and the Vivaldi has itself experienced a major upgrade called Version 2.0 that offers exceptionally refined performance. (See Robert Harley's extended review of the original Vivaldi in Issue 233.) Three of the four units—Transport, DAC, and Upsampler—are the recipients of major software upgrades. In addition, the Upsampler receives a hardware upgrade. These updates are included in all new units. No, if you already own the Vivaldi, your units are not

outmoded. Quite the contrary. Existing owners receive the software upgrades gratis if their system was purchased through authorized channels. There is, however, a \$2000 fee if they want the hardware upgrade for the Upsampler, which includes new network and USB hardware that nearly doubles the processing power of the Upsampler and streamlines the connection between the rear panel and the primary board. I can report that I was shocked by the difference that this one upgrade alone made in dynamic power and sheer grunt. Among other things, the software changes in the DAC are said to create a better mapping algorithm than the one previously employed. This “better math,” as Quick put it, allows the Ring DAC to fire 5 of its 48 current sources per channel approximately 6 million times a second, in a new way that lowers harmonic distortion. For its part, the transport now boasts improvements to its clocking architecture and double-speed DSD upsampling for CD.

It was easy to hear the difference in performance after the units had been reprogrammed. Initially, I listened to software beta versions, then a few months later the final one. From the outset, I heard an increase in resolution, much of which I ascribed to a lower noise floor. On piano and orchestra I was wowed by the improved precision and slam of various instruments. Dynamic contrasts, from pianissimo to forte, were far more vivid. When dCS managing director David Steven visited me after the initial updates had been performed, he raised his eyebrows at the overall level of sound. I can only imagine what he would think now that the entire complement has been installed.

On the legendary 1969 Columbia recording, now available in SACD format, of the Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Chicago brass sections, I was almost literally blown away by the refulgence of the tuba on Gabrieli's Canon a 12. As with other big, dynamic recordings, the dCS conveyed it with a sense of weight and gravity, majesty and grandeur that I had not heretofore experienced, apart from a live performance. This is a recording that I and other students at Oberlin Conservatory would listen to time and again, a kind of Holy Grail of brass playing. To hear it with this kind of resounding fidelity is thrilling. On the Jimmy Cobb Quartet's Chesky recording *Jazz in the Key of Blue*, I was smitten by an entirely different quality—the sinuous ease with which the dCS rendered Roy Hargrove's plangent flugelhorn playing and Cobb's shimmering cymbals on cuts such as “If Ever I Would Leave.” Once more, the size of the soundstage was immense. Indeed, one of the most notable aspects of the Vivaldi 2.0's ability to conjure up a wide, deep soundstage is that you not only win a more lifelike sense of the power of individual instruments but also an improved perception of where they are playing in relation to one another. In fact, I'm reminded of this very quality as I'm listening to a Harmonia Mundi recording by the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra of Bach's violin concertos—the sense of the various string sections combining to form an ensemble is much more intelligible, as are the very quiet passages where the solo violinist is barely touching bow to string. The pace of individual musical lines is more measured and stately, as though rhythm and timing have been subtly but perceptibly improved.

Much of the emphasis of these Version 2.0 upgrades is targeted at improving the ability of users to employ high-resolution sources. I personally continue to like playing CDs, but the industry is clearly moving with the introduction of servers. So when Quick proposed setting me up with a router and a NAS, I was eager to give it a go, especially because I have a cache of private recordings bestowed upon me by recording engineer Peter McGrath that I always enjoy playing.

I used my iPhone to set up a playlist and listened to a wide range of recordings, ranging from classical to jazz to rock. In those instances where I could directly compare a CD to a hi-res file, I have to say that the latter format often appeared to edge ahead by a nose, both in detail and ambience. It also appears as though dCS is going to offer support for Master Quality Authenticated (MQA)—a vivid sign of where the recording industry is headed now that CDs have largely become a remnant of the past. If you possess the requisite ardor, not to mention the financial means, for what can only be called Himalayan heights of digital playback, I urge you to demo the Vivaldi 2.0. Its flexibility and high

quality mark it out as a special product. I can't imagine anyone who wouldn't be happy with it. I know I am. Digital reproduction has long been the Achilles' heel of the high end. The promise has always been there. A supernaturally low noise floor. No pops and ticks and cracks. Ease and convenience of use. But the actual execution has been another matter, which is a roundabout way of saying that "perfect sound forever" has suffered from more than its share of imperfections. The digital nasties, as they have come to be known, scarcely require enumeration.

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