

TEST & REVIEW

Le DAC 3

D/A CONVERTER



Frank Borowski
LowBeats

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Métronomie Le DAC 3 Review – Streaming and Digital-to-Analogue Conversion : "de la haute volée"

For D/A signal conversion of audio at the highest sonic level, it does take somewhat more than merely the best DAC chip currently available, with the highest possible resolution and sampling rate. Not only on the digital but also on the analogue signal side, and not least in the power supply, the greatest care is called for and a great deal of experience is needed in order to be able to offer a DAC with the finest audiophile qualities. That is exactly what Métronome, from France, has achieved with Le DAC 3. And if needed, it can also serve as a streamer into the bargain.

Métronomie Le DAC 3: right at the top

"Haute Volée", from the French "de la haute volée" and also used in German as "Hautevolee", translates literally as something like high-flying or high-flown, and is often used in connection with the upper reaches of society. In hi-fi, the Métronome Le DAC 3 could certainly be counted among them.

Le DAC 3 is a pure, unadulterated D/A converter with no preamplifier function, something rather rare these days. The vast majority of DAC manufacturers are unwilling to forgo the possibility of making their converter usable as a source selector and preamplifier with volume control as well. That broadens the range of applications and hence the potential customer base. The people behind Métronome, however, prefer to leave the preamplifier part to components specialised in it, well aware that an analogue preamplifier brings challenges entirely of its own. Le DAC 3 is connected as a fixed-level source component to a free analogue input on the pre- or integrated amplifier, either by RCA or XLR.

Should the need arise, the interested buyer can also order Le DAC 3 with an integrated streaming module. A small internal board, which adds a further 2,200 euros to the bill. We shall come back to that later.

On taking delivery of the package, the first surprise is its sheer weight. Could an amplifier have been sent by mistake instead of a DAC? No: at 12 kg unpackaged, Le DAC 3 really does weigh as much as, or even more than, many a streaming integrated amplifier. A considerable part of that is accounted for, as expected, by the casework, even though it is not made of finger-thick aluminium plate, as is so often the case nowadays. The lid alone, in folded and powder-coated sheet steel, has a good deal of mass, as I discovered on opening the unit.

The three feet ensure a wobble-free stance and stand out for an interesting piece of design. The flat feet, fixed to the casework, have a recess in the middle of the contact surface fitted



with a magnetic mounting plate. Cones made of the engineering plastic POM (polyoxymethylene, also known under the trade name Delrin) are supplied and can be docked onto it. Protective discs to spare delicate surfaces are unfortunately not included. As I did not want to leave point marks in the wooden top of my low cabinet, discs from my own stock had to step in.

Of course, one could simply leave the cones off and stand the unit on the feet as they are, flat. These are extremely

slippery, however. I did not test the sonic consequences of using the cones or not separately, but I would wager that resting on the cones it sounds a touch better still.

And naturally a look at the electronics was in order ...

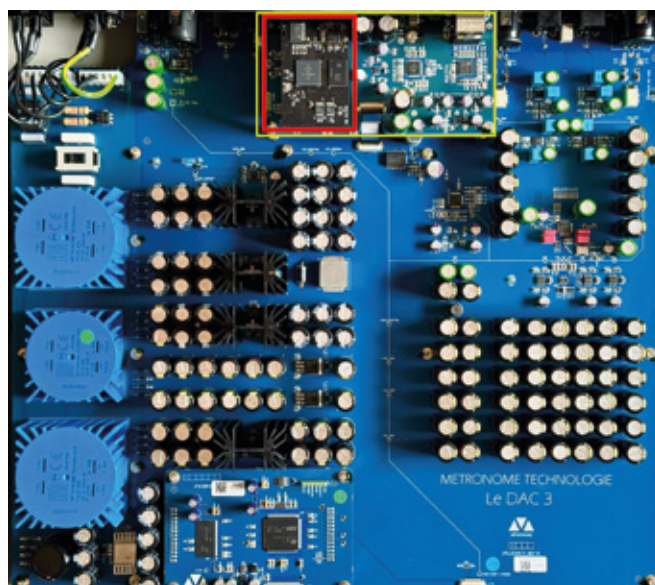
Plenty of storage capacity

What is meant here is not data storage, nor battery capacity, but the storage of electrical energy in the form of capacitors. Le DAC 3 is packed with a great many relatively small buffer capacitors — and that in every single stage, from the power supply through the digital section and on into the analogue part. At a rough count I was able to make out around 120 capacitors; what I counted was above all the clearly visible, cylindrical electrolytics. Small SMD capacitors on the board are not fully included in that tally.

