

Ayre QB-9 DSD | The Ear

Ayre is one of those companies that quietly gets on with producing innovative, well thought out and in my experience great sounding hardware. I have tried amplifiers and CD players in the past and always mourned their loss when the review period came to an end, so when the opportunity arose to listen to the only digital to analogue converter in the line I was very keen indeed.

The QB-9^{DSD} is not brand new but late last year it gained the ability to convert DSD, only DSD64 the base sample rate, but this made it rather more of the moment than its strictly PCM processing predecessor. It is a surprisingly single minded converter inasmuch as it only has USB input, thus is dedicated to computer audio sources and the like. The benefits of avoiding switches in the signal path are well known and this presumably is why Ayre chose not to include legacy S/PDIF inputs such as Toslink and coax. Not including AES/EBU however might limit its high end appeal now that streaming bridges are being made with this particular output.



Ayre was an early adopter of asynchronous USB and clearly sees it as the future of digital transfer in audio systems, they have a point. At present USB is the most popular method for sending high resolution audio to a DAC because very few sources for such material have any other output, essentially we are talking about computers or audio

components with computers onboard. Asynchronous USB is where the timing of the incoming bitstream is controlled by the USB receiver and not the computer sending the signal. As ever with audio matters there are different ways to achieve asynchronous transfer and just having the technology in the box does not mean you get the best results, the job has to be done properly. In this case it means carefully designed power supplies for the receiver and good filtering to keep the noise that the computer sends along with the signal at bay. Ayre's experience in designing amplifiers gives them an instant advantage in this respect. This DAC, in keeping with most Ayre components, is fully balanced and has a zero feedback output stage, which should mean that in a system with fully balanced amplifiers it will sound better via its balanced outputs, but my preamp is single ended only so that's how it was auditioned.

The QB-9^{DSD} is an attractive and compact converter with no front panel controls, in fact there are almost no switches at all because you only have the one input and there is no on/off switch. It remains on as long as there is a power lead connected to its mains inlet (see below for the full story). As with the single input this gives it all the markings of a highly purist component, rather more so than is usual for an established high end company. The CAD 1543 DAC takes this approach one stage further by having a captive mains lead but that is an extreme example.

The display on the QB-9^{DSD} shows the sample rate of the incoming signal, or 64 if it's DSD, when it's active or a red dot when it's not. On the back panel there are the USB input, balanced and single ended outputs, Ayrelink bus connections and a row of dip switches. These offer listen/measure digital filter options, two power modes depending on how the DAC is used, it can turn on only when there is a signal if required, and a display on/off including dimming in an Ayre system. There is also a switch for class 1 or 2 audio over USB, class 1 offering maximum compatibility but is limited to 96kHz, class 2 is therefore the option to pick if you have dedicated audio software on the PC that can output sample rates above 96kHz.



Air for Ayre

When the Ayre arrived chez Kennedy I used it with a Macbook Air laptop running Audirvana Plus software, and this produced a pretty decent result albeit one that limited ultimate performance. The QB-9^{DSD} is an immensely transparent and relaxed converter and it while it makes it obvious that a general purpose laptop is not the be all and end all it also rewards upgrades at the beginning of the chain with significant improvements in sound quality. This much became obvious when I started to use it with a Melco N1A digital music store, an audio grade NAS with USB output as well as Ethernet.

But my initial impressions were gained with the Mac and they were pretty positive. Beethoven's Symphony No.7, specifically the Allegretto (Barenboim, *Beethoven For All* Symphony, 24/96, Decca), offered up masses of low level detail that revealed the nature of the recording venue's acoustic and the textures of the instruments, the bowed basses being particularly glorious. The sense of restrained power is particularly intoxicating with this piece and the Ayre delivered it with complete clarity. The piece always sounds powerful but now it did this while offering up the multiplicity of different instruments and all their subtle timbres. It was so good that I felt inclined to listen to the whole symphony.

With a DSD version of Dylan's 'Visions of Johanna' (*Blonde On Blonde*, CBS) the 'harp' jumps out of the soundstage and the bass line is easy to follow, as is the wiry guitar. It was also surprising how well this almost lo-fi track images. When the Melco arrived however, things moved into another gear, now the fine detail was coming from deeper in the mix and this produced expansive sonic vistas reaching back and out from the speakers in thrilling fashion. Recording allowing of course, not everything is recorded to give great scale but *La Folia* (Atrium Musicae De Madrid, Gregorio Paniagua, Harmonia Mundi) was. Originally an analogue recording but released on SACD some time ago this is a spectacular piece of work when played through a DAC of this calibre. The reverb is immaculately reproduced and the ancient instruments have a strong presence in the room thanks to the substantial and clear acoustic character captured by the recording. Nils Lofgren's 'Keith Don't Go' is a bit different (*Acoustic Live*, Demon), clearly a polished production it presents his crisp steel strings with all the lush tonal richness of the wooden acoustic guitar, again presence is first rate.



The Ayre is unusually relaxed and effortless, its character is so minimal that it could be too restrained for some tastes. Its sound comes closer to the aforementioned CAD 1543 than almost anything I have heard, and that is an impressive achievement given that the CAD costs more than twice as much. There must be something in the lack of switches, by comparison most DACs have an edge to them, this gives more attack to leading edges but is really a subtle form of distortion, a barrier between you and the music. The Ayre has so little in the way of discernible character that you get a lot more colour and subtlety from the music, you can hear what's going on in complex pieces more easily and appreciate nuances in the way that musicians sing and play, and for that matter the way that engineers have recorded them.

The pace, rhythm and timing enthusiast might feel that the Ayre does not sound fast but that's because it's devoid of the emphasis on leading edges that many 'fast' sounding components have. I suspect that with the right source you could get a pacey, taught sound out of this DAC but that would be a waste of its transparency, what it deserves is a source with minimal character as well, that way it will be able to tell you the most about the original sound.

When I first started to listen to the QB-9^{DSD} I was a little underwhelmed, that was largely because my laptop is not a good enough source for such a revealing converter. Since using it with the Melco my opinion has swung 180 degrees and I think this is one of the most transparent and realistic sounding DACs available. It makes instruments and voices sound more real than other very good converters and has as natural a sound as the best turntables. Timing is not in quite that league but that again I suspect is a source issue, at the price the Ayre is a revelation.