

Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series Review

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Rarely do I hear a component that's truly a game changer, a component that's so good I can't stop listening through it, and a component that's so good it renders much of the competition irrelevant. I can't remember, off the top of my head, the last time I heard such a component. That is, before the Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series arrived. The Alpha DAC RS, every bit a true game changer, blew me away from the first listen in my system. Since its arrival I've listened to more complete albums and heard more new sounds from old albums than any time in my life. The Alpha DAC RS is so good and such a game changer it may force consumers to reconsider their desire for high resolution music. Sure the Alpha DAC RS can reproduce high resolution music better than any DAC I've heard in my system, but its absolute magic can be heard with standard CD quality 16 bit / 44.1 kHz material. The Alpha DAC RS is without question the best DAC I've heard anywhere when it comes to 16/44.1 playback. I've never heard detail, delicacy, and transparency with my favorite music like I have when listening through this DAC. The Alpha DAC RS is so outstanding that I equate its presence in my system to that of a new pair of loudspeakers. That's correct; the Alpha DAC RS had an impact on my system equivalent to a new pair of loudspeakers. In fact, the Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series is the most remarkable sounding product I've ever reviewed.

Alpha DAC Reference Series

The Berkeley Audio Design team is well known for pursuing perfection of performance and producing peerless products. The original Alpha DAC is considered by many to be the best \$5,000 DAC money can buy. The company's subsequent USB to AES converter has been unequalled when it comes to sound quality and electrical isolation in D-to-D converters. Pushing boundaries and shooting for unparalleled performance is not an easy task and frequently takes quite a bit of time. Such is the case with the Alpha DAC Reference Series. According to Berkeley Audio Design's Michael Ritter, the Alpha DAC RS contains proprietary parts that didn't exist prior to the creation of the DAC. During the initial design stages of the RS 'Berkeley' asked several manufacturers to build certain parts to its specifications. All but one of the companies said no because it was difficult to build and there was no market for such impeccably spec'd parts. In addition the cost of the parts ended up being 40x greater than parts used in the Alpha DAC Series 2 or the Alpha USB.

Internal parts are but one piece of the Alpha DAC RS puzzle. The other major piece is intellectual property. 'Berkeley' previously made a \$5,000 DAC sound as good as or better than many DACs costing several times more money. To do this requires the intellectual know-how that other DAC manufacturers,

who just assemble parts and follow chip manufacturers' app notes, simply don't have. Talking to Berkeley's lead Engineer Michael "Pflash" Pflaumer, it's clear that the Alpha DAC RS contains engineering wizardry and original ideas that the previous 'Berkeley' products don't contain. The Alpha DAC RS isn't a sibling of the original Alpha DAC, rather it's a close cousin. Both DACs have the same designer, but the Reference Series is so above and beyond that it's in a league of its own. This time, using a mix of proprietary parts and vast intellectual property, Berkeley Audio Design has created a \$16,000 DAC that may be the best in the world at any price.

One of the strengths of the Alpha DAC RS that make it such a great component is its ability to playback standard resolution (16/44.1) material better than any DAC I've heard. According to many DAC designers, playback of standard resolution is where the rubber meets the road, not only because the vast majority of music is released at 16/44.1, but because it takes considerable expertise to develop digital filters for CD quality material. This is where Berkeley Audio Design excels. Michael "Pflash" Pflaumer's digital filter mastery is the stuff of legend in high end audio. One only needs to listen to the Alpha DAC RS at 16/44.1 to hear Pflash's superior skills shine. There's no chip a manufacture can purchase and implement that comes close to replicating 'Berkeley's' custom filtering technology.

Now for the fun part, telling the world how the Alpha DAC RS sounds with some of my favorite music. The RS single handedly sent me into a Natalie Merchant binge that lasted a couple weeks. I couldn't stop listening to Natalie's new self-titled album and her Motherland release from 2001. Both albums are the standard issue, released at 44.1 kHz and not remastered. The detail and delicacy brought out by the Alpha DAC RS on both albums is unparalleled. For example, the track Maggie Said from the 2014 Natalie Merchant album has incredible separation and delineation between instruments. So much so that I can't get this good of sound even through my Sennheiser HD600, Audeze LCD-XC, or JH Audio JH13 in-ear monitors. The first track on the album, Lady Bird, opens with a delicate drum roll. Listening through other DACs and even through headphones, the drums tend to sound like paper, as if the drummer is striking a couple sheets of loose leaf paper from the Dollar Store. Through the Alpha DAC RS it's possible to hear the texture of the drum heads. I'm willing to bet any competent drummer could identify the exact drum kit, and even the sticks used by the drummer, after listening to this track through the Alpha DAC RS.

Continuing my Natalie Merchant kick, I spent countless hours listening to her Motherland album. Track two, titled Motherland, features a guitar, banjo, accordion, and some of the richest sounding vocals Natalie has ever produced. I've never heard this track sound so good and Natalie's vocals sound as wonderful as I have when listening through the Alpha DAC RS. The delicate accordion comes and goes in the background landing like a butterfly with sore feet. The banjo and guitar have terrifically distinct sounds that can be heard even at the lowest volumes through the 'RS'. In fact, I've never heard a DAC excel more at low volumes than the Alpha DAC RS. Listening to the entire Motherland album I kept the volume at such low levels that the crickets outside my listening room drowned out the quiet passages more than a few times. This is in stark contrast to listening through some DACs that lack resolution and force the listener to turn up the volume a notch for every track. After an hour of listening one's ears are tired and ready to retire for the evening. My experience with the Alpha DAC RS couldn't be more the opposite. I never wanted to stop listening once during the entire review period.

