

VPI Aries and Benchmark DSD

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Downsizing While Upscaling – The Front End(s): VPI Aries 3D & Dynavector XV1S, Musical Fidelity M1CDT & Benchmark DAC2 L.
by Sasha Matson



BANG!

Consolidating my 'A System' onto one four-shelf Mapleshade rack was the project I embarked on a few months back. I posed the following question in the prior [PF Issue 72](#): "...how could I maintain or perhaps surpass the level of musical quality I had carefully assembled over time, while simultaneously occupying less space?"

Having previously addressed preamp, amp, and loudspeaker choices, through a vector that involved both component space use and musical quality aspects, it was now time to look at updating the front ends. And in the plural: both analog and digital. Some of the choices I have made include hardware that has been available

and written about for some time. But one piece of gear is almost brand-spanking new, so let's start with that.



VPI Aries 3D Turntable

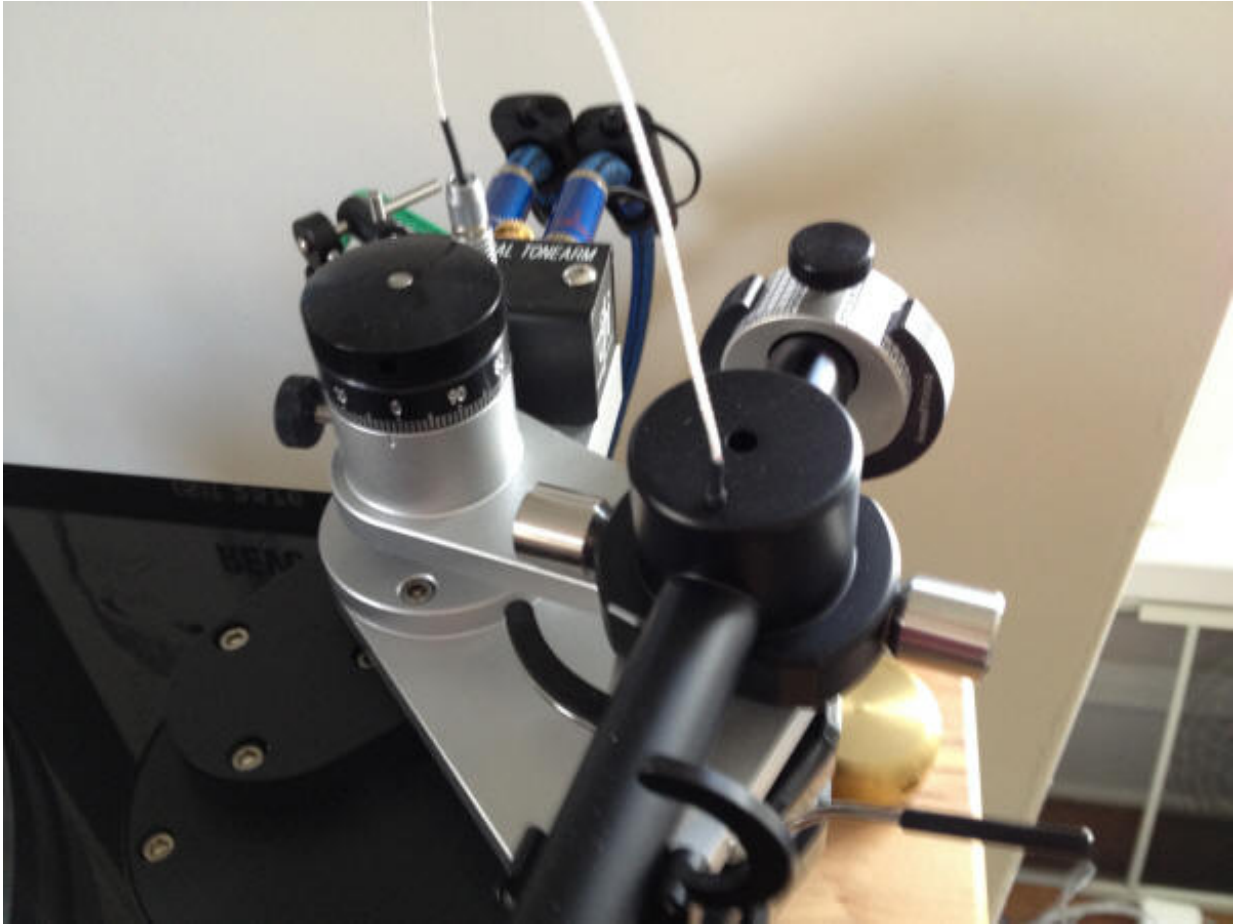
I had owned and loved for the past seven years a VPI Scoutmaster turntable. What's not to like? Never a technical problem in that time, and a great music-maker! But in continuing my theme of 'upscaling' within certain designer's lineups, I looked at what the Weisfeld family is up to right now with their turntable creations. And as anyone familiar with VPI gear knows, that's a lot. I had admired what I've seen and read about VPI's highly regarded Classic models; they are handsome and functional as all get-out. Initially I considered loading up one of those tables with all of Harry Weisfeld's options—like souping up a Mustang. And I opened my big mouth and expressed this idea to Mike Sastra at Audio Classics Ltd in Binghamton. Mike knows when he's got a trout on the line—and he set that hook by pointing out that he had a brand new "hot rodded" VPI Aries 3D turntable sitting in their shop- why not look at that? This particular turntable was initially meant to go to EveAnna Manley for CES 2014, but wasn't ready in time. So now it has come to me! Quoting from VPI's own description of their new Aries 3D package:

