

**BEST CD SOUND EVER FROM DCS**

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# dCS Vivaldi digital replay system part one

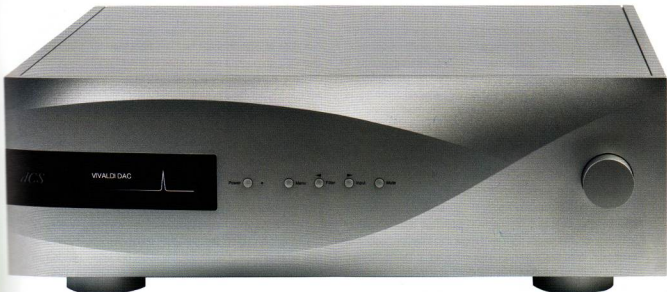
by Chris Thomas

**D**iscuss the technicalities of the four-box Vivaldi system with the engineers at the dCS factory and it is very easy to be overwhelmed with the whole thing. They talk with confidence, enthusiasm and real depth, as befits the men who conceived, designed and built it. But, the rest of us begin to see stars, or should that be zeros and ones?

However, when the intensity of the explanations stop and you slip a CD into that beautifully engineered tray and push play, the whole world changes. Ultimately, this is the system's true *raison d'être* because Vivaldi speaks music with such an eloquent, persuasive and beautiful voice that it grabs and involves you like all truly great audio should. Pretty soon, you will understand that the Vivaldi makes music like no other digital replay system or CD player ever has. This family of digital electronics is just so far ahead of what I have heard that it is truly remarkable.

The entire Vivaldi system comprises four boxes, though not all four are necessarily required for each individual installation. Every one of these components is beautifully fabricated and finished to an impeccable level. Each fascia has its own custom, three-dimensional flowing design curves, machined from a 30mm solid aluminium billet by a six-axis CNC milling machine. The case top and sides are 10mm thick

and dCS machined the internal surfaces with cavities that are then filled with damping materials in an effort to keep each structure as mechanically inert as possible. Every unit is fitted with what must be the clearest and sharpest display window I have ever seen, essential to the set-up of each individual piece through a comprehensive menu system. Having been critical of other manufacturer's menu trees in the past, I must say that, considering the amount of choices, the implementation is logical and after a short while you can find your way through each string of options with no problem – though dCS does provide a plastic covered schematic that might occasionally need to be referred to. Once you have each unit configured to your personal taste with regards to filters, upsampling choices, clock dither etc., the system will remember your selections. A breakdown of the possibilities would take most of this section of the review, but there is some fun to be had selecting just where you want the machine to be for any given situation, so let your dealer earn his crust and be your guide! ▶





DAC before adding the clock and then, later still, installing the Upsampler and listening to what this system could do when confronted with some ripped CDs and high-resolution material from a server in a home network.

My first question during a factory visit to watch the Vivaldi components being made was a gentle enquiry as to the sheer size of the transport (only the Upsampler and clock are the same size). "Does it have to be so big"? I asked. David passed me an Esoteric VRDS NEO Mk 3 CD mechanism, used in the Vivaldi. This is the top disc-spinner available from Esoteric and it weighs nearly six and a half kilograms.

I was staggered at the solidity and size of this thing. It is a massive component that looks incredibly over-engineered to the untrained eye, especially one that is used to seeing rather cheap looking DVD drives adapted for CD and the flimsy looking mechanisms that currently dog the audio world. This Esoteric sled takes up virtually the entire case depth of the Vivaldi transport and is bristling with solid steel shafts and a large CD clamp. Looking at it, fitted inside the Vivaldi with the associated transformers and multi-layer circuit boards, I realised that, yes, the transport does have to be that big.

The CD/SACD transport has limited Upsampling capabilities (expanded greatly by the dedicated Upsampler itself) and can upsample standard CD to DSD (Direct Stream Digital) or DXD. This stands for Digital exTreme Definition. It is data at 352.8KHz/24 bit. The transport can output this and DSD through a pair of AES/EBU sockets though, if no up sampling is the way you chose to go, a single AES/EBU connection will do the trick, or you might even consider the SDFI-2 outputs. The transport provides three of them for left, right and clock information. I chose to go with the twin AES/EBU and spent a happy few minutes for the next several days choosing between DSD (used for SACD coding) and DXD. Where the filter choice was concerned I, as usual with dCS equipment, chose Filter one (of six) for my listening, though you may take a while before arriving at your personal choice. DSD or DXD is a little trickier and more music and taste dependent and perhaps even the system will play a part too, with no clear winner on absolutely every occasion. I ended up using DSD as my preferred setting though I could perfectly understand someone choosing DXD.

In this first section of a two-part review, I intend to lay out the options that Vivaldi provides as a two box CD player and how I found the migration to this from the four-box Paganini I have been using for the past couple of years. This is, of course, just scratching the surface of what the entire system is capable of, but is, we hope, a relatively gentle introduction to a complex, yet extraordinary machine that represents a complete digital processing station for the foreseeable future.

