

Floats like Madam Butterfly

The dCS Puccini CD/SACD Player

By Steve Dickinson



Some years ago I was driving late at night, listening to *Late Junction* on Radio 3. A piece came on which intrigued me, I bought the CD a few days later. The album is *Frame* (Black Box Music BBM1055), the title track composed by Graham Fitkin, performed by Simon Haram and the Duke Quartet. I duly got it home and played it. Oh dear. Forced, nervous, aggressive and shrill. I'd obviously picked up on something when I heard it on the radio, but the edginess was probably drowned out by background noise in the car.

There's another Graham Fitkin piece on the album, 'Hard Fairy' and, once again, I could tell there was something remarkable in the music, but the recording, or the system, was just making a nasty noise. As my system has improved over time, the album has occasionally been pulled out, retried, and quickly put back again. No longer. Shortly after the dCS Puccini arrived, I conducted what has become known as the 'Frame' test. Then I played 'Hard Fairy'. Then, grinning like a Labrador with a stolen Sunday roast, I played it again. And again. I've probably played those tracks more in the couple of months since the Puccini arrived than I ever did in the preceding six years.

The thing is, the music still has the aggression, is still hard and, yes, still a bit harsh, the Puccini has most definitely not

produced an airbrushed, elegant and beguiling sound thereby making a dodgy recording bearable. That is not what it does. What it has revealed is that behind, or perhaps within that edginess there is indeed some amazing music, played by some equally astonishing musicians. The album has gone from unlistenable to unforgettable. And how has it done that timing that's how. I'm sorry, I'll say that again. And how has it done that? Timing. That's how.

dCS players do sometimes polarise opinions. There are those who get wildly enthusiastic about their capabilities and those who, in a nutshell, don't. I quite admire equipment like that. Whether I like it or not, I respect the fact that people will argue about it. That means it probably has something worth arguing about, even if it doesn't necessarily float your boat. The thing is, dCS equipment doesn't sound quite like anything else out there – at least, not in my experience.

I believe the fundamental reason for this is dCS' digital processing expertise, evidenced by their proprietary DSD data format and Ring DAC. This patented technology, produces an analogue signal possessed of more detail than I've ever heard from CD. Upsampling of the data to DSD format in the digital domain allows the Ring DAC to reconstruct the analogue signal using rather more data points than should exist at first glance. This is not interpolation, nor conventional oversampling, nor are they 'inventing' data which is not already encoded on the disc, it is rather like one of those

mathematical conundrums which defies common sense logic until you see it from another point of view. Suffice to say, there is apparently more musical information on your average CD than conventional DAC technology is equipped to convey. This translates not only into revelatory levels of low level detail and ambience, but also into simply exquisite timing. The dCS has the ability to unravel the music like no other player I've yet heard.

It is, however, entirely possible for much of this to pass unnoticed. Shortly after the arrival of the Puccini, the MusicWorks ReVo equipment stand arrived. I delayed installing it until I'd got the measure of the Puccini and part of that process had involved some experimentation with support. Using my own, MusicWorks modified, Quadraspire acrylic reference table I find I can get decent results with a wide variety of equipment through a little fiddling and faffing around. For example, my regular Cairn Fog3 CD player responds well if you take the weight off its feet and rest it instead on a set of Nordost Titanium Pulsar Points. Some other players, notably the dCS Puccini, don't. The Puccini was definitely happier on its own feet when sat on the Quadraspire top shelf. So naturally, when I

reinstalled the Puccini on the new ReVo stand, I set it on its own feet.

Putting on YoYo Ma, playing the Prelude from the Bach Cello Suite No.1 was hugely unexpected: vague, slow and dull. Other pieces, for example Ariel Ramirez' *Missa Criolla* had a soundstage which had imploded. I was beginning to think I'd broken the player during the messing about. Then I remembered something the MusicWorks guys had mentioned: that they sometimes got better results if they bypassed the equipment's own feet and rested the kit directly on its own baseplate, easy to do with the ReVo support.

Revelation! Richer harmonics, massively expanded soundstage, air and space, ambience and sense of acoustic all returned. With knobs on. Notes had a longer and deeper decay, all the better to appreciate their shape and how they were formed. Now the Puccini was starting to sound like a proper, ten grand player. The *Missa Criolla* had a sense of acoustic space with depth and tactility, the percussion sits at the very back of the recording and now that distance was palpable but, if anything, the percussion was clearer, tighter





▶ and more solid than before. This is clearly a player capable of deep and subtle discrimination. Some might accuse it of being overly analytical, 'Moon over Bourbon Street' from Sting's live album *All This Time* (Polydor B00005RT0M) was crystalline and beautifully presented, bass being particularly tight and strong, but perhaps a tiny bit compartmentalised, similarly 'Brand New Day' from the same album leaves one with the sense that something has been deconstructed and reassembled (which, of course, it has) which may partly be down to the dCS player's extraordinary precision: bass is tighter and better defined, leading edges of notes, indeed general levels of articulation, are overall significantly better than any non-dCS player I've encountered; instrumental separation, placement and solidity are quite extraordinary. Then along comes 'Shape of My Heart' and blows my theory apart with a deeply affecting version of a song I'd previously thought was good, but not one of his best. So, it does do emotion, rather well as it happens. Take it from me.

