

# stereophile

JASON VICTOR SERINUS

## dCS Varèse Transport

CD/SACD TRANSPORT FOR VARÈSE MUSIC SYSTEM

Silver platters and I began divorce proceedings over a decade ago. The separation began when the husband and I contemplated liberating ourselves from crime-ridden East Oakland and moving to placid Port Townsend (where anarchist deer, rather than Norteño gang members, wreak havoc on our daily lives). There was no way I was going to haul 55 big boxes of CDs 846 miles and have no place to put them.

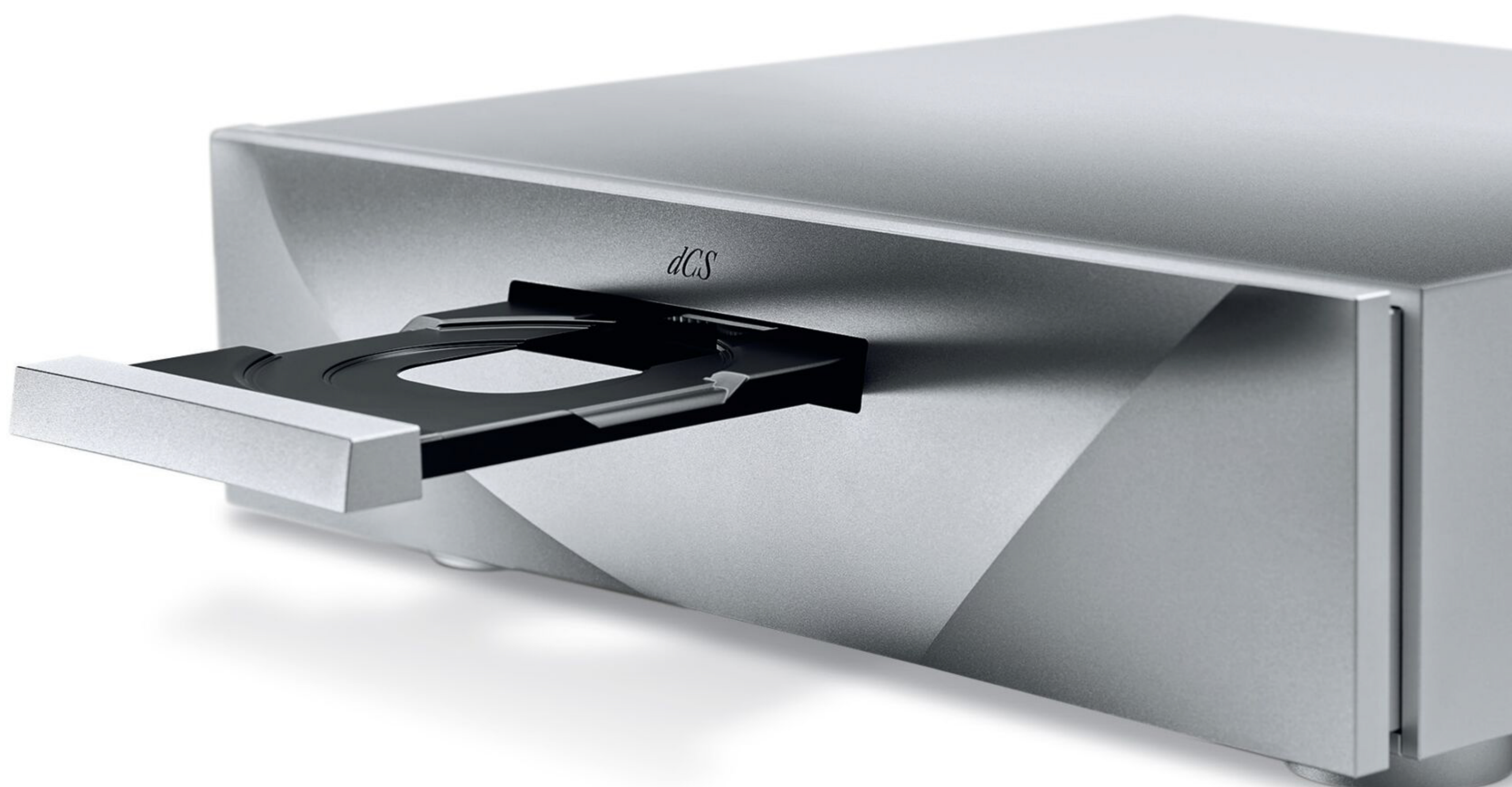
I refused to part with my vocal CDs. Ditto for my LPs and 78s, though my only turntable was destroyed in transit. All that media plus eight large boxes of CDs and SACDs that inexplicably slipped through the cracks and remained unsold at moving time ended up in a huge, diesel-belching van that destroyed all semblance of tranquility in our new, usually quiet neighborhood.

