

Berkeley Audio Alpha DAC Series 2 (TAS)

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Few



products in my experience as a reviewer have offered as much value as the Berkeley Audio Alpha DAC. Although not inexpensive at \$4995, the original Alpha DAC (reviewed in Issue 189) was nonetheless competitive with the best DACs available, regardless of price. Moreover, the Alpha DAC was tailor-made for playing high-resolution files because of its ability to accept a wide range of sampling frequencies and word lengths (up to 192kHz/24-bit), its capacity to drive a power amplifier directly, the remote volume control, and its front-panel HDCD indicator. This LED illuminates when playing an HDCD-encoded disc (or Reference Recordings' HRx file), but only if the data are uncorrupted, providing a sure-fire way of assuring that your music server is "bit transparent." (If the HDCD LED illuminates, the DAC is receiving a datastream that is bit-for-bit identical to the source.) The release of Berkeley's Alpha USB interface, which converts a computer's USB output to AES/EBU (or coax S/PDIF), further increased the Alpha DAC's appeal (see my review of the Alpha USB in Issue 214).

The Alpha DAC was not only functional and capable; it was also fabulous-sounding on both CD and high-res material. In fact, I've had one in my rack since I reviewed the product way back in Issue 189. The Alpha DAC has been at the front end of some of the world's best preamplifiers, power amplifiers, and loudspeakers, and never have I felt that it was the system's weak link. Instead, I've always thought that the Alpha DAC allowed me to hear these reference-grade components at their finest.

Now Berkeley has released an upgraded version, called the Alpha DAC Series 2. Admirably, the price remains the same despite some of the new parts costing ten times more than the parts they replace. For those of you who choose a black front panel, the price has actually dropped from \$5095 to \$4995 (there is no longer a \$100 premium for the black cosmetics). Units that were shipped from Berkeley after June, 2011 can be upgraded to Series 2 for \$350 plus shipping. Units made before that date cannot be upgraded. The Series 2 looks and operates identically to the original; the difference is purely in parts and the circuit refinements Berkeley discovered in the three years since the original's launch. These include new clocking circuits and increased isolation between the digital and analog sections.

In playback, the Series 2 sounds very much like the original, with tremendous resolution of low-level detail, great transparency, freedom from timbral grain, a treble that is simultaneously smooth and resolving, and absolutely stunning dynamics. The Series 2, however, is significantly better in several key areas, most notably transparency, soundstaging, timbral liquidity, ease, refinement, and resolution.

The Series 2 exhibits a considerably more open and transparent presentation, with a greater sense of air surrounding images in the soundstage. The overall spatial perspective is slightly laid-back compared with the original DAC, perhaps the result of greater bloom around images and increased soundstage depth. Instrumental and vocal images sound less dry and closed-in, and their decays seem to hang in space longer. The impression of precisely defined instruments existing in three-dimensional space is significantly improved in the Series 2.

In addition, timbres through the Series 2 are smoother, more liquid, and refined. By contrast, the original DAC sounds a bit hard. Though the Series 2, massed strings are noticeably richer and more velvety in texture, with a more organic quality. The flugelhorn on a jazz quintet album I engineered has a purity and ease that are extremely lifelike. This increased bloom and timbral liquidity combines to produce a greater sense of relaxation and involvement.

The treble is equally improved, with more finely filigreed resolution and greater refinement to go along with smoother textures. The top end is more “delicate,” not in the sense of greater fragility or less energy, but rather in its greatly increased finesse. Treble textures are finer and more intricate, which gives the entire presentation a more sophisticated and nuanced character.

The Series 2 presents more information, but that information is, as noted, presented with increased ease. That is, the additional resolution doesn't tilt the overall sound toward the analytical, but rather toward the subtle and refined. This greater resolution conveys a heightened impression of the mechanism by which an instrument creates sound, fostering a greater sense of realism. For example, on drummer Joe Morello's *Morello Standard Time*, a rim shot that sounded like a transient event on the original DAC is more clearly defined by the Series 2 as a drum stick impacting the snare drum's rim. Listen also to how you can hear the rim shot's decay separate from the rest of the mix—and follow it way down in level. Note that I use this example to illustrate the Series 2's superior resolving power, not that I listen to such things when enjoying music. But it's these kinds of sonic characteristics that you don't notice overtly which contribute to realism and listener involvement.

The Series 2's improved resolution combines synergistically with its significantly better transparency, allowing me to hear fine details toward the back of the mix. The whole presentation is lighter, airier, and more open, with a soundstage infused with a sense of transparent space.

Bass weight and bottom-end dynamics are very similar in these two DACs, but the nod goes to the Series 2 for its increased density of tone color in the bottom end. Acoustic bass is reproduced with slightly greater warmth and richness, coupled with a bit more definition and rhythmic agility. The original DAC had a slightly “looser” bottom end, with perhaps more weight but less definition.

The original Alpha DAC was a groundbreaking product, both in absolute performance and in its spectacular value. The Alpha DAC Series 2 is considerably better, and in musically significant ways. Berkeley Audio Design could have called the Series 2 a “Signature” edition, or even created a new model designation and commanded a higher price. That they improved the product so much yet kept the price the same says a lot about the company.

The Alpha DAC Series 2 would have received my highest recommendation had it cost \$15,000. Yes, it sounds that good. That it sells for \$4995 qualifies as a minor miracle.

SPECS & PRICING

Input sampling rates: 32kHz–192kHz

Input word length: Up to 24-bit

Digital inputs: AES/EBU on XLR jack, SPDIF on BNC, optical on TosLink, BADA-encrypted RJ-45

Analog outputs: Balanced on XLR jacks, unbalanced on RCA jacks

Digital filtering: Multiple options

Analog output level: Variable in 0.1dB steps; Channel balance adjustment in 0.05dB steps

Dimensions: 16.5” x 1.75” x 10.4” (19” rack-mount OPTION)

Warranty: Three years parts and labor

Weight: 9 lbs.

Price: \$4995

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