When I put this to him, Métronome's chief engineer Cyril Monestier explains:

"The capacitors are carefully placed at strategic points throughout the circuit, and the choice of their chemistry was a deliberate one as well. None of this was decided on paper alone: with us, the final selection of components is always validated by listening tests, and not solely on the basis of technical specifications."

And he goes on: "The best possible noise suppression is one of the essential goals. Métronome has always refused to use switch-mode power supplies. That means we must have a continuously sufficient energy reserve available at all times. Combined with



our approach of powering the various sections of our units independently of one another, this leads to a multiplication of the energy reserves throughout the entire circuit."

A total of three encapsulated toroidal transformers supply the various stages with power. The armada of capacitors forms a fast, low-noise buffer capable of meeting any demand for energy instantaneously.

The conversion circuit itself is — in terms of component count, and compared with many other DACs — remarkably uncluttered. Rather than fitting separate DAC chips for each channel and, where applicable, multiple clocks, as is so often seen elsewhere, Le DAC 3 makes do with a single ES9026PRO, which here supports up to 768 kHz / 32-bit PCM and DSD 1024.

The manufacturer makes a particular point of Le DAC 3's DSD capabilities. I myself rarely listen to DSD, having only a small collection of such files, but with support for native DSD up to 1,024 times the base sampling rate of 44.1 kHz (equivalent to 45.1584 MHz), the French DAC should indeed be a very hot candidate for the DSD faithful.

The quality of the circuit as a whole matters far more than the DAC chip — that appears to be the credo here. Which is something I would most definitely endorse.

Operation? Yes, a little.



There really is not a great deal on Le DAC 3 for button-pushers and screen-prodders to play with. With no preamplifier function, volume control is absent from the outset, and the number of switchable sources is limited to the digital inputs: AES/EBU, S/PDIF (TOSLINK and coaxial), USB audio, plus Ethernet and USB Data if a streaming module has been fitted. One unusual feature is the pair of I²S inputs on HDMI.

I²S is a serial interface originally intended for transmitting audio data between microcontrollers, digital-to-analogue converters (DACs) and other digital components. The name stands for Inter-Integrated Circuit Sound, and it is sometimes simplified to "IIS". More and more manufacturers of digital hi-fi components are using I²S to connect units externally by means of an HDMI cable. I²S is regarded as highly flexible and, thanks to its simplicity and the absence of elaborate protocol conversions, as particularly neutral in sonic terms.

There is a catch, however: I²S for connections between units over HDMI is not standardised. Each manufacturer is free to choose its own pin assignment and voltage levels, which makes

it difficult to connect components from different makers via I²S. As a helpful approach, Eversolo, for example, offers eight switchable I²S pin assignments via a menu in its streamers, which ought to cover most cases. Sadly not in combination with Le DAC 3, as I had to discover. One of the available I²S options on the Eversolo T8 does match the pin assignment in Le DAC 3, apart from a reversed polarity that should have no bearing on the sound — and yet over I²S I heard nothing but heavily distorted or noise-ridden sound. By the time of publication, and despite intensive assistance from the manufacturer, I had been unable to establish the cause. I was therefore only able to try external streamers with Le DAC 3 over S/PDIF or AES. A pity, since Métronome singles out the two I²S ports as a special feature of Le DAC 3.

Perhaps it is high time a few influential manufacturers sat down together and developed an I²S standard suited to hi-fi purposes for interconnection over HDMI, so that incompatibilities of this kind are brought to an end.

Which brings us back to operation. There are two touch panels on the front display of Le DAC 3. They switch the input — and that is that. Nor is there much to control on Le DAC 3 by way of the supplied remote handset, which can also serve as a wand for Métronome's CD players and amplifiers. Strictly speaking, nothing at all beyond on/standby and source switching.



Even with the optional streaming module fitted, the buttons on the remote handset work only up to a point. Le DAC 3 with the streaming module is Roon Ready, but when Roon is in use the transport buttons have no function. You cannot, therefore, pause playback or skip a track with them. I find that somewhat regrettable. On every other Roon Ready unit I have here, music control by remote handset does work.

Interestingly, Métronome also does without the by now almost obligatory facility for switching between different digital filter settings, which many DAC chips — including the ESS fitted here — make available. The company has settled on the one filter it considers to sound best. Given that these filter variants often bring about no more than marginal changes in sound, and that constant switching merely distracts from the enjoyment of the music, I find this decision positively worth emulating.