The vocal discs now reside in the music room, where they call to me like sirens. The unprocessed CDs and SACDs are secreted in another deep place—beneath a card table in my office—awaiting the time when I rip and then sell them. In August, they will have gathered dust for 12 years.

Having no room to store additional physical media, I started to beg record label publicists to instead send hi-resolution files. Getting hi-rez was a challenge, especially in the early days when I was virtually the only music reviewer insisting on it.

For the past few years, silver platters have played virtually no role in my life. I own a dCS Rossini Transport, but I was forced to remove it from my equipment rack to make room for review devices.

Having not heard a single silver disc in 24 months, except at audio shows, the notion of reviewing the new dCS Varèse CD/



SACD Transport (\$39,950) may seem odd. Yet the curious assortment of atoms and empty space that constitutes the brain of JVS was excited by the opportunity to discover how much joy and richness could be retrieved from the playback medium at the heart of the digital recording revolution.

### What it is

The elegant face of the Varèse Transport, which contains its front-loading transport tray and, directly below it, a teeny status LED, is as uncluttered as can be. Ditto for the rear, which contains a single ACTUS output port (for connection to the Varèse Core) and a combined power socket, fuse, and power switch. You will likely not notice the two small buttons beyond its bottom edge: The middle one toggles between on, standby, and sleep, and the button three-quarters of the way across opens and closes the transport tray. Nor will you think much of the status LED's light show, which remains bright white most of the time but pulses when the connection is incomplete. (Other light show states: Dim = standby, red = sleep, ma-

## SPECIFICATIONS

**Description** Front-loading dual-laser CD/SACD transport with 1.5m ACTUS cable. Designed solely for use with the dCS Varèse Music System. Outputs: 1 ACTUS port. Power consumption: Sleep 0.5W. Standby <2W. In use 30W.

**Dimensions** 5.12" (130mm) H × 17.48" (444mm) W × 16.73" (425mm) D. Weight: 44.31lb (20.1kg).

**Finish** Silver, black.

**Serial number of unit reviewed** VTP2077. Manufactured in the UK.

**Price** (with ACTUS 1.5m cable) \$39,950. Approximate number of US dealers: 32. Warranty: three years parts and labor for the original owner only.

**Manufacturer** dCS (Data Conversion Systems), Ltd., Unit 1, Buckingway Business

Park, Anderson Rd., Swavesey, Cambridge CB24 4AE, England, UK. US distributor: Data Conversion Systems Americas, LLC, PNC Bank Bldg., 300 Delaware Ave., Suite 210, Wilmington, DE 19801, USA. Tel: (302) 473-9050. Web: dcsaudio.com.

genta = installing a firmware upgrade, off = off.)

Clearly there must be something special going on inside to justify the price tag. To get the skinny, I spoke by Zoom with James Cook, Cambridge-based dCS product marketing manager, and Emron Mangelson, director, dCS North America.

