

Rega DAC £500

Don't be fooled by the unimaginative name; here's one of the most charismatic performers at or near its price...



DETAILS

- ORIGIN: UK
- TYPE: DAC
- WEIGHT: 4kg
- DIMENSIONS: (WxHxD) 215x80x270mm
- FEATURES:
 - twin Wolfson WM8742 DACs
 - 5 switchable digital filters
 - 1 pair RCA line outputs
 - 2x coaxial digital input
 - 2x optical digital input
 - USB digital input
- DISTRIBUTOR: Rega Research Ltd.
- TELEPHONE: 01702 333071
- WEBSITE: rega.co.uk

Unexpectedly well made, considering its modest retail price, the Rega felt like a big metal brick compared to some other DACs here. Finish was good, too, and we liked the front panel design which displayed the input, sampling frequency and user-selectable digital filter settings (five different ones are offered; we used Filter Four for most of the listening).

Inside it's an eye-opener, with designer Terry Bateman's traditional circuitboard inscriptions raising a smile ("best used with EL84 valves"; is that Terry or the Rega DAC?). Twin paralleled up Wolfson WM8742 DAC chips are used, plus a sprinkling of audiophile components with names like Nichicon. A toroidal transformer is fitted, with separate power feeds to the Wolfson digital receiver and PLL circuitry.

Sound quality

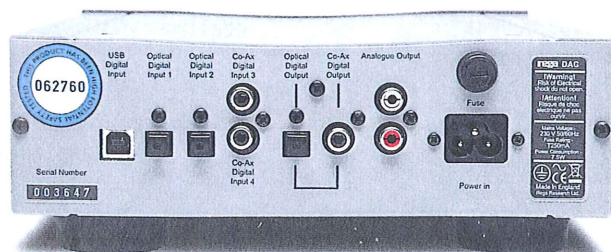
Just the first few opening bars of Sade had the panelists raising their eyebrows, Roger Moore-style. The Rega was, in no uncertain terms, the best DAC here. It sounded exuberantly musical in a way that none of the others managed – only the Arcam gave a whiff of what the Rega was able to do. The contrast between the Rega DAC and the Burson, for example, was striking; night and day wouldn't begin to

describe the rather large musical gulf between the two!

"The best DAC, it's got what (the Arcam) has but is cleaner and more open", said one panelist. "Everything sounds rich, vibrant, punchy", said another. "Presents the music as itself, doesn't embellish", said the third. It produced a string of compliments, no matter what music we played; "Coldplay was excellent", "Steely Dan was superb", "808 State was the best I've heard".

Tonally, the Rega was clean and open, yet had warmth and body to it; there was no obvious coloration, yet it didn't 'thin' the sound like some others. "The best balanced of all", one panelist described it, with everything being instinctively right. Bass was big, but more importantly it was fluid and expressive in a way none of the others were. Treble was as refined and finessed as the best of the rest, while the midband communicated instrumental timbre extremely well on the Julian Lloyd Weber track.

In absolute hi-fi terms, one listener believed the first DAC (Arcam) to be fractionally better on stage depth, but otherwise the Rega was very accomplished at imparting the recorded acoustic, which one person described as "extremely well organised". Treble wasn't quite



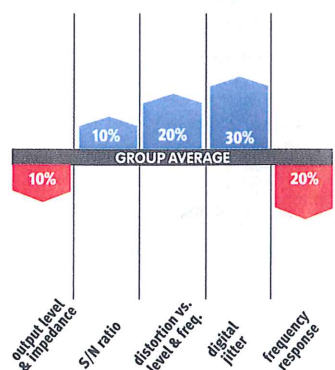
as extended as the CEntrance, losing some atmosphere with classical, but still the Rega conquered all comers with pop and rock.

Rhythmically it was riotously good fun, capturing the music's subtle dynamic accenting superbly. With basslines and rhythm guitar work it was almost as if the Rega had swallowed a happy pill, so merry did it make the music. Only via USB, did it fall back a fraction; still remaining highly enjoyable, but not quite the superstar we'd been dazzled by via its coaxial input.