"Being a staple in the VPI product line, it is time for a facelift for the VPI Aries Turntable! Customers have requested an option for a 12-inch 3D printed arm but with a reasonable footprint. The Aries 3D includes a Classic Aluminum platter, Periphery Ring Clamp, HR-X Center Weight, HR-X Mini Feet, and Classic 3D Extended (12 inch) tonearm."

That's a lot of great stuff, which applies a full range of Harry Weisfeld's creative developments past and present. Squeezing as much juice as possible out of all the technical design parameters at play, in order to re-create music from spinning platters of vinyl! I spoke briefly with VPI's Mat Weisfeld about the Aries 3D, and Mat mentioned that initially VPI was intending this model for the foreign market, with maximum flexibility in terms of what elements and options would be included. So for those who know and respect VPI, a 'package' can be assembled that delivers exactly what particular customers are looking for.

As of this writing, the cutting-edge technical development that VPI is introducing now throughout much of their lineup, either as one element in a package or as a separate stand-alone option, are their '3D printed' tonearms. Made out of epoxy resin, they are produced, or 'printed', by high-tech machines that laser-carve one-piece finished products from computer-input designs. I suppose everything we can hold in our hands will eventually be made this way. Maybe entire cars? Coffins? Who knows? Right now it's an expensive manufacturing process, and if you buy one of these tonearms from VPI as a stand-alone upgrade they carry a

hefty price tag. But that would be like going down to the auto parts store and trying to assemble an entire car from parts- it doesn't work best that way. As one element in all that is offered with the Aries 3D package, it makes a lot of sense.