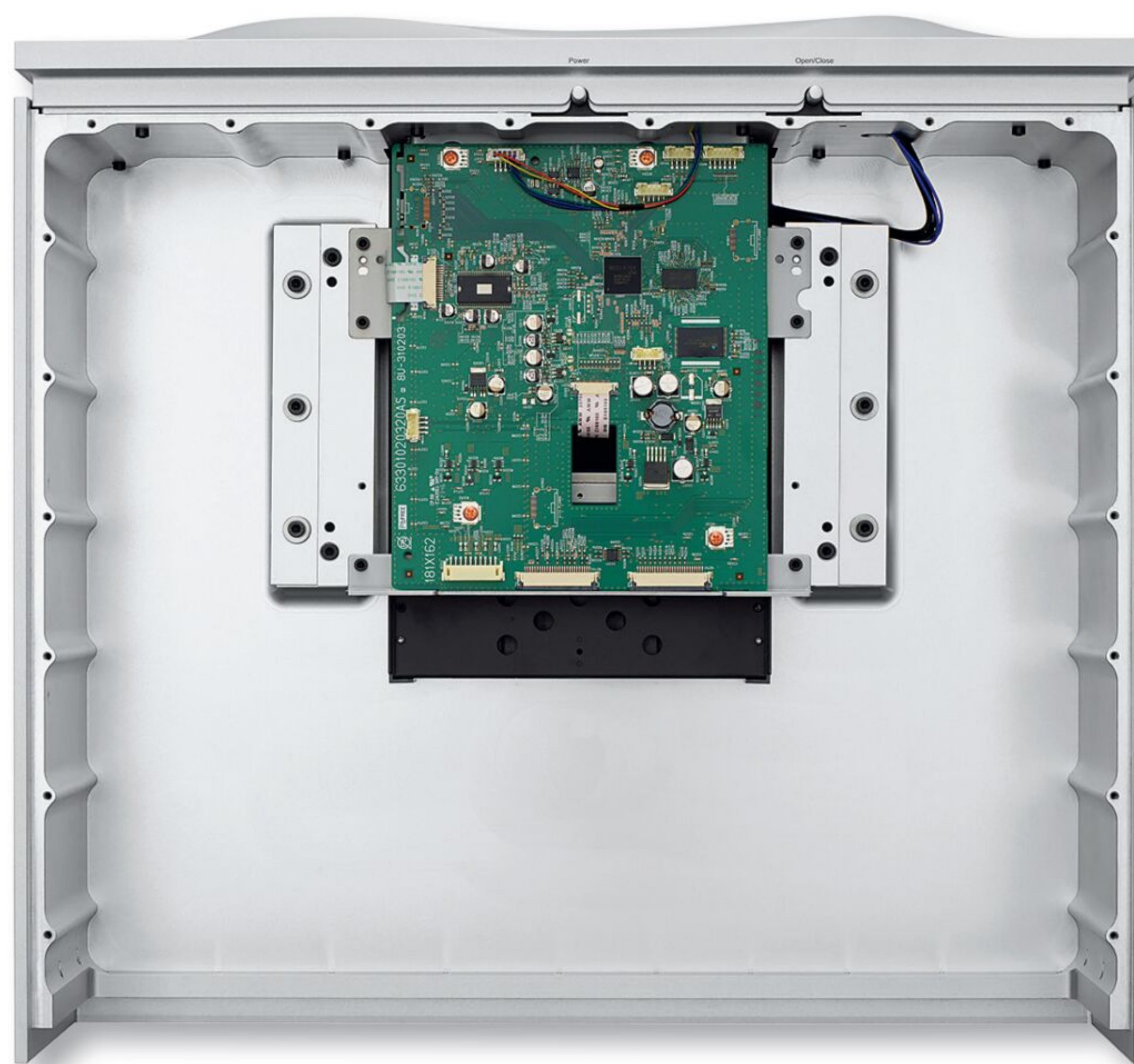
Despite rumors to the contrary, Cook assured me that the only element shared by the Rossini, Vivaldi, and Varèse Transports is their Denon & Marantz CD/SACD mechanism. “Everything else is unique,” he said.

