



"And you may ask yourself  
How do I work this?  
And you may ask yourself  
Where is that large automobile?"

—"Once in Lifetime" by David Byrne, Brian Eno, Chris Frantz, Jerry Harrison, and Tina Weymouth

It took a really long time to get to review the Ayre QB-9DSD and even then they had to send a really nice guy from Colorado to my place in the San Francisco Bay Area to personally set it up and make sure everything sounded right before he handed it off for about a month for me to review. He said it only had about 3-4 hours on it and asked if I could burn it in for about a week before I did any critical listening, and I said yes. Unfortunately, I started having some problems with the RAID drive I use to store my music and felt uncomfortable leaving it running 24/7 without actually monitoring the music; but, in a way, that was a very good thing, because (a) it never actually did fail and (b) it gave me a chance to hear the QB-9DSD mature as if I could somehow pull a glass of wine at a time out of a magnum of Cabernet Sauvignon over the course of several years without actually causing any unnecessary oxidation. At first, I thought, "Wow, the QB-9DSD has really rocking bass and midrange blossom that totally blows the old dCS Debussy and the Berkeley Alpha Series 2 DAC's out of the water; but, maybe, it could use a good Cardas copper cable rather than a Kondo Sound Labs KSL-LP pure silver interconnect with Eichmann Silver Bullet Plugs to un-convolute the treble a little." Then, another few albums in (all PCM so far at various, higher-resolutions), I thought, "No, the treble is starting to sound sweet as silk. I just put about the cost of a dCS Vivaldi into my Audio Note reference DAC not to mention maybe another \$7K-\$10K into cables, bridge devices, and switchboxes to actually make the whole thing work. I'm starting to feel embarrassed and maybe a little out of touch with reality."

While it is true that reference setup I have, while



limited to 24/96, PCM and (on the plus side) capable of serving as a DAC for my CD transport at the push of a button is musically very engaging and accomplishes everything I set out to do when I went credit card crazy (which I do *not* generally recommend), I can't help feeling a little silly when the QB-9DSD sounds so damn good at a price of \$3250. Plus, I have to say that, while higher-resolution material may sound better than lower-resolution material, even imported CD's sound great. So, while there is a clear and apparent difference between resolutions (talking about PCM here, I will get to DSD in a bit), it's not like anything

sounded bad. Even across genres, if the download was solid, the music was great. The Ayre didn't do anything to improve poor downloads, which do exist. I mean a good DAC should show a bad download for what it is, garbage in/garbage out, like the 24/96 download of *The Köln Concert* that I got from HDtracks.com (that they got from ECM), which has an approximate 15.9kHz test tone running throughout it. Now that I have a copy of the basic version of iZotope's RX 3, I can both see and repair many anomalies in downloads, including the one in *The Köln Concert*, making it sound much better both through my reference DAC and through the QB-9DSD. I have to be a little careful here when I do comparisons to other products because I haven't owned a Debussy in a really long time, dCS no doubt having made many improvements, and although I only replaced my Berkeley DAC in the past few months, they're about to come out with a whole new reference model. Plus, I briefly owned the previous generation QB-9 but replaced it with an Audiophile 1 and a Rega DAC because I wanted a warmer sound and more input options for my home office system, then the QB-9DSD comes out and blows the previous generation away; the point being that I know I can trust my ears, and if it's as easy as buying a Mac mini or a 13" MacBook Pro either with an SSD, a large RAID drive, a good USB cable (I'm currently using the AudioQuest Diamond), the QB-9DSD, some software (I would recommend Pure Music based on fairly extensive listening experience), and a really good pair of single-ended or balanced analog interconnect cables depending on your system, it's kind of hard justifying putting more than \$3250 into your DAC for a digital music server unless either (a) you just have to have that last 1/10 of 1% of sound or (b) like me, you're looking for a specific (read Audio Note) kind of sound and you're crazy enough to pursue it, neither of which are, in reality, particularly good reasons (I say despite myself). Also, I would recommend getting a better than stock power cable. I'm using the Locus Design Keynote, designed and made by the late Lee Weiland, and which received a *PF Writer's Award* from me. It is very good at working with digital equipment, which is the sort of thing you're after.

