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- Product Reviews

## dCS Debussy DAC Review



The dCS name has become one of the most recognized and distinguished in the high-end audio world, as the class leader for digital electronics in the ever-growing DAC market. The most coveted being the dCS Vivaldi which is a four-box powerhouse and used by many of the class leading high end audio speaker manufacturers to show off their gorgeous speakers to their best ability.

All of their DAC's are named after famous composers with the one that I am reviewing here being the Debussy DAC. This is their starting point in the ladder and also their cheapest coming in at around the £8,500 price point, but that by no means reflects any shortcomings in the Debussy's performance as it still uses their proprietary Ring DAC™ which over-samples all incoming data to 5-bits at 2.822 to 3.07MS/s and is used all the way through to the gorgeous sounding Vivaldi DAC. Their approach to the digital processing platform is one in which it is built around a sophisticated field programmable gate array and DSP IC. It is so flexible that it allows for any given function to be programmed into the software and makes their products an easy upgrade just by tweaking the software with which their DAC's operate on. All of this allows their products to perform to the highest levels, and at the heart of every dCS is their Ring DAC™ and unique DSP topologies which let them perform to a very high level of performance.

### **Features and Build Quality**

The Debussy is built to the highest of standards and that is reflected in its weight coming in at a healthy 8.8kg. The front fascia is built out of a solid

piece of aluminum and the casing built out of a high-grade aluminum. It looks and feels every bit as good as it sounds. The casing is actually quite deep and wide so you need a good rack space to fit the Debussy onto. On the front, each button has a solid feel when you push them in and again are made out of aluminium. The front has a very sleek and curved look to it which screams quality and light blue LED's light up the power and sample rates to show you what the DAC is doing. There is also volume, filter and phase buttons which can be used to tweak the Debussy's sound.

On the back of the unit you get plenty of connectivity with the standard AES3, dual AES and S/PDIF inputs as well as a USB class 2 audio input. For outputs, you get both balanced and standard RCA. It can also serve as a



digital preamplifier so you can in theory just connect straight to power amplifiers and use the digital volume to control the levels. There is also a small switch which can raise the gain output from 2v to 6v should you require this extra level of boost. In most cases 2v will be more than enough output. One point on the connectivity is that it also features an input for an external clock to be connected which will improve the dCS Debussy's performance even further.

The asynchronous class 2 USB input allows for direct connections to a PC / Mac or as in my case an Aurender Music Server which will accept high resolution audio at 24bits - 192Khz and DoP (DSD over PCM).

### **Performance and Sound Quality**

As you may well know from previous reviews I am now using the McIntosh Labs MA8000 to power my Wilson Audio Sophia 2 Speakers and I use an Oppo BDP93 player as a CD transport and my Aurender N100H Music Server to stream music to the Debussy DAC. All this is connected with Transparent Cables, power leads and interconnects and speaker cables to give the best possible path for my music. This is my reference system and the sound is simply divine.

For music, I will be using a few new CD's that I have acquired for this review, also some new downloads that I will be using with my Aurender N100H Music Server into the Debussy DAC.



For my first album, I will be listening to the beautifully captured and recorded E.S.T Symphony album on CD, " Esbjörn Svensson Trio " which is arranged and performed by the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra and sounds glorious, released by ACT Music 2016.

The first track is aptly named e.s.t prelude and features the full orchestra with brass, drums, strings all playing in what can best be described as a dynamic and exhilarating piece of music. The

Debussy DAC takes it all in its stride and separates each instrument into its own space within the music such is the clarity and tonal balance, which is a delight to listen to. What strikes me so much with the Debussy is its way of highlighting each instrument so well, every note has a silky flowing sound that the tap of cymbal and the strike of each key from the piano is rendered so cleanly and natural sounding. This is down to the excellent timing that the Debussy has and is displayed even more so by track three, When God Created the Coffee break, which is such a fast-paced piece with the percussion, strings and brass section all taking their cues so brilliantly with any lesser DAC making it sound more muddled than so layered which the Debussy does. This gives a more three-dimensional sound to the music with greater depth. The music extends deep into the room making the walls simply disappear into what is best described as a wonderfully huge sound stage. The snare drum is just stunning to hear with the rest of what is being played, lightning fast and then in an instant total and utter silence, the noise floor is literally non-existent.

