

Hi-Fi Choice

Review dCS Varèse Mono DAC's



Cat that got the stream

Completing the six-box Varèse 'stack', dCS' latest CD/SACD transport caters for physical media as well as streaming

It's tempting to imagine a Frankenstein-like cry of: "At last our creature is complete!" emanating from the Cambridge HQ of dCS. The arrival of the company's Varèse CD/SACD transport – a snip at £32,500 – should come as no surprise to followers of the company's flagship digital solution. Bringing the complete Varèse 'stack' to a total of six units – the User Interface, Core, Master Clock and dual Mono DACs – the eagerly anticipated Transport also lifts the all-up price just north of £260,000.

Now it's here, what exactly is the Varèse Transport? And does it have a place in the brave not-so-new world of streaming music? To answer the second part first, the answer must be a resounding yes. There'll be many buyers – 'many' being relative in the context of a digital player solution costing over a quarter-of-a-million quid – with extensive collections of CDs and quite possibly more than a few SACDs at their disposal.

Agreed, those collectors could have ripped their discs to network storage by now, even if doing so with SACDs is something of a faff, typically involving an elderly Sony PlayStation and the patience of Job. Yet there are still those who relish the ritual of finding and prizing open a jewel case, and popping an actual disc into a physical player. Moreover, given the total price of the complete Varèse front-end, the add-on cost of the Transport may not be so much of a stretch for those who want the complete experience.

So, back to the 'what is it?' question, and while the name is pretty self-explanatory, there's a lot going on inside what dCS describes as its: "quietest, lowest-vibration" disc transport to date. Playing 16-bit/44.1kHz CDs and SACDs in their native formats, the Transport interfaces with the Varèse Core using the company's ACTUS link. It's controlled from the touchscreen of the Varèse User Interface module, the

► DETAILS

PRODUCT
dCS Varèse Transport
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
CD/SACD transport
WEIGHT
20.1kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
444 x 131 x 437mm
FEATURES
• Bit-perfect CD/SACD playback
• ACTUS link output
• Touch-sensitive remote control with volume dial
DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds
WEBSITE
dcsaudio.com
absolutesounds.com

Varèse remote control handset or the dCS Mosaic ACTUS app, where it simply appears as another input option, from which tracks can be selected for playback.

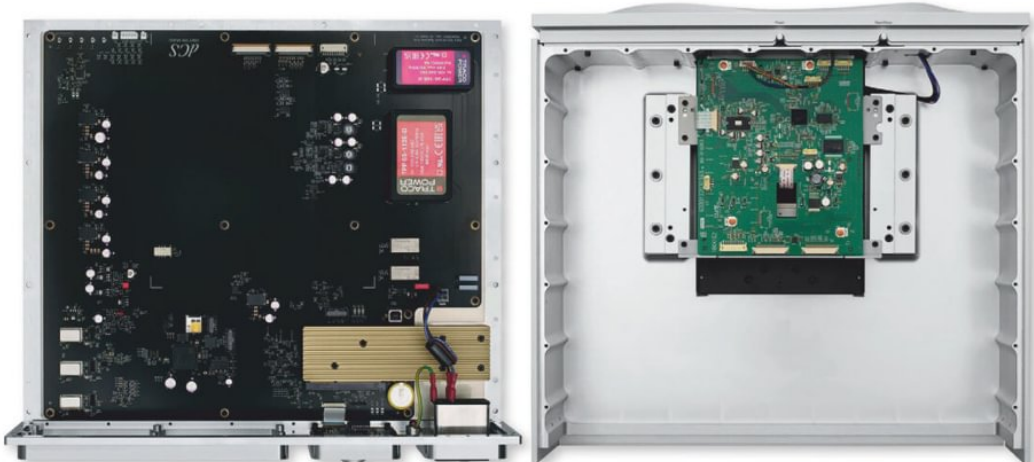
Here one hits a foible of the new unit – the disc mechanism, sourced from Marantz/Denon parent Sound United and also used in the dCS Rossini and Vivaldi Mark II transports, does not read metadata. As a result, the only information you get via the Transport and Mosaic ACTUS app is a list of track numbers, with no artist/album/track title information and not a sniff of any artwork. It is a little surprising, given that the Varèse system will be network-connected, that dCS hasn't included an element of online metadata lookup to add this information to the listening experience. After all, the likes of Rotel's Michi Q5 (HFC 528) CD player at a far more wallet-friendly £5,500, manages this trick in some style via its Ethernet port.

Good vibrations

The Varèse Transport's mechanism was chosen for its ability to offer "bit-perfect disc-reading and output", and is controlled here by dCS' own VCXO clock circuitry, reducing jitter. Additionally, great care has been taken in the mounting of the mechanism to mitigate against vibration and get the cleanest possible read of the disc – especially critical with the higher rotational speed and finer data pit structure of SACDs.

The Transport uses massive two-part casework that's been milled from solid aluminium. One part comprises the top, front and side panels, and mounts ►

The disc mech and control PCB are mounted into the top of the chassis (left) and the main PCB is in the base (right)





the transport using a solid alloy sub-chassis, while the section forming the base and rear panels carries the unit's electronics.

dCS reveals that the Transport's solid mounting was determined after measuring the vibration caused by spinning discs, during which the use of various bushings was discounted in favour of mass to damp the transport. Hung using mounting plates from pillars extending down from the top-plate, the mechanism in the Varèse Transport is said to generate substantially less vibration than the more conventional mounting found in other dCS transports.

The electronics here are combined on a single circuitboard, with only the ACTUS connector and front-panel LED being separate. The VCXOs, running at 22.5792MHz and 27MHz, control the audio and mechanism,

respectively, with the former synchronised to the Varèse Core or optional Clock through a Tomix clock signal fed via the ACTUS link.