So, I will list some of the downloads that I used as references in evaluating the QB-9DSD before this article is over; but it's getting to be time to talk about DSD. Since I got a better power cable going between my PS Audio Power Plant 10 and the Equi=Tech that serves my video subsystem, plus put my Theta Compli Blue on a set of four Spiral Groove Strange Attractors, SACD's sound much better in my system than they have in the past and I feel less biased against them; although, I often just play the CD layer of the SACD through my Audio Note CD 3.1x/II (transport) and Audio Note DAC 4.1x Balanced Signature to get that Audio Note sound. I do, however, not infrequently play the SACD in the Compli Blu, which has a direct feed (i.e., it doesn't go through HDMI into the HDTV first) into my integrated amplifier, and really enjoy, as an example, Kenny Burrell's *Midnight Blue* as an SACD, with much thanks to Acoustic Sounds. In fact, in some ways, I prefer that SACD to the recent 33 and 1/3 vinyl Blue Note reissue by Music Matters, although both are good in different ways. In any case, Cookie Marengo of Blue Coast Records agreed to give me about

\$200.00 worth of DSD material for evaluation purposes with her personal favorites highlighted and pointed to a Firefox add on ([downthemall.net](http://downthemall.net)) for coordinating downloads, as the files are quite large and need to be well-managed just to get to your machine. As Cookie wrote to me:

*We sponsor 3 free DSD downloads a month [from our catalog](#). Once you've signed up, there is a half price store after sign up. [...]*

*We have a sister site called Downloads NOW! <http://downloadsnow.net> where we distribute titles for indie labels like the San Francisco Symphony. If you're a fan of Mahler, we have quite a few available. [...]*

*Let us know if you have any issues with playback. Our customer service crew is always happy to help with getting you setup.*

While I was in the process of getting Firefox setup with the download manager and deciding whether it made sense to download everything to my 27" iMac then copy selections to my Mac mini or just download the selections to my Mac mini directly, I did an experiment where I played "Attaboy" from *The Goat Rodeo Sessions* by Yo-yo Ma et al at 24/88.2 from HDtracks via the Ayre QB-9DSD then via my Sonicweld Diverter HR and my Audio Note DAC 4.1x Balanced Signature. While the Audio Note felt more truthful to what was in the download and gave me more of a sweeping sound to then music, making it enjoyable and engaging in that oh-so-pricey Audio Note kind of way, the QB-9 was much more dynamic (perhaps to the point of slight exaggeration) and, well, just more fun, for less than a 10th the cost, which gives me great hope that someone in the industry is finally getting it right (Ayre) at a price that maybe not everyone but a much broader variety of audiophiles can enjoy.

The truth of the matter is that it's been a very long time since I began this article, and I honestly don't remember all the specific samples that I used to listen to music via the QB-9DSD. The titles that most come to mind are the 24/192 download of *Moment to Moment* by Cava Menzies and Nick Phillips, procured from HDtracks.com, and pretty much all of the files that I was able to install from Blue Coast Records. There is a certain glossiness to the sound of DSD files that I don't really like and don't really understand, but that didn't get in my way of enjoying the music and even when I returned to using the Sonicweld Diverter HR / Audio Note DAC 4.1x Balanced Signature as my reference (for PCM files only), I missed a certain element of fun to the sound that the QB-9DSD imparted to pretty much every recording that passed through it. I honestly wish that I hadn't gotten so busy at work, gotten ill, decided to move, had many real-world obstacles step in place of my initially listening to the QB-9DSD and my wrapping up this column; but one thing I can say for sure is that is that all if you want is to listen to really amazing-sounding music, pretty much no matter the genre nor format, and you're willing to invest \$3250 into the QB-9DSD, you will not feel disappointed. This is truly going into the audio hall of fame. Thanks to everyone for making this extended review possible. I can't think of more fun that I've had in a really long time reviewing a piece of equipment—no matter the price—and I can highly recommend the QB-9DSD to anyone thinking of spending anywhere north of a few hundred dollars to south of about \$10K to be able to play digital music files even if they have a MacBook Air and a decent headphone amplifier in a headphone-only system, or beyond.

Kindest regards,