

● REVIEW PRIMARE DAC30

Flexible digital converter delivers effortless power

It's big and impressive in build as well as sound but this Swedish-made DAC proves it's light on its feet, too

SPECIFICATION

PRIMARE DAC30

Type Digital-to-analogue converter

Price £1999

DAC 24-bit/192kHz, upsampling

Digital inputs Asynchronous USB, AES/

EBU electrical, three phono, three optical

Outputs Digital (phono), analogue stereo on phonos and balanced XLRs

Accessories supplied Remote handset

Dimensions (WxHxD) 43x9.5x37cm

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Asynchronous USB is the new 'must have' in the digital audio market. Used when a computer is connected to a DAC, it allows that DAC to control the flow of data from the computer. The idea is to reduce jitter – digital timing errors between source and DAC. It's a major cause of digital set-ups sounding – well, a bit 'digital' (in the artificial and mechanical sense).

So asynchronous USB is one of the features of the Primare DAC30, a big, solid slab of a converter from the Swedish company. Selling for £1999, it combines Primare's usual simplicity of outward design with high-quality internal engineering, from power supplies all the way through to circuit layout.

The hefty chassis and trio of feet provide the rigidity and damping to let what's within do its job to the best of its abilities, and what's within is the high-quality Crystal DSD DAC CS4399 multibit Delta-Sigma

converter, capable of handling signals at up to 24-bit/192kHz and fed by an SRC 4392 asynchronous sample-rate converter. This has further jitter-suppression software to ensure that the signal delivered to the DAC is as clean as possible. Downstream of the DAC is Primare's own analogue circuitry, using Burr-Brown op-amps, selected components and an output stage with a single MOSFET driven by an active current source.

The 24-bit/192kHz USB interface is from XMOS, with Primare working with its developers to optimise the firmware for this application, and the DAC30 also has a single AES/EBU electrical digital input on an XLR socket, three electrical digital inputs and three TOSLink optical, and outputs on both phono sockets and balanced XLRs. Indicator lights on the front panel show the input connected, digital lock and the sampling rate being received, and the remote handset allows

power on/off, direct digital inputs selection or scrolling through the inputs, and will also turn off the front-panel indicators.

PERFORMANCE

The Primare displayed one of the more obvious running-in progressions I have heard for a long while – from cold it's impressive, if rather analytical and mechanical, but after a day or two's use it clearly becomes richer, warmer and more 'together'-sounding.

This is a DAC capable of excellent insight into the minutiae of a recording, making clear the size and acoustics of the venue, and also a sense of the 'sound' of a studio or location in the moments before the performance begins. However, it also retains its composure when things get busy, enabling the threads making up a complex work to be studied, or just the effect of the whole to be enjoyed.

There's effortless power here, making the dynamics of a piece truly thrilling, while at the same time the Primare always sounds entirely within its capabilities. It delivers a big-boned, beautifully detailed sound with well-recorded CDs, and really comes into its own with higher-resolution 'Studio Master' recordings.

At a shade under £2000, the Primare is up against tough competition in the digital music field, but its ability to give the illusion of a smooth, easy-going sound while delivering so much insight should win it many fans. This is a DAC designed to play music and do all the hi-fi stuff as a foundation to what's being played, not a distraction from it. ⑥



HOW TO TEST...

The Primare does a fine job with vocal and instrumental textures within a warm, rich sound. Test it with this disc of Telemann arias by Dorothee Mields and L'Orfeo Baroque Orchestra to hear just what this fine DAC can do.