

The Rega DAC-R

A STEALTHY UPGRADE

By Jeff Dorgay

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hen Rega launched its compact DAC two years ago, it was a \$1,095 miracle, offering incredible performance for its size. Its only drawback was that it lacked high-resolution playback from the USB port, as Rega's engineers didn't feel computer audio was a major thing at that time. Times have rapidly changed and the computer audio/streaming market is bigger than ever. Moving faster than normal for the Rega camp (remember, these guys were the last major manufacturer to produce a high-performance CD player), the new DAC-R is here, featuring full 24-bit/192-kHz capability via the USB input. There's no option for DSD, but this time I agree with Rega; it's a moot format. Flame suit on.



REVIEW

Just like Rega's turntables, the DAC-R is an evolutionary product. The original DAC delivered excellent sonic results and the DAC-R builds on that foundation. Its three front-panel digital filters give you the option to switch between a linear-phase half-band filter, minimum-phase half-band filter and linear-phase aperiodizing filter. While these filters have minimal overall effect, the differences are more noticeable at higher sampling frequencies—something perhaps best discussed on your favorite Internet forum.

For those needing the techie bits, the DAC-R features improved circuitry for its parallel pair of Wolfson WM8742 DACs, which are driven into a buffer stage. To keep signal processing to a minimum, the DAC-R processes the input signal in its native resolution and does not upsample the data stream. And the USB input is galvanically isolated from the DAC to keep the computer interaction/interference to a minimum. All of this results in an extremely quiet DAC.

We used the DAC-R with quite a few different digital sources: an Astell & Kern AK120 portable player, Oppo 105, Apple TV, Meridian MS200, and even a Comcast cable box. In every instance, it made substantial improvements to the overall sound, with easy switching between the five inputs: *(continued)*



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REVIEW



USB, two coaxial S/PDIF and two optical, so you can easily use the DAC-R as a digital hub for multiple sources. And the addition of a remote control makes it a breeze to switch sources from your favorite comfy chair.

Other than the DAC-R's three filter choices (instead of five on the original DAC), the new model looks identical to its predecessor, with the same casework derived from that of Rega's Brio-R integrated amplifier. It's standard procedure at Rega to utilize the same enclosure material for multiple components, thus maintaining product-line consistency and keeping prices down, so putting the DAC-R on the same shelf as your Brio-R makes for a nice and tidy system.

Another upgrade to the DAC-R is the addition of a standard IEC connector in place of the wonky three-prong mini connector of the original DAC. While we can argue till the cows come home as to how much a good mains cable will improve the sound, now you at least have the option to investigate.

But Is It Better?

At first listen, the DAC-R has a very *un-digital* sound, not unlike Rega's excellent CD players, with a natural and organic, almost analog sound—not rolled off but easy to listen to for long periods of time and free of fatigue. Remember, these guys have been making great turntables for over 40 years now. *(continued)*



Tonally, the DAC-R renders acoustic instruments with good tone and texture, never sounding mechanical or digital. Miles Davis's horn on "Pinocchio" is well placed, slightly to the left of center, with the cymbals splashing in and out of the mix ever so delicately. Female vocals fare equally well through the DAC-R, whether playing Christine McVie or Chrissie Hynde. Top to bottom, the sound is evenly balanced, with nothing out of place and no specific segment of the frequency range overly embellished or understated.

This is such an unobtrusive DAC (as was its predecessor) that it's tough to decipher where the improvements are coming from without a direct comparison—so we do just that. Borrowing the original from a friend, we discover that the side-by-side listening reveals a significant upgrade everywhere but in the noise floor. (continued) Both DACs are super quiet and, while they share a similar overall tonality, the new model is much more refined. It's like going from a Rega RP3 turntable to RP8—for those of you with more of an analog point of view.

Another aspect of the DAC-R that really stands out is the performance of its optical input, which is incredibly good. While it's easy for audiophiles to pooh-pooh the lowly TOSLINK input, a lot of consumer devices still sport a TOSLINK output. With the help of the DAC-R's optical input, both the Meridian MS200 (linked to a Meridian digital music server) and the Apple TV (now sporting Tidal streaming) offer performance that I would normally associate with S/PDIF, making the DAC-R an easier upgrade to justify.