“The transport has three essential jobs. First, it must extract bit-perfect data from the disc. Simultaneously, it must minimize vibrations that might generate electronic and acoustic noise. Third, it must be able to accept an external clock signal so that it can be clocked by a master clock’s more accurate clock circuitry. The D&M mechanism does all three of those things for both CDs and SACDs.

“We’ve done a huge amount of mechanical work to give the transport a proper, noise-free housing to perform well in. The chassis, circuit board, and power supply designs are entirely new. In both the Rossini and Vivaldi Transports, the chassis was constructed of six different pieces. With the Varèse, there are only two pieces that come together a bit like a clamshell to form pretty much a completely electrically sealed unit.”

dCS feels that how you mount the transport mechanism to the chassis is of paramount importance. In the Varèse Transport, the mechanism is mounted to the top plate of the chassis via two aluminum “almost stalactites,” which extend down from the heavy billet of unbroken aluminum that is the top plate.

“Mounting onto the two stalactites provided the best isolation we could get,” Cook said. “It allows us to fine-tune the mounting to adjust for slight deviations in mechanical tolerances. The Varèse Transport’s mechanical construction is a lot more advanced than anything we’ve done previously, and it contributes to the most



stable transport that we have ever made by quite a significant margin.”

All electronic components are mounted on a single, innovative circuit board.<sup>1</sup> This allows extra space to separate and isolate the power supply modules in the bottom left-hand corner of the unit, away from the clock circuitry in the top right corner and the computer in another corner that runs the ACTUS interface, encodes, and decodes.

### Clocking

The Varèse Transport incorporates dCS’s standard clock circuitry with a 27MHz oscillator. When the external Varèse Clock generates a master clock signal for the whole system, the transport locks onto that master clock

signal and adjusts its own oscillators to match.

“The transport uses those oscillators to carry out necessary internal operations that include running the CD mechanism or clocking the audio output from the mechanism itself to make sure that we’re getting samples that are free from jitter,” Cook said. “A key difference between the Varèse Transport and pretty much anything else that exists on the market currently is that it sends the data out asynchronously. Other transports, including the Vivaldi and the Rossini, use a synchronous interface—something like AES or S/PDIF—that by its nature has quality limitations. This is why we’ve shifted to using ACTUS interconnects in the Varèse system. Getting asynchronous data out of the Varèse Transport and feeding it in native format into the Varèse Core for the rest of the audio processing makes quite a bit of difference.”

“When we first heard the transport at dCS headquarters, the difference was stunning,” Mangelson said.

Cook clarified that the Varèse system always utilizes a master clock signal to keep the clocks in the transport and the other units

<sup>1</sup> See [stereophile.com/content/dcs-varèse-music-system-da-processor-page-2](http://stereophile.com/content/dcs-varèse-music-system-da-processor-page-2).



**“16 bits on a CD can sound really damn good if it’s well-dithered to deliver dynamic resolution far beyond what the medium of a CD supposedly allows.”**

synchronized. “The external clock signal acts as a reference for each of the unit’s own internal clocks. Once they lock up to it, it enables them to speed up or slow down so that everything in the Varèse system operates in synch. At no point does that master clock signal replace anything. It essentially works to improve the quality of each of the internal clock circuits and make sure that they’re all singing from the same hymn sheet and keeping the same time.” How English of it.

Mangelson’s turn. “The Varèse system, even without its master clock, has intrinsically lower jitter than a full Vivaldi system with an external Master Clock,” he noted. “The TOMIX timing protocol we use in Varèse is far more precise than anything we’ve used before.”

Cook noted that all the power supplies in individual Varèse units lock synchronously to the master clock, thereby controlling playback at direct multiples of 44.1kHz. No noise is injected back into the system. This allows the Varèse Transport to use a quiet switching power supply that operates at the same frequencies as the audio.

