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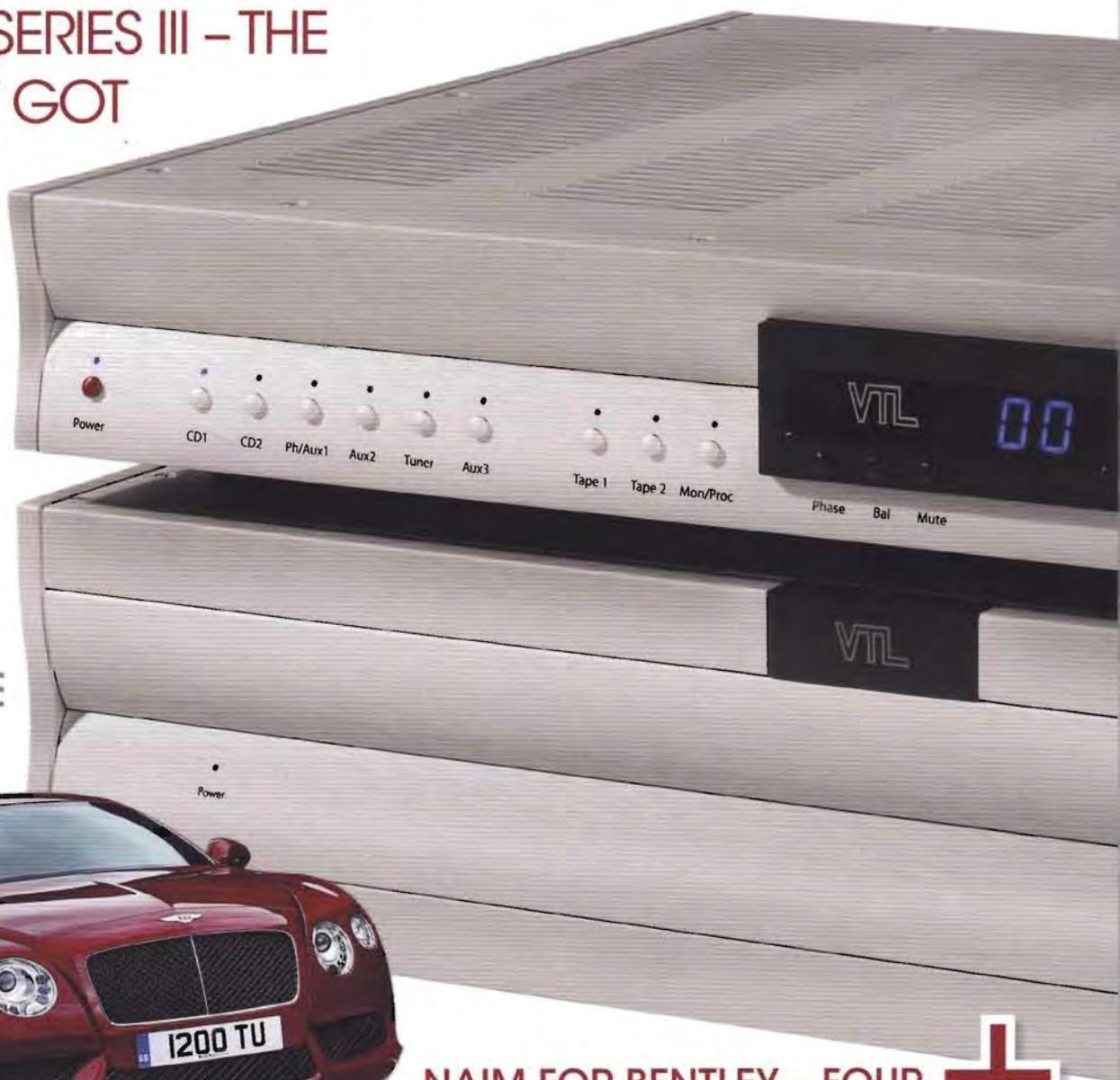
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HRT Music Streamer HD digital converter

By Alan Sircom

I'm not going to beat around the bush. Correctly fettled, this is the best DAC you can buy at this time. Not the best DAC for less than £500 or the best USB-powered DAC. It's not even the best DAC for something like the double the price. I've tried a lot of DACs, some costing a lot more than the HRT Music Streamer HD and – while they might be different, they are not better.

