

player is the music. Here, in addition to pace and drama, this German unit demonstrates a rare ability to bring out details and inner lines without letting them trip over each other. Instead, they meld and interact exactly as the composer and musicians intended. The effect, AT says, quoting a highly discriminating audiophile friend, is "so satisfying I could use a cigarette." AT, 212

### CH Precision D1

**\$37,750**

When paired with the companion CH Precision C1 DAC/Pre, the D1 becomes a formidable digital front end. The two communicate via the company's proprietary CH Link, and once you hear its open, natural sound, you will never go back to SPDIF. Furthermore, the CH Link can carry raw DSD straight from an SACD to the C1. The combination of D1, C1, and CH Link results in the best SACD sound AT has yet heard. As a stand-alone digital front end, the D1 is excellent but more expensive than viable alternatives. Nor can one leverage the D1's raw DSD capability if not mating it to the C1. The bottom line is: Buy the D1 with the C1. AT, 239



### dCS Vivaldi

**\$114,996 (Transport, \$41,999; Upsampler, \$21,999; Master Clock, \$14,999; DAC, \$36,999)**

Comprising four chassis, the Vivaldi system is nothing short of the state of the art in CD, SACD, and computer-

audio playback. The system is a no-compromise rethinking of the company's vaunted Scarlatti, updated with newer technologies, improved parts, and the latest software. The four chassis are the CD/SACD transport, DAC, clock, and upsampler. Note that you can buy these components individually, and that the upsampler and clock incrementally increase the performance. The Vivaldi's sound is like no other, with a density of information, an incredible spatial presentation that sounds nothing like conventional digital, phenomenal bass, richness of tone color, and off-the-chart dynamics. RH, 233

### Digital-to-Analog Converters

**Under \$1000**

#### Meridian Direct DAC

**\$349**

Meridian's Direct could best be described as an Explorer with a larger portfolio. Compact yet designed for the home rather than the street, its mission is digital media—from computer audio via USB to virtually any device with an optical or SPDIF input. However, unlike Explorer, Direct uses a pair of unbalanced RCA output jacks permitting audiophiles to exploit the potential of interconnect options. With included Meridian resolution enhancements such as upsampling and apodising, it's a sonic knockout in the bargain, recapturing much of the realism and dimensionality so often missing from digital images. A cost-effective solution for inoculating a system against digital obsolescence. NG, 240

#### Micromega MyDAC

**\$399**

Micromega's MyDAC is entry-level in price only. The unit looks very much like an Apple AirPort Extreme, but with a front-panel wheel to select between TosLink, coaxial, and asynchronous USB inputs. The Micromega gives you some sonic attributes

usually found in much more expensive DACs—qualities like air around instruments, a sense of three-dimensional space, and a laid-back ease. Timbres are remarkably smooth and free from grain. The bass is solid and tight, although the very lowest bass lacks ultimate authority. RH, 228

#### Essence HDACC DAC

**\$499**

Many audiophiles want to have a 2.1 audio system connected to a video display. Quite a few of these systems use or plan to use an AV pre/pro to convert HDMI sources to two-channel audio. The Essence HDACC offers a better, less expensive, and higher-performance way to accomplish this (as well as supply a digital input and output hub). Combine the HDACC with a high-quality integrated amplifier and a pair of decent loudspeakers (and subwoofer) and you have most of what you will need to assemble a high-performance 2.1-channel audio system that can handle anything you can throw at it. SS, 259

#### Arcam airDAC

**\$699**

Tired of being limited to high-res audio only in your listening room? The Arcam airDAC is the perfect solution for those who have second systems in another room, but have no way of connecting it to the main system or home network. Even if a wired Ethernet connection is available, the Arcam airDAC will help stream high-res music to your system. A sleek app for smartphones and the iPad allow control of music. RCA output is great for instant high-res to a system, or optical out allows for connection with a component DAC. Airplay and Ethernet UPnP enabled, the airDAC allows you to harness modern connectivity and bring your system into the twenty-first century. SHo, 245

#### Channel Islands Audio

##### Transient II

**\$699**

Like the other audio components from CIA, the Transient Mark II's exterior is simple and lacks the cosmetic frills that increase a component's cost without adding to its sonic performance. If you are contemplating spending \$700 or more for a USB to S/PDIF converter or USB DAC, you should definitely consider the Channel Islands Audio Transient II. For a reasonable price it lets you keep up with the current state of USB 2.0-compliant audio, and does it beautifully. SS, 228

##### NuForce DAC-80

**\$795**

One thousand to twelve hundred dollars seems to be a price that many manufacturers are aiming at with their latest high-performance USB-enabled DACs. NuForce's entry at this hotly contested price point delivers excellent sound combined with a useful feature set, making it one of the products that should be on anyone's short list who is in the market for an under-\$1200 USB DAC/pre. SS, 228

##### Rotel RDD-1580

**\$799**

If you're in need of a high-quality DAC capable of PCM audio up to 192kHz/24-bit at an affordable price (and who isn't), Rotel has designed a DAC capable of producing audiophile-quality sound at box-store prices. With six digital inputs, including USB, coax, and optical, plus the ability to stream Bluetooth audio from your favorite portable devices, the Rotel RDD-1580 is a DAC that will blow you away without blowing the budget. SHo, 243

**\$1000-\$3000**

##### Musical Surroundings Mydac II

**\$1200**

The Musical Surroundings Mydac II offers a unique