“One part of the secret sauce to dCS performance is the way in which we deploy our clocks,” Mangelson said. “Even the displays are clocked to the audio clocks. This eliminates noise that customarily arises when display microprocessors run at completely different nonmultiples of audio. That’s why you don’t need to shut off dCS displays in order to eliminate noise.”

### Other considerations

Another difference between the Varèse Transport and the upsampling transports for Rossini and Vivaldi is that the Varèse Transport always plays back in native resolution. Rather than upsample, it sends everything to the Core. If the user wants to convert PCM to DSD, conversion occurs in the Core.

Cook noted that dCS performs upsampling differently than some other companies. “We don’t use linear interpolation,” he said. “We upsample without adding or subtracting anything. The process is completely transparent.”

At least one audio company known primarily for its DACs maintains that CDs have the potential to sound better than files. dCS, however, remains agnostic about sources.

“You can get fantastic sound quality, even from Red Book CDs,” Cook insisted. “In our units, if you use a master clock, CD playback should deliver sound comparable to files ripped from that CD. The provenance of file and disc just need to be the same. The Varèse system will make the best of whatever source material is fed to it.”

During a long conversation about bit rates, I mentioned that John Atkinson, in his measurements, sometimes comments on the actual dynamic resolution capability of DACs under review. Cook claimed that because dCS DACs “whack up” any distortion as noise to around 350kHz, they can achieve true 24-bit dynamic resolution.

Vinyl is much worse. “Vinyl as a format is conservatively 13 bits at most,” he said, meaning that the dynamic range with vinyl is equivalent to 13 bits in a digital system. “The dynamics physically aren’t there with the vinyl medium in the same way that they would be with digital. But it should be noted that dynamic resolution is not as linear in the ear as it is when drawing it out as numbers. So, for example, 16 bits on a CD can sound really damn good if it’s well-dithered to deliver dynamic resolution far beyond what the



medium of a CD supposedly allows.”

At the conversation’s end, Cook summarized his thoughts about the Varèse CD/SACD Transport. “The Varèse Transport is the quietest, most stable, lowest jitter transport that we have ever made by quite a significant margin. It is also the easiest to use, with one connection in and out. Plug it into the Core, turn it on, and everything comes online. There’s no need for separate clock connections, choice of sync modes or upsampling methods. None of that. It’s a plug-and-play job. It may be very technologically advanced, but it’s quite understated in how simple it is to use.”

### Why is so little in Serinusland simple?

Placing the Varèse Transport in my rack was easy. Putting the same Wilson Audio Pedestals under it that I use under my other Varèse gear, connecting the supplied ACTUS cable to an open port on the Varèse Core, and using the same brand/model of power cable that I use in my file playback setup was equally simple.

Ditto for playback, also simple. Although I needed to leave my seat to change discs, all other functions, including opening and closing the tray, selecting which track to play, and adjusting volume could be performed from my listening position using the dCS Mosaic ACTUS app (though I favor the Varèse remote control for adjusting volume). Comparing disc and file playback, I could remain seated and use the app to seamlessly move between them.

Sometimes I preferred to open and close the tray using the button on the transport’s bottom edge and control playback from



the Varèse Display. In contrast to players with big colorful screens that display album cover art and other information, on the Varèse tracks were only identified by a number. I happily used booklets and disc jackets to identify which track was playing.

I did everything I could to level the playing field between disc and file playback. I disconnected all Nordost QKore grounding devices from components on the file-playback side. I moved four power cables and two pairs of Nordost QWave and QSine devices to ensure that neither playback medium had an unfair advantage over the other. Because expensive power cables do not grow on trees, this was a far more time-consuming process than I wish to recount. My thanks to Joe Reynolds, Meredith Gabor, and Michael Taylor of Nordost as well as to Bill Low, Garth Powell, and Stephen Mejias of AudioQuest for making this journey possible.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I made sure I was comparing apples to apples—physical discs to rips of the files they contain. I could not, for example, compare a DSD-native SACD of one of Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony's Mahler symphonies to the 24/96 stream on Qobuz. Even in the case of pianist Murray Perahia's 16/44.1 recording of Handel and Scarlatti, which you can stream in 16/44.1, I did not know if the 16/44.1 files on Qobuz were exactly the same as those on the CD.

