

Accoustic Arts Drive I Mk 2/ DAC I Mk 4

by Alan Sircom

Accoustic Arts is a poorly spelled but very well made audio range from Germany. In addition to the Drive I Mk 2 CD transport and DAC I Mk 4 converter, the brand has an integrated amp, a pre-amp and three power amps, a CD and universal player and – most recently – a reference class valve DAC. There are speakers and a range of accessories, too. The products have a consistent theme: a very clean sound and build quality second to none. And yet, the products are little-known, even among high-end enthusiasts – I suspect there might be some anti-Euro xenophobia at play. If these two products had a big British or American name on the front panel, they'd be on every audiophile's Most Wanted list. Or maybe it's just a very contended market. Whatever the reason, this particular transport and DAC combo deserve more recognition, because they work particularly well. Both in combination or taken on their own.

One of the biggest bonuses of the transport mechanism in the \$2,895 Drive I Mk 2 CD transport is that it is perhaps the quietest we've ever (not) heard. Once you close that thick shiny cover on the top of the player, having put the mag-puck over the spindle of the disc, you won't hear a thing, even if you stick your ear to the side of the transport. You can barely even feel the vibration. Of course, the top-loading mech – a Philips CDM Pro 2 LF; good, hardcore stock built on a mechanically decoupled cast metal chassis – does mean the player makes crucial demands on placement. You must position this on the top shelf of the rack, because not only is the transport set back from the front panel, but it's also got an inch-high knob on the lid of the transport (and it's not powered).

Inside the thick chassis is the sort of solid engineering you would expect to find inside an amplifier (or possibly a Naim CD player), with a heavily ▶



► shielded 75VA toroidal transformer and 45,000µF of smoothing capacitance. The player has no less than four separate power supply stages, feeding drive, DSP, display control and display heating stages. A brace of transformer-coupled coaxial phono, BNC and balanced AES/EBU XLR connections form the sockets on the back panel of this heavy aluminium chassis.

There is a touch of bling about both transport and DAC. The transport has a blue glowing logo on the sliding draw – this can be defeated, but is bright enough to light up a small room. Then there's the overall look, with brushed aluminium cases with shiny chrome knobs. This stays just the right side of garish... but only just. In contrast, the old school Philips display is understated, but not the most informative around.

The DAC is styled similarly to the transport. It has a pair of big shiny knobs (gratuitous on a DAC, surely) and three indicator LEDs in between. It's a multi-bit affair, but uniquely works to 66-bit precision and 1.536GHz sampling. This comes from using a pair of multi-channel DAC chips parallel-connected for fully balanced operation. That said, we preferred the sound of the Drive to DAC through the single-ended BNC connection with analogue output in balanced. With four XLR inputs, two phonos and a BNC connector, plus both XLR and phono output, you have room to experiment. There is also an unbalanced version, that shaves £200 off the base £3,100 price. The DAC 1 Mk 4 also sports a high-grade filter stage, with 60,000µF of Panasonic filtration and a Class A output that's

claimed to be nabbed from the pro studio world. Once again, a toroidal transformer – a 100VA model – provides the motive power.

Normally when checking out combinations of CD transport and DAC (or pre-amp and power amp for that matter), one side is better than the other. It's rare to find a matched pair, but the Accoustic Arts duo are just that. Yes, the

Moving over to the DAC, it's a minor revelation. Music here seems fundamentally 'right' through the partnership. It's difficult to pin down, because – like the very best products – it seems to do little more than the merely good kit, but that last degree of 'rightness' to the sound is what separates the Wadias and Zandens from the rest.

In particular, there's an absence of 'ringing' to the sound that only manifests itself when you go back to regular



transport is also a perfect partner for the company's Reference converter and if you upgraded the transport, you'd still be able to squeeze out better performance from the DAC 1 Mk 4, but the two go together perfectly. So well, in fact, it's a shame to break them up.