With all that, it's impressive that dCS has managed to make setting up the Varèse Transport so simple. By contrast, installation of the Rossini Transport requires five connections to its matching DAC – three AES, one RS232 and one clock – while the Varèse system does it all with a single ACTUS link.

The Transport outputs data from discs in its native form, with any upsampling or format conversion the user requires carried out in the Varèse Core.

Similarly, operation of the Transport's, ahem, transport functions – that's play/pause/stop, track skip and eject – is carried out via the Varèse system's various interfaces

because there are no physical controls on the unit itself.

Sound quality

The quick and easy answer to 'how does the Varèse Transport sound?' is that it doesn't. Comparing CDs with streams at the same resolution from Qobuz and Tidal shows any differences to be so vanishingly small, if even there, as to be entirely irrelevant, leading to the conclusion that the main influence here is the digital capability of the full Varèse ensemble. The Transport, just like the Varèse's streaming implementation, simply offers a clean datastream to the Core and DAC(s), and they just get on with the job of delivering a world-class musical performance.

Playing *Brahms' First Symphony* from the Danish Chamber Orchestra/Adam Fischer boxset of the complete symphonies sees the Varèse, feeding Constellation Revelation 2 amps and suitably outlandish Wilson Audio

The SACD layer delivers additional warmth and a more organic sound

Alexx Vfx loudspeakers, revealing the clean, bright and detailed performance and recording. There are fine dynamics, punch and lyricism in the playing of the chamber orchestra – smaller forces than are usually deployed for these works.

At the time of writing, the three-disc boxset costs less than £20, which is a real bargain for an account of the works so insightful and involving. Nevertheless, switching to Tidal's lossless stream highlights that the presentation loses nothing in translation to streaming over the wired Ethernet connection.

A more intimate piece, pianist Jan Gunnar Hoff's take on The Beach Boys' *God Only Knows*, shows the

The ACTUS connection outputs native CD and SACD/DSD audio data to the rest of the Varèse stack





DISC VERSUS STREAMING

As with the rest of the dCS Varese 'stack', the Transport can be controlled by the system's remote handset, the control interface module's full-colour touchscreen or the Mosaic ACTUS app, to which the disc player – labelled as "Varese Transport" – appears as an extra input. When selected, this will show the tracks on the disc loaded – but as noted in the main review, only as track numbers, with no album/artist/track title information.

This all makes for a slightly old-fashioned experience, playing back music with the disc jewel box or booklet insert to hand to be able to see and select tracks. Disc playback therefore loses out to streaming in this respect, rather lacking the wealth of information that's typically on tap from network-stored music and streaming services. This area, at least, is a definite 'must try harder'.

from CD proves just the same, with nothing added or taken away. Similarly, U2's cover of Porter's *Night And Day* fails to elicit any repeatable differences between disc and stream, despite its powerful, droning bass, Bono's recessed vocal and The Edge's guitar interjections.

With the 2015 Michael Stern/Kansas City Symphony recording of Saint-Saëns' *Organ Symphony* the Varese stack, fed from the new Transport, delivers fine attack in the orchestra allied to excellent scale and warmth. Big bass chords erupt beneath skittering strings and woodwind. Then there is that momentary pause before the organ crashes forward in magnificent style, along with the radiant piano contributions in the final movement. Unfortunately, we don't have the SACD release to hand for direct comparison, but the Qobuz stream at 24-bit/176.4kHz/just about edges the

The Transport, just like the streaming, simply offers a clean datastream

CD sound from the Varese Transport. The organ sounds bigger and more characterful, and appears to emanate from a greater space.

The sound is also tight and clean, with abundant detail, on Joe Stilgoe's *Theatre*, despite the lushness of the balance in songs like *Does Anybody Have A Map?* from the musical *Dear Evan Hansen*. There is also a lovely sense of scale and drama on Stilgoe's medley from Stephen Sondheim's *Into The Woods* with his rich voice sweetly set against the Metropole Orkest.

This performance is matched by the better streaming services, as is the sound of the all-star *AngelHeaded Hipster* tribute to Marc Bolan. Joan Jett's *Jeepster* might lack the impetus of the original but has a brief, killer, guitar stab, while Lucinda Williams' *Life's A Gas* is bonkers, but superbly focused. One possible advantage of the disc? Streaming services don't have the set's overblown *Get It On* by U2 and Elton John – although on reflection that's probably a mercy.

The Transport fights back with its rendition of Vivaldi's *Violin Concerto in A major*: The Tidal stream matches the CD playback, but the SACD layer opens up the sound, making even more of the reverberant church acoustic in this exemplary recording.

Conclusion

A fine performance, but it's hard not to form the impression that the rest of the Varese 'stack' is doing the heavy lifting, so close are streamed files to the sound available from CDs. However, the physical disc player shows its true abilities with SACDs, making this a no-brainer for Varese owners ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** SACDs really shine as do streams and Red Book CDs

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No album, artist or track title info

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** For stack completists with large wallets only

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

quality of the recording, with both a close focus on the instrument and obvious ambience on a CD-quality stream, just the same as the CD layer on the hybrid SACD release from 2L. However, switching to the SACD layer delivers both additional warmth and space in the piano, and a far more organic sound overall. There is a greater feeling for the ambient acoustic as notes decay and simply more body in the piano. The SACD giving more of that 'instrument in the room' impression.

Salif Keita's rendition of Cole Porter's *Begin The Beguine* on the 1990 *Red Hot + Blue* compilation sounds joyous and vibrant streaming from Qobuz, with crisp driving percussion. The same track played