My thanks to Scott Campbell for taking one of my Murray Perahia CDs to his house and ripping it to a 16/44.1 AIFF file using bit-perfect ripping software, transferring the files to a USB-B stick, and bringing everything back in time to allow me to complete this review.

### The sound

I've used the word "stunned" so frequently in my reviews that I dare not use it again, lest its meaning be blunted. "Gobsmacked," a descriptor oft invoked by one of my mentors, John Atkinson, is a viable alternative, but it, too, is more than a bit overused by audiophiles. Yet "surprised" is inadequate to convey my reaction when I began auditioning the Varèse Transport. I was *amazed* to hear what I heard and *astonished* to feel what I felt.

Which doesn't mean that there weren't false starts. I began with a track Scott often chooses—one which we could play on CD and

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stream through Qobuz—The Modern Jazz Quartet's "Pyramid" (LP version) from the eponymous CD, *Pyramid* (16/44.1 FLAC, Rhino Atlantic/download). It quickly became apparent that the CD and streamed versions were not the same. All I could ascertain for certain was that, read from a CD by the Varèse Transport, the vibraphone sounded gorgeous.

Several more inherently flawed comparisons sputtered along, equally inconclusive. Only when Scott brought over his ripped-to-USB AIFF copy of Murray Perahia's 1997 Sony CD of Handel's Suite for keyboard (*Suite de pièce*), Vol.1 No.5 in E major ("The Harmonious Blacksmith"), HWV 430, from *Murray Perahia plays Handel and Scarlatti* (16/44.1 FLAC, Sony/Qobuz), was I able to figure out what was what.

Though I had to play several movements multiple times, the joy and perfection with which Perahia executes every move of his fingers with a harpsichord-like touch, and the subtle dynamics he employs, kept me smiling. If you want to hear 14 minutes of one of the most joyful keyboard pieces of the baroque period, check out this recording. Its elation brings to mind the equally joyful first movements of Bach's first and second *Brandenburg Concertos*, both in F major, and his arias "Phoebus eilt mit schnellen Pferden" (So Cupid too seeks his pleasure) and "Sich üben im Lieben" (To indulge in love) from *Weichet nur, betrübte Schatten*, BWV 202 (aka The Wedding Cantata).

As long as the recorded performance was great, any sense of a barrier between me, artist, and music was eliminated. The illusion of artists performing directly in front of me was sometimes disarmingly real. I know that every recording is a product of electrical manipulation that reflects the engineer's signature as much as the artist's—that every recording is a reality unto itself—yet CD and SACD playback often sounded as direct-to-the-source as



<sup>2</sup> Equal thanks to John Giolas, Gary Breustle, Hans Brackmann, Gabriel Jones, Norm Varney, and the many folks at dCS, D'Agostino, Wilson, Innuos, Grand Prix, Artnovion, AXISS distribution, Bart Andeer, and more for having my back. Gratitude abounds.

## I was amazed to hear what I heard and astonished to feel what I felt.

anything I'd ever heard. I've never experienced CD or SACD sound remotely as good as through the Varèse Transport and system.

I was astonished and moved by how much subtle dynamic contrast the Varèse Transport revealed. If I listened carefully to the Qobuz stream of Perahia's Handel through the Dragonfire Mini Dragon desktop system with subwoofer, I could eventually ascertain a slight drop in volume between 1:10 and 1:12 in the first movement. Emotionally, it didn't register at all. Through the Varèse system, however, in that slight softening of touch I felt Perahia sinking deeper into the music, reaching deeper into its heart. As his heart responded, so did mine.