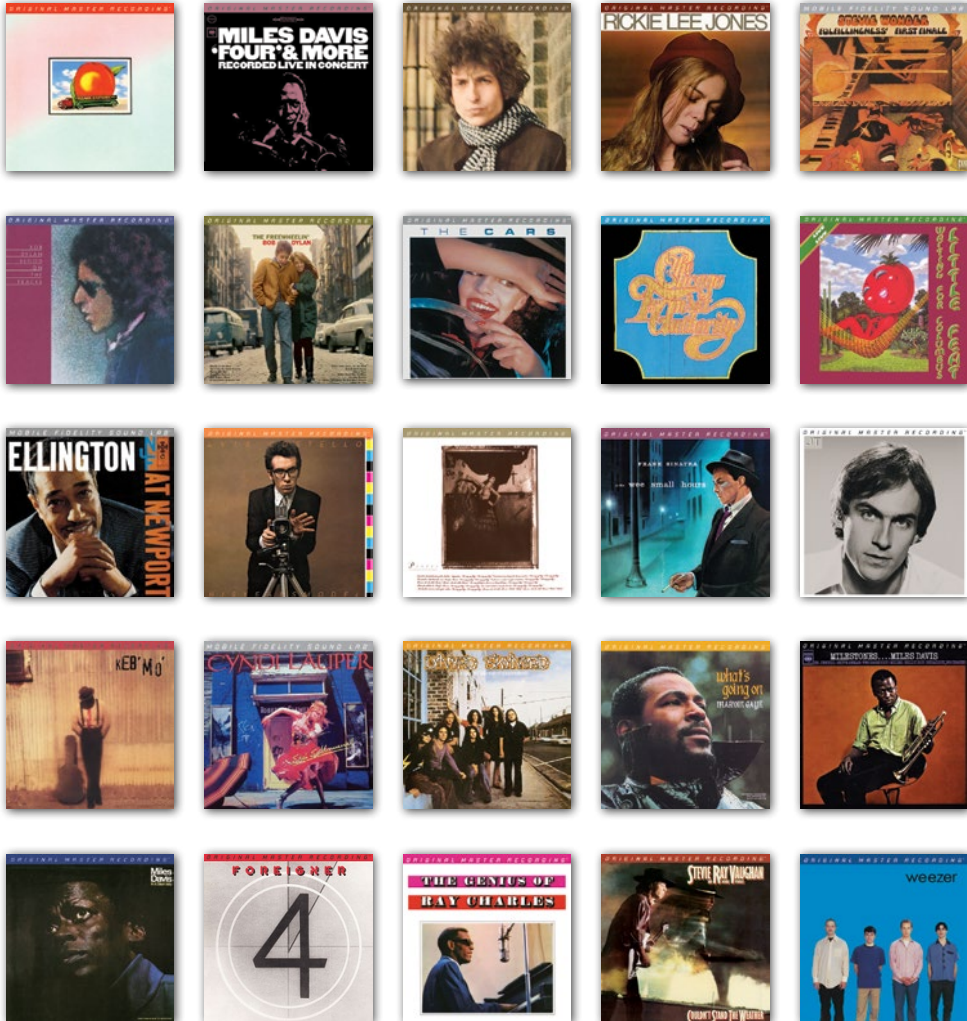
Tracking through dense recordings immediately gives the DAC-R the upper hand, especially with relatively poor quality recordings. (continued)

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It digs deeper into good and bad recordings, revealing more low-level information. The softest passages in Mighty Sam McClain's *Give it Up to Love* now have their own specific space; with the original model, they blend into the noise floor and are more diffuse.

Dynamic passages also uncover the DAC-R's superiority. Drums hit harder and have more texture, attack and slam—which is particularly noticeable as the drumstick lifts from the drumhead. Percussion in general comes through more clearly and with more definition than before. And through the original DAC, the soundstage collapses somewhat.

Because the original model is an excellent product, buyers will ask themselves the eternal question: "Should I upgrade?" The answer in this case is an unqualified yes. Rega's new DAC-R is better in every parameter. And it's amazing that the company only upped the price by \$100. Mistakenly, I was under the assumption that the new DAC-R carried a price tag of \$1,795—but when I found out that it's only \$1,195, I was quick to give it an Exceptional Value Award.

REVIEW

Rega DAC-R
MSRP: \$1,195

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