It's an USB-powered Asynchronous input DAC, which can work up to 24 bit, 192kHz precision in Class 2.0 USB Audio. It only has a single USB Type B input, but can output a balanced or a single-ended output, although it works in fully differential mode. It has vanishingly low levels of everything bad (noise floor, THD+N, jitter) and high levels of everything good (signal to noise ratio, flatness of frequency response). It doesn't upsample your music for you, re-convert its sample rate to another more internally-friendly one, it has at most two LEDs (neither of which are ever blue) glowing at once. The nearest concession to interactivity is the front-mounted toggle-switch that flips from Class 1.0 to Class 2.0 USB connectivity (as ever, Mac people are fine with Class 2.0, but PC and Linux users... it's driver time). It can – and should – be periodically updated with the latest firmware. And that's it. It weighs less than a trio of audiophile cones and costs less than many audiophile USB cables.

It's distanced from the audiophile zeitgeist in this respect. It's not in the least bit cable fussy – the giveaway USB in the box is more than good enough, and its output voltage and impedance make the use of fancy interconnect cables less of a priority, more of a present. If you want to make an audiophile song and dance about it, put a paperweight on the top to damp it down (sorry, losing my audiophile cred here – put a rare piece of hardwood that costs five times more than the DAC on top of it to re-un-tungulate the positively negative ions and ward off dark energy). It doesn't care. It just makes music happen.

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And boy does it make it happen. With the DAC correctly fettled (again), about 20 seconds into listening to the first piece of music, I lost interest in reviewing and just went into 'music lover' mode. And stayed there. Following that excellent 'Searching for Sugar Man' documentary, I acquired the two Rodriguez albums (Cold Fact and Coming From Reality) and I played them end to end. Then I played the equally rare Lou Bond, which drew me to Donny Hathaway, inexorably from there to two Roberta Flack albums in a row, then (naturally) to the Fugees, and on, and on. The next day was almost the same, broken only by shopping trips and a pressing desire to put something on page. The thing is, I don't know what to put on page here. It just does sound, and does it exceptionally well. You aren't aware of the detail resolution, the articulation, the imagery, soundstaging, solidity, dynamics (micro-, macro- or any other kind of 'o', including Bilko). They are just there, and being done so well it's only in those moments when you drag yourself away from the player to do some comparing that you get just how good it is at making itself invisible.

Of course there will be those who listen to the HRT and will prefer the sound of any one of dozens of top-end DACs currently available. That's not the point. The point of this is, this is a DAC that stands proud in such company

without sounding in any way out of place. If its closest rival from a musical standing is in excess of £2,000 and it really wouldn't sound far out of sorts being compared to a Bricasti or dCS, you know we are on to something good.

The 'correctly fettled' part is key, though. Used straight from your computer's USB host controller, this is a perfectly serviceable, perfectly blah DAC. It will not offend, but neither will it set the world alight. It's a bit 'meh!' This is because it draws 480mA from a line that tops out at 500mA. Put it through a powered hub (even a cheap powered hub) and you begin to see the glint in its eye. Put it through something like the AQVOX isolated linear power supply for USB and five seconds into the next track, you have achieved computer audio nirvana.

My worry is that, people being people, they will ignore the need for that extra juice box and never hear what their computer is capable of. My hope is that Kevin Halverson of HRT reads this and makes something similarly sized and mains powered to 'upgrade' the HD. While the jump up in performance can be achieved elsewhere, there are always those who think using something other than a HRT product to power another HRT product is either 'unsafe' or 'disloyal'. In which case, HRT needs to complete the job with an isolating power supply.