All things considered, then, Le DAC 3 is something of a black box, one that calls for little interaction with the user. For that very reason, though, I would have welcomed the presence of trigger ports, so that the DAC could be woken by an externally connected streamer, for instance. Anyone who does not change input often could then leave the remote handset in the drawer.

Finally, the display fitted to Le DAC 3 likewise reflects the manufacturer's distinctly purist approach to this unit. The monochrome, bluish readout puts me in mind of the Trinnov Amethyst. In DAC mode it shows chiefly the incoming sampling frequency, whereas in streaming mode it also displays track information.



Listening test: The timekeeper

The founders did not have the name Métronome generated by an AI, as is common practice among many start-ups today. There was a thought behind it. In music, almost everything depends on precise time, and for more than a thousand years the metronome that gives the company its name (its origins are dated to around 800–900) has served countless musicians as a tempo reference. Le DAC 3 lives up to that claim admirably, in that from the very first notes it stands out for a high degree of timing and rhythmic feel.

texte brut, garder l'adresse des liens

In the test system — Le DAC 3 with streaming module, the Moon 791 preamplifier (by way of its purely analogue preamp path), the Moon 761 power amplifier and the Sabrina V loudspeakers — the French DAC immediately created a genuine sense of ease. Although I have experienced this effect several times before with particularly accomplished digital components, I still find it hard to put what I hear into words. It is not a matter of more or less distortion, of wealth of detail, or indeed of dynamics, but rather of the flow of the music.

Needless to say, the tempo or time signature of the music being played is no different through Le DAC 3 than through any other DAC you care to name. And yet this thoroughly accomplished converter somehow manages to set my foot tapping with more verve, to have my head nodding along to the beat more often, and to produce more goosebump moments. As though a top-flight conductor had licked the orchestra into shape. At any rate, working my way through my musical treasures with Le DAC 3 gave me enormous pleasure.

Among them were a few DSD files, which Le DAC 3 likewise rendered with magnificent ease and coherence. That said, I found the differences from tracks that were also available in PCM to be exceedingly slight.

There remained the question, though, of whether the far from trivial surcharge for the streaming module is worth it, or whether one would not be better served by an external

streaming bridge. To put it plainly: for 2,200 euros you can also have a bridge as accomplished and magnificently equipped as the Eversolo T8 (1,380 euros), or even its big brother the T10 (2,180 euros). These offer not only vastly greater material outlay than Métronome's small piggyback board, but also state-of-the-art touchscreens and a staggering range of functions.

With the T8 in place of the internal streaming module, the sonic standard was already roughly on a par. The outcome over I²S might perhaps have turned out a shade better still for the T8, but that experiment was unfortunately denied me. Shortly before publication the long-awaited Eversolo T10 finally arrived. And this enormously elaborate streamer did indeed pull off the feat, via coaxial into Le DAC 3, of drawing a shade more clarity from the music. Not worlds apart, but certainly worth having.



Métronome's streaming module naturally offers the not inconsiderable advantage that, as an integrated solution, it means fewer boxes and less cabling. It is therefore the right choice for anyone wanting to keep their setup uncluttered. Those after maximum streaming convenience, or who perhaps already own a good streaming bridge, can do without the module.

Conclusion: Sit back and enjoy

This unadorned, high-end DAC from France, with its streaming option, is a knockout in sonic terms. Anyone who likes things pure and has no wish to be distracted from the music by functional gimmickry has come to exactly the right address with Le DAC 3.

The optional streaming module enhances Le DAC 3 in functional terms and blends in superbly from a sonic point of view, but is comparatively costly for what it offers.

What stays with me above all is that Le DAC 3 is one of those top-flight converters that won me over with their musical talent from the very first second. Here there really is nothing better than simply sitting back, relaxing and enjoying.

Technical specifications

• Concept	DAC with optional streaming
• Resolution	PCM up to 768 kHz / 32-bit, DSD 1024
• Digital inputs	2 x I ² S, S/PDIF coaxial and TOSLINK, AES/EBU; LAN and USB Data with streaming option
• Analogue inputs	None
• Analogue outputs	Stereo RCA and XLR
• App / remote control	IR remote
• Notable features	I ² S inputs, magnetic cone feet, optional streaming module
• Finishes	Black, silver
• Dimensions (W x D x H)	450 x 420 x 120 mm
• Weight	12 kg