It occurs to me that if I'd started with the Puccini on its own feet on the ReVo stand, without hearing it first on the Quadraspire table, I wouldn't have had my

nose quite so forcefully rubbed in the fact that all was not as it should have been. I might have tinkered, aware that the player was underperforming, but without any real sense of what I was missing. Clearly the dCS player can, in some circumstances, spectacularly fail to impress. Get it right, though, and the Puccini becomes a vital, vibrant thing. Rhythmically impeccable, it never gets tripped up by complex polyrhythms or rubato; combining classical and jazz in Shostakovich's Waltz from the Jazz Suite No. 2 the player's sure-footedness allowed a real sense of fun to infuse the piece, this felt less like a concert or recording session, more like a sunny afternoon on a seaside fairground.

Technically, the Puccini contains little that is new, mostly just the latest implementation of the dCS Ring DAC technology with upsampling of the digital signal to DSD format before delivery to the DAC. There is the facility to leave the data as PCM (i.e., not upsampled to DSD) in the various menu options but, if you do opt for this version, much of the magic leaves too; the sense of acoustic space, naturalness of instruments and the feeling of being in the presence of a musical event is evidently an important

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

dCS Puccini

Type . . . Upsampling CD/SACD player

DAC . . . dCS Ring DAC, upsampling to DSD before oversampling.

Inputs Two digital (S/PDIF) RCA Phono connectors, accepting up to 24 bit PCM at 32, 44.1, 48, 88.2 and 96 kHz. One word clock input on 75 Ohm BNC connector

Outputs . Two digital coaxial output
 . . . One unbalanced analogue output
 One balanced analogue output
 . . One word clock output on 75 Ohm BNC connector

Output Level . . 2.0V rms or 6.0V rms
 Variable output level as digital preamp

Dimensions (WxHxD, in mm)
 460x101x410

Weight 12.1Kg

Available finishes . . . Silver or black

Remote control Yes
 optional programmable remote

Price £10,799

Manufacturer

Data Conversion Systems Ltd

Tel: +44 (0)1799 531999

Net: www.dcsLtd.co.uk

part of the DSD upsampling option. The DSD upsampler also provides a choice of output filters which progressively reduce the bandwidth, trading detail, air and space for a reduction in perceived harshness. If your system is limited in frequency extension this may be an option worth exploring, but if you can justify around £10k on a CD player you probably have



▶ an amplifier and loudspeakers which can cope and will probably do as I did, check them out, then leave the factory recommended filter option set. The player uses a high quality TEAC UMK5 dual-laser CD/SACD transport, modified with a custom-made aluminium CD-tray replacing the standard plastic part. This mechanism operates with a silky precision well worth the elevated asking price, indeed the casework, switchery and display are all made to a satisfyingly high standard, to my eyes this is the best-looking dCS product yet.

The use of the TEAC UMK5 transport means, as expected, that the Puccini also plays SACDs. Given the already impressive performance of DSD upsampled CD I was expecting great things from the SACDs in my collection. I wasn't disappointed. We glibly use expressions like 'shape' and 'solidity' to express ideas in reviews but high-definition formats such as SACD show just how much can be achieved by this process. Kick-drums now have a real sense of body, firing their beats at you like hard-edged nuggets of sound; delicate, breathy female voices, for example Eleanor McEvoy's fragile vocals on *Yola*, are easy to discern, even over loud, complex or bass-heavy mixes because they float free of the background, claiming their own space. The SACD layer of the *Dies Irae* from the Nicholas Harnoncourt/Vienna Philharmonic Verdi *Requiem* (Sony BMG 82876 61244 2) gains not only weight and body, but a sense of presence and urgency, which is lost in the general melee that is (by comparison) the CD layer.

The dCS Puccini is also versatile. It has two digital inputs, so the advantages of the Ring DAC technology can be extended to another transport, or perhaps

DAB radio, it has a digital output (though I am slightly struggling to think what real-world use you might put it to, given the obvious strengths of the onboard DAC and the fact that it can only be used to access the PCM signal, so an SACD or DSD datastream can't be output). There is also a variable output level, analogue output volume is adjusted in the digital domain so the unit can be used as a digital preamp. It is also possible to connect an external word clock, such as dCS' own Paganini unit for yet greater precision, something I have yet to experience but am keen to try.

"Rhythmically impeccable, (the dCS Puccini) never gets tripped up by complex polyrhythms or rubato"

Other players sound unfocused, in comparison with the dCS. *Possessed* by the Balanescu Quartet (MUTE 9 61421-2) has a sinewy, urgent quality through the Puccini. It is still compelling through other players, but one is not left quite so breathless or bereft when the music stops. If timing is at the heart of the dCS approach, as I think it is, then the Puccini has it, in spades.

Mostly very, very positive, I have nevertheless been left with curiously mixed feelings about this player: on the one hand, it has strengths which leave me feeling overwhelmingly enthusiastic, the

sound of DSD-upsampled CD and SACD is beyond what I've heard elsewhere, it is infectious and addictive; on the other hand there is something niggling away at me which I haven't isolated. I did the 'Frame' test on an Accuphase DP500, a superb CD player at around half the price of the dCS and it gave a very good account of itself, as it should. Although ultimately not even close to the mightily impressive dCS, it did however have a wonderfully natural sense of ease and liquid phrasing which the dCS would struggle to better. I've also heard dCS at shows sound distinctly off the pace. It occurs to me that perhaps dCS have concentrated on their peerless digital expertise and the analogue output hasn't had quite the attention of more organic-sounding players from Accuphase, Audio Research or Zanden, for example. I'd like to stick my neck out and wonder aloud just how good the dCS Puccini would be, with a genuinely top notch analogue output stage. It is already one of the great one-box players, dCS may have to ask very, very nicely indeed if they want it back. ✚