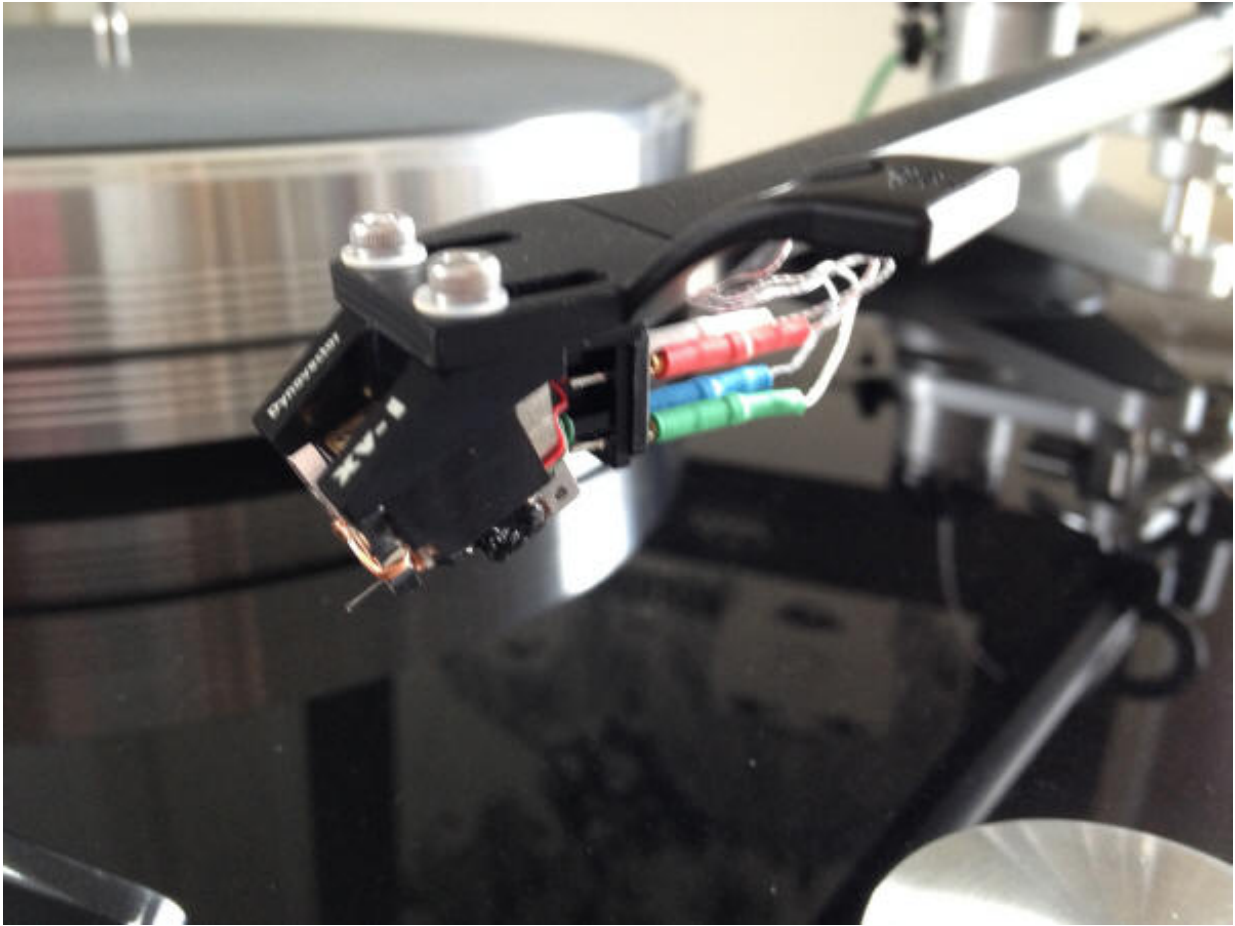
Aries 3D Tonearm Assembly

Ahmet Ertegun used to like to say in the studio when he was particularly impressed by something: "That's the shit." And that's the way I feel about what I'm hearing from this 12" 3D tonearm. And I am not the only one responding in this way. My good friend Joe Harley of AudioQuest recently described the new 3D tonearm at an event by saying: "It's a tonearm, but there's no tone!" There's some real heavy audio-music magic happening here for sure. Is it a combination of one-piece lightness, rigidity, and total lack of resonance? I don't have the benefit of tech measurements in this regard, but I strongly suspect that when measurements are made public they will reveal highly positive behavior. (As of this writing I am ahead of Mike Fremer's comments on these tonearms forthcoming in the June issue of the *S-Philes*.) 12" tonearm geometry itself is also a strong contributing factor compared to the shorter 10" arm it replaced; there is no need for anti-skating, there is improved tracking ability, etc. In my case I was just barely able to reap these benefits- the Aries turntable footprint fits on the top shelf of my rack with about $\frac{1}{4}$ " to spare between each of the hefty HR-X Mini Feet and the tops of my shelf bolts. Talk about maximizing space. The tonearm assembly actually protrudes slightly beyond the edges of the turntable plinth- necessitating some custom work in terms of the plexiglass cover that Vinh Vu is making for me right now at Ginkgo Audio! And VPI has made improvements to the manner in which the tonearm assembly is braced. Fully adjustable 'on-the-fly' VTA is set from a metered knob- braced in two spots. Being a cranky individualist audiophile, I did make one custom request when I purchased this. The 12" 3D tonearm came wired with copper Discovery cable. However, my prior VPI Scoutmaster Signature arm had been wired with Nordhost Valhalla silver wire, and I really wanted to keep it that way. We're talking millivolts here- call me folksy, but I think of copper as like a series of salmon dams on a river. Perhaps silver has a better shot at getting those tiny little signals from a moving coil all the way to a phono stage! So VPI kindly accommodated my request, and re-wired the 3D arm with the Nordhost cabling.