The drive is a timing hound. It adds a degree of precision to the sound of the digital output that is exceptionally hard to find elsewhere; not just in tempo like an old Linn turntable, but spatial and temporal precision. Sounds have a tangible 'space' in the soundstage and hang together beautifully, eliminating some of the artifice of the replay chain in the process.

CD playing. Suddenly, after hearing it through the Accoustic duo, CD sounds shiny and as if it's played through a ring modulator (the thing that gave the daleks their voice, albeit not to anything like that extent). This pairing strips back the brightness of digital without sounding dull in the process. There are a few players that do this, but often at the expense of some bottom end energy. This one manages to keep the integrity of the sound intact right across the frequency range, delivering a potent mix.

Of course, this description makes ►

▶ the AA duo sound a bit sterile. Not a bit of it. These two play with fire and energy when the disc demands it, grace and subtlety when it needs those elements and a lot of balls when spanking through Led Zep. Truth is, we put a range of discs down the Accustic chain – everything from old 'leecy noodling from early Kraftwerk to the most mellow slice of Wes Montgomery guitar its possible to hear without falling into a coma and everything in between. Nothing foxed this pair, every piece of music fell into place beautifully, and kept coming back for more.

Zanden. But it gets close to all these things.

Slightly garish looks aside, there's not much to find fault in the Accustic duo. It does what all good players try to do... get out of the way of the music. Which makes it perform remarkably well in a wide variety of systems and with all kinds of music. You could easily plonk the Accustic Arts Drive and DAC 1 Mk IV turn in at the head of a soft, comfortable valve system or a tight, upbeat, small-speaker, solid-state system and the result would be the same... you get to bypass any



As suggested in the review of the Briston CD player in the last issue, most high-end CD players seem to fall into either the accurate-but-dull or the entertaining-but-wrong camps. This is one of the very few exceptions. Accuracy and entertainment can be bed-fellows, but not very often it seems. The Accustic duo manages to combine the precision and exactness of the most accurate players with the sheer sense of musical fun of some of the more beat oriented designs. No, it will not out-resolve a Resolution Audio or out-pace a Naim, and neither will it provide that seemingly endless musicality of a Wadia or

encroachment on the sound by the digital stages. In fact, arguably the only real downside to the duo is their integrity. It's not the sort of performance that lends itself to two-minute snap decisions. Instead, it's the slow build, as it dawns on you that this combo is playing the long game and those more immediate-sounding players begin to sound peaky and wrong.

Of the two, the DAC is always going to appear the more exciting product, because of that super-high sample rate and word length. It shouldn't; the two both offer improvements over the norm and in combination, they are an unstoppable force, requiring a large cash injection to better the sound.

It'll take a few days to burn into your psyche, but the Accustic Arts Drive 1 Mk 2 and DAC 1 Mk IV turn in a memorable performance. ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drive 1 Mk 2

Digital outputs: 1 x AES/EBU XLR (balanced - 110 Ω)
1 x S/P-DIF; RCA (unbalanced - 75 Ω)
1 x S/P-DIF; BNC (unbalanced - 75 Ω)

Dimensions (WxDxH): 482 x 100 x 375 mm

Weight: 15 kg

Price: £2895

DAC 1 Mk IV

Converter technology: 66 bit/1536 kHz (max. sampling rate)

Digital inputs: 1 x AES/EBU; balanced - 110 Ω (XLR)
2 x S/P-DIF; unbalanced - 75 Ω (RCA)
1 x S/P-DIF; unbalanced - 75 Ω (BNC)

Digital outputs: 1 x AES/EBU; balanced - 110 Ω (XLR)
1 x S/P-DIF; unbalanced - 75 Ω (RCA)

Analog outputs: 1pr balanced XLR
1pr unbalanced RCA phono

Dimensions (WxDxH): 100 x 482 x 375 mm

Weight: 10 kg

Price: £3100

UK Distributor:

Audio Reference

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Manufacturer:

Accustic Arts

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