I had a similar experience when I cued up, for the first time in years, the CD of Brahms's song "Heimweh II [O wüßt ich doch den Weg zurück]," from soprano Elly Ameling's 1977 recording of Brahms songs. I originally discovered this recording on an out-of-print LP in the Berkeley Public Library and searched for decades until, soon after the start of the 21st century, Philips rereleased it as part of a five-CD set, *The Artistry of Elly Ameling*.

Captured in its prime, Ameling's voice had gained gravity and profundity since she made her first, lighter-voiced commercial recordings well over a decade earlier. I place the best of her mature Brahms recordings on the same exalted level as those of sopranos Lotte Lehmann and Elisabeth Schumann. Each woman had a distinct voice and sensibility, better suited to some songs than others. But when voice, heart, and repertoire matched, the results were transporting.

As were they through the Varèse Transport. I had no idea how dynamic Ameling's smaller voice could sound<sup>3</sup> until I played this song through the Varèse. Ameling's art registers emotion more through tone and shading than through specific word-painting; hearing more of how she sang the song to herself means everything, to me, at least. I expect that many jazz lovers feel the same about Trane's artistry, others about Janis Joplin's or Samara Joy's.

SACD vs the DSD file on USB stick was a tougher call. I went back and forth many times on two tracks of Mahler's *Songs of a Wayfarer*, performed marvelously if imperfectly by Alice Coote on a Pentatone SACD of *Mahler Song Cycles* with the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra under Marc Albrecht. Eventually I decided that the file on a stick sounded a bit more vivid than the SACD, but I'm not certain. They sounded different, but those differences were hard to pin down.

After all the testing, I had a ball digging out CDs known and unknown. I used to carry John Atkinson's 2008 CD of male en-

## ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

**Digital sources** dCS Varèse five-piece music system, dCS Rossini CD/SACD Transport; Innuos Nazaré Music Server and PhoenixNET network switch; Small Green Computer Sonore opticalModule Deluxe (2); Broadcom/Avago AFBR-5718PZ 1GB SX-SFP, Gen 5 Fiber Optic modules (2); Nordost QSource linear power supply (2); Sonore Audiophile Linear Power Supply; Synology 5-bay 1019+ NAS with Ferrum Hypsos linear/switching hybrid power supply; ASUS AX6000 and RT-AX88U Pro mesh routers and Netgear Nighthawk modem; Apple 2023 iPad Pro and 2025 MacBook Air.

**Power amplifiers** Dan D'Agostino Momentum M400 MxV monoblocks, Audio Research 330M monoblocks.

**Loudspeakers** Wilson Audio Specialties Alexia V with Løke subwoofers.

**Headphones** Audeze LCD-X, updated Audeze LCD-5.

**Cables** Digital: Nordost Odin 2, Valhalla 2 (USB and Ethernet), Frey 2 (USB adapter); AudioQuest WEL Signature; Wireworld Platinum Starlight Cat8 (Ethernet), OM1 62.5/125 multimode duplex (fiber optic). Interconnect (XLR): Nordost Odin 2 and Blue Heaven (subwoofer), AudioQuest Dragon. Speaker: Nordost Odin 2, AudioQuest Dragon. AC: Nordost Odin 2, Valhalla 2, Valhalla 1; AudioQuest Dragon and Firebird; Kimber Kable PK10 Palladian. Umbilical cords: Ghent Audio Canare on NAS; QSource Premium DC cables with Lemo terminations for QSources.

**Accessories** Grand Prix Monza 8-shelf double rack and amp stands, 1.5" Formula platform; Symposium Ultra Platform; Nordost 20A QB8 Mark III, QKore 1 and 6; Titanium and Bronze Sort Kones, Sort Lifts; Stromtank S-4000 MK II XT power generator, SEQ-5 Audio Distribution Bar; AudioQuest Niagara 7000 and 5000 power conditioners, NRG Edison outlets; Environmental Potentials EP2050EE surge protector/filter; Wilson Audio Pedestals; Artnovion Lagos and Alps diffusers and bass corner traps, A/V RoomService Polyflex diffusers, Nihon Onkyo Engineering AGS diffusers, Resolution Acoustics room treatment; Stillpoints Clouds (8); HRS DPX-14545 Damping Plates; Marigo Aida CD mat.