One Ring to Rule Them All

Then there are the other cards that Harry Weisfeld has up his sleeve. For one, the metal Periphery Ring Clamp, which is heavier than I expected. When you place it over the edges of an LP you physically get the sensation that that particular record is not going anywhere- except around and around; mild warping or excursions eradicated or at least reduced. Doesn't work with every LP though. I never thought about variations in actual diameter of pressed vinyl, however, on a few records the clamp will not stay properly placed. It works most of the time though. On newer audiophile pressings that are visually completely flat, I don't bother with it. This goes in tandem with using the inner Center Weight, which is essential as far as I am concerned. Another relatively new item is the hefty Classic Aluminum Platter. As the name implies this was introduced I think with the Classic series of turntables, and replaces in my rig the acrylic platter that came with the Scoutmaster. I am sure it is another contributing factor to the excellent overall sonic results that I am experiencing. The hefty Mini Feet look like something off some sort of Star Wars walker tank, and they are easily rotated for table leveling. The heavy-duty aluminum/acrylic sandwich of the plinth, and the similarly impressive stand-alone detached motor for the belt drive, complete the sonic and visual picture. You know you are making progress when your gear starts looking the like the inside of a well-equipped dental office! I plan on icing this multi-layer Aries cake with the VPI SDS speed controller device, when it is available again. Plus it's all made in New Jersey- yeah baby!



Dynavector DRT XV-1S Moving Coil Cartridge

You know that feeling of going to the doctor and they inform you that you are suffering from some condition you didn't know you had? I am not a guy that swaps gear every week. Not only did I own my previous VPI Scoutmaster turntable for seven years, but the cartridge had been on there almost as long! I started out briefly with a Dynavector 10X5, a sort of handsome bowling ball red-colored unit. That was my first moving coil experience—a loaner at the time. So that got me hooked, and I moved up a notch and purchased the well known Dynavector Karat 17D3, which I thought then, and still do today, to be one of the great values in high-end audio.

Mike Sastra at Audio Classics Ltd removed the Dynavector 17D3 cartridge when I brought in my Scoutmaster rig. He put it up on his microscope and asked me to take a look. It almost made me physically queasy- a sort of hi-fi version of erectile dysfunction! The stylus was bent! Possibly from the force of mechanical anti-skating being applied for some years? It was still playing, but probably barely hanging on! Allow me to quote myself again from the previous article: "This is the 'upscaling' part of the process. I personally like finding designers and products that you can really connect with, and then working within their lineup over time." Couldn't say it better myself—wait—I did say that myself. So I did the due-diligence research, and ended up selecting a cartridge several rungs higher up the Dynavector ladder. The DRT XV-1S moving coil cartridge design has been available for some years now; it is not a brand new offering. The 'S' in the model designation in turn refers to an updating from the previous model. I should point out that Dynavector US was kind enough to offer me a discount, as they do for all people who trade up the Dynavector cartridge line, which was helpful.

The XV-1S is a complex little gem of machinery, much described in the audio press, and you can also read about its design on the Dynavector website. One of the prime elements is an array of eight small magnets, the energy of which is precisely controlled through various yokes and armatures. It is a fairly heavy unit, weighing a little less than 13 grams. Boron cantilever and a line-contact diamond stylus. All the good stuff in other words. And putting out a very useable .3MV. If you stopped the average guy on the street and told him how much you had just spent to *change a needle on your record player* they might start slapping you! Perhaps a more positive analogy is to think of all the money people can spend on fancy watches? It is that kind of intense exacting physical production that is involved here. And Dynavector's quality reputation is outstanding. Bob Herman at Lyric Hi Fi in Manhattan, told me he's been selling Dynavector products for 20 years and has not had a single mechanical problem reported from a customer EVER. That's a pretty impressive stat.