Listening to track five Wonderland Suite which has to be my favorite piece of music from this exceptional album, the symphony and trumpet soloist is some of the best I have heard in my room to date, the Debussy takes my listening pleasure to another level and supersedes what I was expecting from this DAC. The sheer scale and size of the performance is so commanding that I am totally drawn into the music that my room becomes part of the listening experience. And I soon forget where I am and sit back and just relax into the music.

The drums solo is something nothing short of spectacular with such speed and clarity that I am left almost speechless such is the performance. I switch back to my Mytek DAC and play the same track but it is lacking something and that is the super-fast timing and in some parts, feels detached from the sound which is not as fluid in its presentation, or is there as much air between the instruments. The Mytek DAC with its dedicated PSU is a formidable DAC

but the Debussy is simply on another level and rightly so considering its price point.

Onto my second album, CD of The Freedom Unity, Down by The Naked City stereo recording by the Victor World Group. This is a remastered CD from the 1970's jazz band who mix some spiritual Jazz with a bit of funk, I imported this one from Japan as it is quite difficult to get hold of but sounds so good, that the effort and money spent was worth it.

The dCS Debussy does a wonderful job of capturing this album's purity and richness with the electric piano, percussion, saxophonist and Cello double bass in its raw form that the sound is electrifying in its performance. The double bass's sound is so tangible that each pluck is rendered perfectly and within reach. This piece of music is really one to be heard on a reference system otherwise it will just not do justice to the recording. Wonderfully choreographed The Freedom Unity is an exceptional group of musician's whose energy and fusion of Jazz is captured so well on this recording and the Debussy portrays this flawlessly, giving it an almost analogue sound which is as close as you could possibly get to its original Vinyl pressing.

For my third album, I switch to the brilliant Aurender N100H for its superb playback of high resolution recordings. My third album is Fragile by Robert Len in 24bits 192Khz by 2xhd recordings. This is a beautifully elegant sounding album with Robert Len using his ability to play almost everything that he has mastered, from the Trumpet, flugelhorn, classical guitars to electrics and percussion, even the gorgeous sounding flute which he plays masterfully.

In high resolution, the dCS really does shine and gives a stunning performance of this great album, with a wonderfully big sound-stage Fragile the second track sounds graceful with the Classical guitar and trumpet reminding me of some of Herb Albert's recordings, another brilliant artist. I am amazed at how good the Debussy presents every recording I throw at it. It just seems to revel in high resolution recordings though with an almost perfect sound.

Track four is a soothing sound to the ears with Len Roberts lending his talents to what is Il volo a track which features some great dynamics and range from all the instruments he plays on this one. The dCS is just pure reference in its playback and its ability to portray the music in the way it does.

For my last album, I have chosen an album which I love and it is by the very talented Dominic Miller called 5th House and it represents his love and passion for his music and he actually wrote this one while on the road with Sting touring.

It has a beautiful sound with the classical guitar played so passionately which

you can hear in his music. The jazz funk element also prominent by the percussion, electric and bass guitar. The dCS produces an almost holographic image of what is being played on stage and the sound is as lush as it could ever be. The dCS really is a master of the digital domain capturing the sonic purity of the music and all its elements that makes for such gorgeous sounding music. If Only track four on the album steps up the tempo with some great percussion and the quality and quantity of bass that the dCS manages to dig out really is astonishing as it has such power and authority to the track.

## **Conclusions and Final Thoughts**

I have a new reference for DAC's and that is the dCS Debussy as it is the best DAC I have heard under the £10,000 mark. It really does set the level very high for all other DAC's as it such a wonderful piece of equipment to add to your system. dCS is the master of the digital domain when it comes to music and my system just stepped up a gear with the Debussy slotted in. It doesn't matter what type of music you play it will just play it as it should, only the music. As dCS so eloquently puts, enough said.

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