

Vertex AQ DAC-1.5 Revisited

IN OUR VOL9 NO2 REVIEW, THE SOUND QUALITY OF THE ORIGINAL VERTEX AQ DAC-1.5 WAS A TRIFLE DISAPPOINTING. SURPRISINGLY PERHAPS, THE COMPANY AGREED WITH OUR CRITICISMS, INVESTIGATED AND REVISED THE COMPONENTRY AND CIRCUITRY, SO PAUL MESSENGER GIVES THIS LATEST INCARNATION A LISTEN

PAUL MESSENGER

For our recent review in *Vol9 No2*, Vertex AQ had delivered a version of the original *dac-1* (originally reviewed in *Vol6 No2*), to provide a proper context, plus the new and even more costly *Aletheia dac-1.5* as the main subject of the review. The results turned out to be a trifle mixed.

The £16,000 Vertex AQ *Aletheia dac-1.5* did indeed show some improvement in detail extraction over the £11,000 *dac-1*, but both components suffered from a degree of timing error that was considered undesirable, especially considering the very high prices of both units. Indeed, in timing terms the *dac-1.5* seemed if anything slightly more handicapped than the *dac-1*, so I was tempted to conclude – not illogically I should point out – that the cause might well have something to do with the superior and extra treatment technologies that were fitted to the more costly model.

However, I subsequently heard from Vertex AQ that they actually agreed with my opinion, that the timing was ‘off’. Their only disagreement was with the conclusions that I’d drawn, as their own subsequent investigations revealed that the source of the problem lay in the use and location of a capacitor from a well known brand that had actually been specifically chosen for its sonic qualities. Once this was changed, the whole thing allegedly speeded up and sounded more coherent,

Unfortunately such a ‘before-and-after’ comparison was not possible on this occasion, because all existing models had already been modified by replacing the key capacitor that was causing the problem. The original C.E.C. disc drive wasn’t available either, but a Rega *Saturn* provided a more than adequate alternative drive. However, it was still possible to compare the *Aletheia dac-1* with the *dac1.5*, so some background context is needed and some pertinent questions must be asked.

Why spend the additional £5,000 to go from *dac-1* to *dac1.5*? And an even tougher question is: why spend nearly £16,000 on all the peripherals surrounding that very inexpensive Philips *TD1543* DAC chip? Some have certainly suggested that the *1543* is much too humble device to form the DAC core of such a costly and complex unit. But Vertex



AQ decided to choose the *1543* only after it had tried numerous alternatives. It chose to use this particular ladder-type chip mainly because it’s one of the simplest around, and as free as possible from further processing. As in other audio components (such as loudspeakers and valve amplifiers), simplicity can be a positive advantage.

I started the auditioning with a version of the original *dac-1* with Mundorf caps, a standard ‘hybrid hi-res’ digital lead and the Enklein *David* interconnects. The sound quality seemed somewhat brighter than my Naim *CDS3/555PS* reference CD player, yet also demonstrated somewhat better treble definition. Changing to the *dac-1.5* brought an obvious improvement, delivering a wider dynamic range alongside rather better overall control.

Using Vertex AQ’s new upmarket digital lead – the *Hi-Rez (Silver) Illimani* costs £1240 for 1.5m – brought further improvements as the cable (and the DAC) ‘warmed up’. Bass timing was clearly now right on the money, and the overall top-to-bottom sound was also more neutral, with outstanding stereo imaging, superior extreme left and right definition, excellent depth, and generous fine detailing

I also had the opportunity to try Vertex AQ’s Pico ‘grounding block’, and found that this made a big difference to the overall sound quality, significantly cleaning up some previously unsuspected bass excess and improving the top end tonality too. It somehow seemed to remove ‘grunge’ from the whole system, so I’ll get back to this component soon.

However, the bottom line must be about the performance of the *Aletheia dac-1.5*, which is clearly now fulfilling its fine potential with good timing, and surely deserves an Audio Excellence flag. It is an unquestionably costly component, especially as it has virtually no facilities. But if outstanding Red Book performance is the prime criterion, there may well be no better alternative.

HIFICRITIC
AUDIO EXCELLENCE

Manufacturer’s Data

Make	Vertex AQ
Model	Aletheia 1.5
Type	DAC (D-to-A converter)
Inputs:	1x S/PDIF electrical (RCA, BNC) or Toslink optical (Red Book 16-bit/44.1-96kHz)
Size (WxHxD)	46x14x38cm
Weight	13kg
Price	£16,000

Contact:
Tel: 01554 759267
www.vertexaq.com