I am still musically unconvinced by the world of the home network and high-resolution downloads that I have heard, but I am hoping that eureka moment will be just around the corner. As a result of this, I mainly still listen to CDs. Yes, the good old CD, with all its obvious limitations that I resisted for so long, preferring to stick to my historical collection of vinyl. Over the years I have had many CD players at home, but found particular favour with the Paganini four-box; a cable-hungry collection of beautifully made dCS offerings that, I have to say, took a while to get right with regard to interconnects and supports. With this in mind I was intrigued at David Steven, MD of dCS' suggestion that I should switch from Paganini to the full Vivaldi in stages, beginning with the transport and

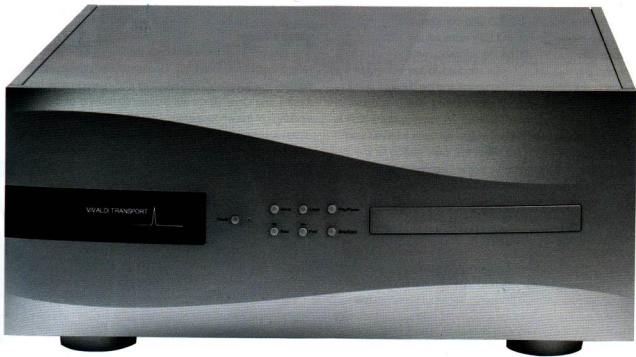
The DAC is capable of converting just about any digital information you care to ask of it through its plethora of inputs, including three USBs. I should add at this point that you cannot play USB memory sticks back though, as that requires the Upsampler. It has both balanced and single-ended analogue outputs and can drive a power amplifier directly through single-ended or balanced analogue outputs. This is an interesting one as I have been seeing CD players and DACs similarly configured for years only to find the resultant sound to be somewhat flaccid and lacking body. But I have to say that the Vivaldi DAC is by far the best sounding device I have ever heard working in this way, perhaps due to the all-new output stage. If the choice was to own a Vivaldi 2 box and sacrifice the large outlay that a top class preamplifier entails then I would take that every time as the music sounds remarkably grounded and solid. Reducing volume while operating in the digital domain is always a tricky proposition but the Vivaldi remains extremely viable here due in part to the fact that the output can be switched through 2 or 6V. Having said all the above, given the option, I still prefer the extra degree of musical integrity offered by my Berning Pre One with the DAC output setting at 2V. The high gain structure of this pre works better for me with the lower setting although owners of other preamps seem to like the 6V setting for the extra scale and drive it can provide. The impressive quality of the Vivaldi controlling the volume does mean though that only

a very, very good preamplifier would be better (think £8k plus and add a the cost of an extra pair of expensive interconnects). Again, it is a very useful user-configurable option.

So, in one of its most basic forms and operating as a two box CD player initially, how does the Vivaldi compare to the four-box Paganini set-up I have grown so accustomed to?

The system I used included both the Berning Pre One and a pair of Quadrature Z amplifiers or alternatively, the wonderful Vitus 025 25 watt Class A integrated amplifier. The Paganini electronics were replaced on the Stillpoints ESS rack, fitted with grids and Ultras while the speakers were the Focal Diablos, again perched on Ultras. I will discuss the cabling I used for the Vivaldi in a separate sidebar next month as it is obviously both a serious quality and financial consideration, but the interconnects and speaker cables at this point were all Nordost Odin. This is a spectacularly expensive system for sure but one able to illustrate the musical differences with consummate ease.

As the listening began, without too much thought I had reached for the nearest CD to hand. It was Bill Evans *Sunday At The Village Vanguard*, a magnificent piece of work, by one of the best Jazz trios ever, apparent even when playing through the speakers in the car. I selected 'My Man's Gone Now'. As the first piano chords rang out I was hooked. I had simply never heard such a solid, pitch stable sound from this ▶





► CD before. The chords I have heard a hundred times seemed infinitely more real and complex, but more pitch accurate with far greater tangibility. As Paul Motian started on the cymbals to add texture I was thinking, "Is this really a 1961 recording, it sounds so fresh?" And then Scott LaFaro opened up on the string bass and I was there, hanging on every note and every phrase. Poor Scott, who died only ten days after the session, seemed to reach to me through the Vivaldi. The blurring and loss of pitch focus in the lower registers that I always thought was somehow due to the age of the recording and the limitations of the CD was completely gone. No, this was of a different order and Bill's extraordinary technique and expression poured out of the speakers with a fresh sense of phrasing that left me quite shocked to say nothing of the sheer space around each instrument and the dynamic freedom and tonal colour vibrancy and shading. The live audience ambiance, that had often seemed an irritating distraction in the past, became totally incidental. As track followed track I smiled inside, relishing the treats that were waiting for me and wondering at all those moments that I was going to share with the musicians I loved. As disc followed disc, that evening went on to be one of the greatest listening sessions I have ever had with musical revelations following one upon another. But, considering that I was only using two of the Vivaldi's eventual four boxes, it promised so much more. Where audio equipment is concerned, this, in my experience, happens very, very rarely.

The question that evening wasn't if the two-box Vivaldi could outperform the full Paganini set. I had accepted that fact after a few bars. It is quite simply at a different performance level completely and judged as a straight CD player in this configuration I would say that it heralds a completely new

level of CD replay altogether. Nothing I have ever heard comes anywhere close. If you are thinking that CD, as a format is fast becoming an irrelevance then you have clearly not heard the Vivaldi. What became utterly apparent, after only a few hours listening was confirmed as the music flowed and the weeks passed. The challenge, despite views to the contrary, is and always has been getting the information from the disc, decoding it and providing your amplification with a signal of sufficient quality. If you think that 44.1kHz/16 bit is an ancient format that we have simply outgrown, then the Vivaldi will give you pause for thought. In fact, if you love music, it will rock you to the core.

This is just an introduction to the Vivaldi set-up though. Next month I will install the clock and the Upsampler and discuss the connection possibilities and related cable costs (ouch!) and Chris Binns will explain something of the inner workings of the whole system. I will listen to music from every digital source I can lay my hands on and I will even become an SACD convert. At this stage, let me just say that, musically, you ain't heard nothing yet. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

dCS Vivaldi CD transport: £24,499

dCS Vivaldi DAC: £19,999

Manufactured by: Data Conversion Systems Ltd

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