Classical music isn't traditionally one of my favorite genres. However, when a component like the Alpha DAC RS is placed into my system I feel the need to listen to all of my music as if it was all new. During this review I frequently said to myself, "I wonder what X or Y sounds like through the RS." It was as close to the kid before Christmas feeling as I could have as an adult. Thus, I played the Kansas City Symphony's Britten's Orchestra recorded and released at 24 bit / 176.4 kHz by Reference Recordings. This album demonstrated the Alpha DAC RS' ability to reproduce transients like no other DAC I've heard. About 4:20 into the track Passacaglia things get real interesting. The horns start out quite delicate augmenting the string section that is building the scene. By 5:30 into the track the horn section is leading the way in the most transparent sounding symphonic reproduction I've yet heard. At 5:45 into the track the deep horns start to snap and the drums create an incredible sounding crescendo. Then all is quiet with the exception of a soft and delicate string section in recovery from the event that just took place. Throughout the track the Alpha DAC RS appears to only reproduce the music. There's no memorializing of an event after it

happens and there certainly are no rounded edges of transients. This DAC starts and stops like no other.

Organic and transparent is how I describe listening to Jack Johnson's Brushfire Fairytales through the Alpha DAC RS. This isn't the most well recorded album, but through the 'RS' something magical comes out of each track. The Alpha DAC RS isn't adding anything or forcing a Hi-Fi signature on the album, rather more sounds and nuances are coming through now than ever before through any other DAC. The track Flake features a very soft steel drum in the left channel and acoustic guitar in the right channel at the beginning. The guitar sounds incredibly organic and realistic while the steel drum smoothly floats in the background with its soft presence. Through less resolute DACs I frequently turn up the volume during this part of the track because I can't hear the steel drum enough for my liking. Through the Alpha DAC RS the steel drum magically comes through appropriately soft but appropriately present. It's really magical to hear these seemingly antithetical (soft / present) characteristics come through with delicacy and transparency like never before.

Closing out the review period I wanted to push the bass limits of the Alpha DAC RS. What I had heard up to this point was incredibly tight and deep bass from more traditional sources like rock and roll and jazz. It was time for a little Jay Z, one of my favorite hip hop artists of all time. Jay Z's MTV Unplugged (with the Roots band) is a great sounding album but it doesn't have the bass of the Magna Carta... Holy Grail album. After warming up with MTV Unplugged I switched to track Holy Grail featuring Justin Timberlake. A synthetic piano and somewhat synthetic sounding vocal start the track before a huge bass beat kicks in. Under the right conditions I'm sure one could blow woofers into a listener's lap. Fortunately the track isn't just a bass monster / demo track. The deep beat is great as are the lyrics with a sample of Nirvana's Smells Like Teen Spirit. The Alpha DAC RS puts out the deepest and tightest bass of any DAC I've yet heard. Listening to this deep tight bass gave me a similar feeling to listening to soft and present steel drums from Jack Johnson. The deep bass was omnipresent as it was supposed to be, but it wasn't overpowering. Jay Z's and Timberlake's vocals were clearly audible and intelligible as were the plethora of other sounds going on in the track. Chalk this magic up to the Alpha DAC RS and its brilliant designer Michael "Pflash" Pflaumer and the rest of the 'Berkeley' team who took part in creating the best DAC on the market.

Conclusion

The Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series is a DAC for the ages. Delicacy, detail, and unparalleled transparency are hallmarks of the RS. Reproducing soft yet present background instruments as clearly as the lead guitar is something only the Alpha DAC RS has done in my system. This DAC is capable of hooking the listener in to hours long listening sessions even at the expense of getting other work done. In other words, the Alpha DAC RS reproduces addicting sound. The Reference Series is what the term "game changer" was meant to describe. It's a PCM only DAC that renders most other universal DACs on the market irrelevant. Irrelevant because they cost more and don't sound as good. A DAC that can make standard resolution (16/44.1) material sound as good as high resolution is a true game changer. The advanced digital filtering algorithms created by Berkeley Audio Design do exactly that with 16/44.1 music. I know of no DAC available today that can reproduce Redbook CD content as well as the Alpha DAC RS. Period. If I could afford it and my job allowed it, the Alpha DAC RS is the only DAC I'd use for the foreseeable future.

Product Information:

- Product - Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Reference Series
- Price - \$16,000
- Product Page - [Link](#)

Associated Equipment:

- Source: [Sonore Signature Series Rendu](#), [Aurender W20](#)

- DAC: [Auralic Vega](#), [Berkeley Audio Design Alpha DAC Series 2](#) , [EMM Labs DAC2X](#)
- D-to-D Converter: [Berkeley Audio Design Alpha USB](#)
- Amplifier: [Pass Labs XA160.5 Monoblocks](#)
- Pre-Amplifier: [Pass Labs INT-30A](#)
- Loudspeakers: [TAD Labs CR1 Compact Reference](#)
- Remote Control Software: [JRemote](#), [Aurender iOS App](#)
- Remote Control Hardware: [iPhone 5](#), [iPad \(3rd Generation\)](#)
- Network Attached Storage (NAS): [Synology DS1812+](#)
- Audio Cables: [Wire World Platinum Eclipse 7 Balanced Interconnects](#), [Wire World Platinum Eclipse 7 Speaker Cables](#), [Wire World Platinum Starlight 7 USB 2.0](#), [Wire World Platinum Starlight 7 Digital Cables](#),
- Power Cables: [ALO Audio AC6 Power Cables](#)
- Ethernet Cables: [AudioQuest Vodka Ethernet Cables](#) throughout system
- Network: , [Cisco SG200-26 Switch](#), [Baaske MI-1005 Ethernet Isolator](#), [Apple AirPort Extreme](#) , [PFSense Router / Firewall](#), [Cisco DPC3000 Docsis 3.0 cable modem](#), [Comcast Extreme 105 Mbps Internet Service](#)