Let's be truly honest here. Part of being an audiophile is brand snobbery. There will be those who will never look at the HD because it's not made by their pet brand. There will be those who won't touch it because it's not got a 20A power socket and an inch-thick alloy front panel. And there will be those who don't get it because they simply wouldn't dream of spending less than four, five or even six figures on their digital source. Such is life. But if we are being truly honest, try and look past that, and think of this in the sort of systems it deserves to go in, in performance terms alone. Suddenly, you realise you aren't looking at a cheap DAC with high-end pretensions; it's the real deal.



"If you have shifted – or are planning to shift – to using a computer as a source, this must be in your cross-hairs, no matter what price-point you were considering prior to the launch of the Music Streamer HD."

▶ This really is a game-changer. OK, if you are using a source that doesn't speak USB, then it's more someone else's game-changer, but if you have shifted – or are planning to shift – to using a computer as a source, this must be in your cross-hairs, no matter what price-point you were considering prior to the launch of the HD. The fact that it's a game-changer at a fraction of the price of those it stands toe-to-toe with is a mark of just how far and how fast our industry is changing.

You owe it to your music to hear the HRT Music Streamer HD. It's that good! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Full Scale Output: 2.25 V RMS (RCA), 4.5V (XLR)
 Output Impedance: 50 Ohm (RCA), 50+50 Ohm (XLR)
 Frequency Response: (20 Hz / 20 kHz) -0 dB / -2 dB
 Noise Floor (DC to 30 kHz): 5 uV RMS (RCA), 9 uV (XLR)
 S/N Ratio (DC to 30 kHz): 113 dB (RCA), 114 dB (XLR)
 S/N Ratio (A-weighted): 119 dB (RCA), 122 dB (XLR)
 THD+N (1 kHz Full Scale): .002%
 THD+N (1kHz -20 dB): .0002%
 Jitter contribution (DC to 30 kHz): >144 dB below full scale
 Isolation: > 500M ohm
 Sample Rate: up to 192 kHz
 Bit Depth: up to 24 bit
 USB transfer protocol: asynchronous
 Power Requirements (USB Buss): 480 mA
 Dimensions (WxDxH): 9.7 x 15.2 x 7.6cm
 Price: £439

Manufactured by: High Resolution Technologies

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HRT MICROSTREAMER HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER/DAC

Along with the Music Streamer HD, HRT has a new £179 microStreamer. Following in the footsteps of the AudioQuest Dragonfly, but using a short USB cable instead of plugging directly to the computer, the diminutive silver rectangle is powered direct from your host computer. It's tiny, but surprisingly adept at its twin roles of driving a pair of headphones and acting as a DAC in its own right.

Its headphone output is the core of this device – get it wrong and everything else being good won't save it. Fortunately it is exceptionally good in this respect. It's two main benefits are that it is clean-sounding and it drives most headphones well. It's shouldn't be the kind of headphone amp that will drive a tough headphone load but it does. Its bass is particularly strong. I played Ben Harper's 'Excuse Me Mr', with its slow, flowing bass lines that can so easily over-burden a small headphone amplifier, but was met with satisfying depth and energy. I then moved through Chopin to Zadok the Priest and out through some smooth Dexter Gordon and some fine choral work. All of which the HRT sailed through.

We have an embarrassment of headphone amp riches this issue and it would be wrong not to compare them. The similarly specified Meridian Explorer is a strong contender; it's more expensive, but looks suave where the HRT is purposeful. The UK-based DAC is smoother in the mids and top, but the HRT has the better bass. There's not a lot between them. Meanwhile, the Just Audio headphone amp has the better of both of them in outright control over a pair of headphones and has an analogue volume control, but lacks the DAC option.

On balance, as an all-rounder, this is hard to beat.