ON TEST

Of Rega's five filter settings the apodising filters 4/5 are the most interesting. These trade unnatural pre-ringing for more post-event ringing (a more agreeable phenomenon), while rolling the response from -2.4dB/30kHz to -4.5dB/30kHz (96kHz digital input, Filter 1 versus 5). The flattest response at 96kHz+ is achieved with Filter 3 but this 'brickwall' filter is the most traditional of the bunch. Otherwise Rega's DAC offers a minimum 0.0007% distortion through the midrange, increasing to a mere 0.0016% at 20kHz/-20dBfs. The S/N ratio is spot-on spec at 105.9dB (98dB via USB) but jitter is slightly higher than expected (though not high) at 250psec (24-bit/48kHz), mainly through PSU-related sidebands, and 505psec (24-bit/96kHz) from a specific 15Hz clock (inter)modulation. All sample rates from 32-192kHz are handled correctly via Rega's S/PDIF inputs although USB is limited to 48kHz. PM

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Gorgeously musical and exuberant sound is a hoot to listen to! Fine build, facilities and input selection, too
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** USB input only works up to 48kHz
- FEATURES** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Right now, the very best DAC we've heard at or near the price

OVERALL



Blind-listening verdicts

David Price puts this month's listening into context. How do the contenders fare in the great scheme of things?

Before I organised this test, there was a voice in the back of my head warning me – just *how* different could a bunch of cheap DACs sound?

I had visions of myself and the listening panel scratching our heads as we desperately tried to pick up on infinitesimally small differences. Then I'd have to labour at the keyboard for hours, employing the very loosest journalistic licence to make it an easily readable review...

Erm, I needn't have worried. Differences were very marked across the group, even between designs costing within £50 of one another. And neither is this a group where everyone does well; some were poor.

The Burson was the biggest disappointment; it was clean and had decent texture, but was about as exciting to listen to as a late night debate in the House of Lords. Each of the panel members agreed that it had few redeeming features, sadly.

The Jolida came next; it wasn't as charming as the JD1501 amp I reviewed a couple of months back (*HFC* 355), although it had some merit. We liked its expansive soundstage, although tonally it was a bit murky; I wanted to drop some decent tubes inside it, which could well have opened the sound up, but that wouldn't have been fair. We were listening to stock products on this occasion, after all!

Fidelity Audio's DAC-150 was really loved by one panelist in particular, and the others certainly respected it. It's a fine sounding, subtle, well-specified performer; I feel this has hidden depths and hope to spend more time with it in future.








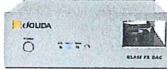


The CEntrance was excellent – open, expansive and detailed, it made most others sound veiled and slow. It's the sort of thing you could use in high-end systems and not find wanting.

The Arcam was amazing; aside from a very slight lack of finesse it was an absolute star – oodles of passion, power and poise, plus gorgeous looks, build and an unexpectedly capable USB input. All for £300 – wow!



The biggest surprise of all was the Rega DAC. From the first notes of the first bar of practically every piece of music we played, it was clear it was in another league. It was as if the music had dropped a happy pill and suddenly everything was fun-packed, shiny and new. It has a musical exuberance which has to be heard to be believed; its low £500 price is even more remarkable.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Make/model	 Arcam rDAC 	 Burson Audio DA-160	 CEntrance DACmini 	 Fidelity Audio DAC-150 	 Jolida FX Tube DAC	 Rega DAC 
Price	£300	£750	£650	£545	£445	£500
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Conclusion	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Barnstorming little box with a feisty, musical sound, super build, and strong USB	Has a lifeless sound that fails to inspire, considering the care taken in its design	Has a powerful, open sound and is a genuinely capable performer. Styling is not to every taste	Great little do-it-all DAC for a budget price, although its subtle musicality won't suit all	A wide soundstage, and interesting styling; it's not as impressive as some of its peers, though	Musically exuberant with fine build and input selection. It's the best at the price

Key features

Dig inputs: elec/opt	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1	2/2
Digital input USB	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Balanced output	No	No	No	No	No	No
Remote control	No	No	No	No	No	No
Headphone output	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No

TRY WITH THESE

CD TRANSPORT: Cyrus CD Transport £599

If you're not happy to use your existing silver disc spinner, possibly due to its impending death due to old age, then this is a good investment to partner any of these DACs. The Cyrus has a bespoke mechanism, with long-term parts backup, is very well made and offers a crisp, detailed sound.



DIGITAL STREAMER: Logitech Squeezebox Touch £199

A game changing product. Before the 'Touch, network music players were fiddly things with rubbish displays, as easy to use as a nineteen eighties Psion organiser. The new Squeezebox is a breeze to work, its only problem being a very so-so sound. Stick one of these DACs on the end of it though, and it's suddenly a fine listen.



COMPUTER: Apple Mac Mini £529

There are umpteen ways to get computer audio up and running; a simple one is to buy one of these, and run a USB lead or a mini-digital optical lead from it to any of these DACs. You can then play your music via iTunes and/or any one of many other software player applications, some of which claim far superior sonics. Computer audio this way is dead simple; no longer just a geek's fantasy playground!