I had really good help installing the XV-1S. Art Dudley, whom you all know as Editor at Large for Stereophile

magazine, owed me an installation. I had bartered with Art when he cast his magpie-glance on an old mono Django Reinhardt LP that had come to me from my in-laws. We live in a barter economy in up-state New York, so I said, "O.K. Art, you can have it, but you owe me one cartridge install." So that day finally came, and Art brought over his toolkit and did a fine job. Tip: children's play tables make excellent turntable workbenches! Fine cartridges benefit and change sound to some degree from a burn-in period. I am less than two weeks into listening to this amazing music transducer, and there may be further tweaking of VTA and so forth down the line. But for now, it is just a whole 'nuther ballgame than anything I have previously experienced. Everything I have read by varied writers in audio about what one can and should expect from the best moving coil cartridges is happening here. It's almost a simultaneous yin/yang dynamic- there can be velvet subtle sound one second, and the next the most explosive rockin' you can imagine! The XV-1S can do it all, and I am fortunate to get to experience this level of music re-creation in my own time and place.

A few specific examples of this particular turntable cartridge combo- Last night I pulled out an album I hadn't listened to in a long time, *Let It Bleed*. IMO the best-sounding record made by The Stones. And one I almost knew too well in the past. It sounded fresh and new, and better than I can ever recall hearing it, from the great slide guitar work, to the Fremeresque slam of Charlie Watts definitive kick drum whacks- just a rockin'! Contrast that with a long-time reference on the classical side of the street, "The Reiner Sound." Those extremely subtle muted strings that open the Ravel on the A side. In fact this one was the first thing Art Dudley and I played after he had installed the cartridge—and Art seemed mighty pleased as well, with the results of his handiwork!



Musical Fidelity M1CDT Compact Disc Transport

From top shelf to bottom shelf—that's where I house my two-box digital playback hardware. It seems these days like everybody and their uncle are making DACs. But how many companies are offering a reasonably priced stand-alone CD transport for those with large CD collections? Not that many, I found out when I started to look into it. Like many of you, I've got to have a thousand-plus CD's on little shelves in a cupboard—I never have counted them. Musical Fidelity is filling a need here with their M1CDT. Half a rack shelf wide, the unit plays only standard red-book CD's, puts out only digital signals. And delivers the digital number goods extremely well- that's its focused task. The M1CDT is a front-slot loading player, with three outputs: Coax, Optical, and AES/EBU XLR. I use the coax with a fine AudioQuest DBS cable running into my Benchmark DAC2. There is a remote, but the one quirky thing about this unit is there is no remote eject button. I could get it to eject using another manufacturer's remote, but Musical Fidelity for some strange reason doesn't provide that function.

Obviously one big plus of a two-box digital playback system is that any mechanical vibration issues from the player are not going to affect the DAC—and all things being equal that seems like a good idea to me, compared to one-box CD players. And of course you are then free to choose from a wide variety of constantly updated DACs out there on the market- those stats seem to change weekly, whereas the numeric reading of digital info off of a red-book CD is established technology at this point. To do significantly sonically better than what I am hearing as an end-result from the M1CDT, you would have to enter the stratosphere budget-wise. And choosing this half-shelf wide unit fulfilled my goal of maximizing shelf space use. It is a great current solution for those of you with stand-alone DACs who haven't had a new CD player in your system for some time. I should note that Musical Fidelity offers several other units in their M1 series, including the companion M1DAC, should you wish to pair them. And the pricing is very reasonable indeed, given the level of build and musical quality!



Flashing Lights – Like the Mothership in 'Close Encounters' – What Are They Trying to Tell Me?

Benchmark DAC2 L Digital Analog Converter

Pity the fate of that ancient old bit of technology—the iPod. Everything in popular culture, and the connected music, now emanates from what used to be called telephones. Good luck to Neil Young and Pono, trying to get young folk to carry around dedicated music players again! I actually witnessed the life cycle of the iPod in the collegiate setting- when I first asked for a show of hands around the year 2000, a couple of hands went up in a large lecture class. Cut to four or five years on and it was almost 100%. In the year 2014 I think the dedicated music player numbers with the college crowd would be back again to almost zilch. You can literally watch the waves of technology ebb and flow these days.

I am now into owning my second stand-alone DAC. The first one I purchased was a Peachtree iDac. That unit has a top-loading slot for iPods or iPhones—hence the clever tie-in name. Never used that slot once. The Peachtree DAC offers outstanding sound for the money, and Peachtree designs flexible high-value gear—particularly their all-purpose integrated amps. I've purchased two of those and will be buying another one shortly for my younger son's college graduation present.