**Music room** 20' L × 16'4" W × flattens at 9'4" H.—Jason Victor Serinus

semble Cantus's *While You Are Alive* (Cantus Recordings) to audio shows. Despite how many times I heard it, including at the end of one show where John and I sat in mystical silence as golden sound poured forth from a darTZeel/Evolution Acoustics system, I've



never heard the ensemble sound as real, present, and dynamic on Eric Whitacre's "Lux Aurumque" as it did through the Varèse Transport. Nor did I expect to hear so much color, vibrancy, shading, and pristine silence from a 16/44.1 CD.

After a dose of "Mood Indigo" in stereo from Nina Simone's 1959 *Little Girl Blue* (Bethlehem)—I'd never heard her voice sound so soulfully beautiful, even on LPs played on hugely expensive setups at audio shows—and *Ella and Louis's* mono recording of "Can't We Be Friends" from Michael Bishop's Lim Ultra HD 32/192 CD remastering, I turned to something new: Tyshawn Sorey's *Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)*, the first release on a new Houston label, DaCamera Editions.

This unbroken 75-minute work was recorded at Rice University in October 2023 by the fabled Judith Sherman (winner of 14 Grammy Awards), with Francis Schmidt. Sherman worked on every aspect of the recording. When I first listened to the 24/96 WAV download, it didn't touch me. But read from the CD with the Varèse Transport, the opening eight minutes seemed to embody Executive Producer Sarah Rothenberg's assertion, "Minutes have no meaning in this music—no more than inches can describe a Rothko painting." Once this review is submitted, I look forward to playing the entire CD in darkness and experiencing some of the time-stands-still, Morton Feldman-like magic reportedly shared at the music's world premiere in Rothko Chapel.

### What more is there to say?

The more I listen to the entire Varèse music system, the more I'm convinced that describing it as "better than" fails to convey the extent to which it elevates digital reproduction to an entirely different plane. I can't compare it to an analog front end of comparable or greater price, but I have yet to hear a digital front end

(especially one without a preamplifier) that brings me as close to what I would like to think sound engineers and artists hoped I would hear.

I never expected a dynamically limited CD—a medium some hi-fi pundits have called inherently incomplete, irritating, and incongruent—to send me spinning, head over heels. Nor did I expect an SACD, even though recorded in DSD, to rival the sound of DSD64 files stored on a USB stick or music server.

The Varèse Transport is a remarkable achievement. As part of a full Varèse system, it shows how good silver discs can sound.

Many decades ago, when Terry McEwen became head of London Records' classical division in New York and then served as the executive vice president of London Records U.S.A., he invited critics over to share one of his greatest passions: savoring 78 recordings of great opera singers of yesteryear. On the radio show he hosted during his days as general director of the San Francisco Opera, McEwen recounted that on one occasion he cued up a 1935 recording by Claudia Muzio, the soprano who opened the War Memorial Opera House as *Tosca* in 1932. After some critics queried "Claudia who?" McEwen asked his radio audience, "How can you be a critic if you don't have standards?"

The dCS Varèse Transport, as part of a complete Varèse Music System, sets a new standard in silver disc reproduction, at least in my experience. Even if it's not in your price range, try to hear it in an equipment configuration and room that do it full justice. What you hear may change your mind about what's possible from digital audio. Highest possible recommendation. ■

<sup>3</sup> Although Ameling first achieved recognition in 1956 when her rendition of Gounod's "Jewel Song," from the opera *Faust*, won first prize during the International Vocal Competition 's-Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands—I've got it on CD—the size of her voice limited her operatic performances.