Benchmark Media Systems Inc., based in Syracuse, New York, is an example of the interplay between two amorphous markets which high-end audio straddles—often referred to as 'consumer' versus 'pro'. But those lines have blurred over time, particularly in recent years. Benchmark initially established their brand on the pro side of the tracks, designing high-quality processing gear intended primarily for studio and media use. In other

words—rack mounted boxes. But what used to be the exclusive domain of well-equipped post-production studios stuffed with various specialized dedicated signal processing gear, has now entered America's living rooms! The very idea that anyone other than a busy network television techie should know what "Digital Analog Converter" even refers to is quite odd I think. But here we are, and this highly sophisticated technology has gotten more democratic as a result, i.e. it is cheaper than it used to be.

The DAC2 builds on the strengths of an earlier first Benchmark generation of small, reasonably priced high-quality DACs. A relatively recent product, the DAC2 series was thoroughly vetted in the February 2014 issue of *Stereophile*, and I refer you to that for John Atkinson's measurements, which John described as "simply superb." You can choose from several different versions—the one I purchased is designated as the DAC2L, the 'L' referring I suppose to Line. In other words, this one doesn't include headphone jacks. For a few dollars more you can get the HGC model which features two of them- so you and your girlfriend can both sit there with headphones on? I don't listen to music through headphones, unless I am on a train or plane.

Listing all the technical features of the DAC2 here would run several more pages—it packs a LOT of audio firepower into a small half-rack shelf width little 3 pound package. The gist of the thing lies in the four (4!) 32-bit Sabre DAC chips running in a balanced circuit. Benchmark also completely separates analog and digital processing in the implementation of the gain stage—that can be used as a stand-alone high-quality minimalist preamp. So it's really a multi-purpose device, should you wish to employ all that it offers. I am using only the digital-analog converter aspects, having set the outputs to fixed 'pass-through' mode, and feeding the analog outputs into my pre-amp.

Saying *only* the DAC, is an oxymoron however, as the Benchmark DAC2 decodes 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4, 192 and DSD sampling. And in a plus for the user, unlike my previous DAC, you can see from the front-panel lights which sampling rate is actually making it into the unit, and that it is locked on properly. This greatly helps to reduce a recent form of audio neurosis that at least I am suffering from, which is not knowing what the heck the actual sampling rates are in those iTunes files coming out of your laptop! Benchmark reveals its pro-audio heritage in this area as well—there are too many flashing lights. The thing flashes when you aren't actually playing something. I guess that's cool in a control booth, but it really is overkill at home when you are trying to listen to an LP instead. Monkey see, monkey do—that's how I deal with hi-tech. Benchmark indicates the various sampling rates with various combinations of LED lights—which you have to memorize unless you were using a telephoto lens from your listening chair. Ah technology...

It's the sound that matters of course in high-end audio. True audiophiles kind of relish the challenge of getting things to work properly. Let me be extra clear now—I have never heard better music reproduction from digital sources than I am now hearing from the Benchmark DAC2. The palpable ease of flow, the incredible micro detailing, and the explosive yet musical dynamics- with none of that digital CD hardness—it's just GREAT! Congrats to the Benchmark team, and well-deserving of its 'A+' rating in *Stereophile*.



Master and Commander – Editor and Producer John Atkinson in the 'Mastering Nook.'

To s-s-s-sum up: what a pleasure to hear for the first time just last week, the actual 'native' hi-rez 88/24 files of my own music, in my own hi-fi! John Atkinson was here for a sleepover, in order to set final levels and sequencing for the mastered version of my *Cooperstown: Jazz Opera in Nine Innings* recording, which John has been producing. (More on this project when it is formally released.) We actually used my revised rig for the purpose indicated with the "mastering series" designation on my Harbeth 30.1 speakers. The overall quality of this *downsized* and *upscaled* system now is such that this recording could be finalized in my own reference environment, which is really the optimum way to go. With the benefits of outstanding current high-end audio technology, I have packed a lot of musical firepower and truths onto one four-shelf altar.

VPI Aries 3D Turntable

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Musical Fidelity M1CDT Compact Disc Transport

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Benchmark Media DAC2 L Digital Analog Converter

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