

GRAMOPHONE DREAMS

BY HERB REICHERT

THIS ISSUE: Herb listens to the dCS Bartók Apex

It's all about the source

I view poetry as more than a literary genre. It's a worldview and a state of being that frames my daily experience in the supernal. I've consumed a lifetime keeping my senses peeled for authentic, manmade mysteries, especially in art and music. Music is my favorite hunting ground, and nowhere have I found mysteries as DNA-deep as the 59 takes of 29 songs recorded in only five days by Delta blues legend Robert Johnson (1911–1938). I've played the Columbia Records 1961 anthology *King of the Delta Blues Singers* (Columbia LP CL 1654) 100 times since my days in Chicago as a teenager, and I still haven't grasped more than a portion of its juke-joint poetics.

Robert Johnson's lyrics, to songs like "If I Had Possession over Judgment Day" and "Crossroads," are acutely strange, and I can't imagine what sorts of listeners would have made these songs popular (which I doubt they were). It's clear enough, though, why people like me admire them: They're complete works of minstrel art exhibiting the highest levels of creativity and musicianship. Johnson's lyrics and guitar project eerie, plaintive sounds that I find spellbinding. I see Robert Johnson as a natural-born poet channeling powerful spirit-energy from somewhere beyond normal reckoning.

It's not likely that Mr. Johnson ever heard of Sigmund Freud, or of the 1930s European art movement called Surrealism, but the lyrics to his songs present dark pools of Freudian dream-death allusions that I am certain would have awed Freud and inspired French poet André Breton, author of the *Surrealist Manifesto*. Which doesn't mean that Johnson didn't have insight, on some level, into Surrealism and Freudian psychology.

On an even higher plane: There's a story that says that Robert Johnson's last public performance took place after his death.¹

In 1938, Columbia Records talent scout John H. Hammond (1910–1987) put together a Carnegie Hall bill called "From Spirituals to Swing." Robert Johnson was listed on the poster (along with Sidney Bechet, Count Basie, and others), but Johnson couldn't be there to perform because he had disappeared and died a few months earlier. On opening night, Hammond introduced

Johnson as a "musical genius" and "a chief progenitor of Delta Blues" and declared that, "Regardless of his death, Robert Johnson will grace our stage tonight." Whereupon two stagehands rolled out a Victrola and placed a microphone in its horn. After hand-cranking the turntable, they proceeded to play "Walkin' Blues" and "Preachin' Blues: Up Jumped the Devil," filling the famous hall with chilling, wraithlike sounds from the Mississippi Delta. When the second disc finished, all the starched-collared swells stood up and applauded a musical sorcery they could not have fully understood.

At its highest levels of power, poetry establishes a blood-memory connection, a human-to-human intimacy, that allows a community-specific language, like the Delta Blues, to leap the gap between social groups that barely know the other exists.

In my world, the primary purpose of a good sound system is the same as that

Victrola on the Carnegie Hall stage: to bring back songs and sounds from faraway cultures and put me in close touch with their creators.

dCS Bartók Apex

For years, I fell asleep with the TV on. I'm sure it damaged my brain. Then, without premeditation or foresight, I started skipping late-night movies and started streaming songs in the darkness instead. What instigated this change was a slow parade of superior-quality DACs wandering into my sound system. Now I stream music all day, then fall asleep to Béla Bartók through a dCS Bartók. When I wake up at 3:00am, I unmute and listen for a minute, checking to see what new treats Roon Radio has found.

Now, for mood management and mental health, I start and finish every day with a quiet dose of close listening via streaming. Which means that the sound character of whatever DAC is in the system figures prominently in the emotional quality of my daily life. And then there's this reviewer thing: I require reference-quality source components that a broad cross section of readers might be familiar with and even admire.

The original dCS Bartók has been my top-level, system-anchoring digital source since it came out in 2019. It has served that purpose perfectly by virtue of its ability to present recordings in a fantastically appealing manner that lesser DACs can't muster. I know some readers want me to say "its ability to present recordings

¹ See justsoulyouknow.wordpress.com/2020/10/20/that-time-bluesman-robert-johnson-played-carnegie-hall-wait-what.



in an extremely accurate manner,” but I can’t. I came of age during the analog era, when I could use an oscilloscope to visually compare an input signal to its corresponding output signal. I could see accuracy with my own eyes. With a DAC, however, the input signal is digital, and the output signal is analog. How am I supposed to know if it’s accurate?

According to Technical Editor John Atkinson, dCS’s Ring DAC is a 5-bit R-2R topology operated with massive oversampling. According to dCS, the Bartók DAC upsamples PCM to DXD or (alternatively) DSD, but I can’t imagine what those types of processing look like in action, or what benefits I should expect from these contrivances.

What I do know is that the musical sounds coming out of this new Bartók Apex sound more fantastically appealing than the ones generated by my original Bartók or any other DAC I’ve reviewed. That’s a major achievement.

Besides top-shelf sonics, another reason I use the Bartók as a reference source is Mosaic, its network control and streaming app. I have found that playback via Mosaic offers a greater sense of transparency and less dynamic restraint than when the music data source is my Roon Nucleus+. It’s easy to bypass Roon. I use Mosaic for careful critical listening and Roon for everything else.

I first heard about dCS’s Apex upgrades from my physicist friend, Gaucho. He asked me if I thought he should upgrade his Rossini. So I asked him, “You’ve been enjoying your Rossini for years; you know its sound intimately. Is there anything you’ve been wishing it could do better?”

Together, for fun, we made a short “wish list,” which included these adjectives: quieter, deeper, more corporeal, less grainy. Then we laughed, thinking that dCS probably made a similar list. I remember saying that if I were dCS, I’d back up that “Ring thingy” with a bigger power supply. According to John Giolas, dCS’s VP for sales and marketing, that’s one of the main things they did.

According to Giolas, for the Apex version, “The engineering team made extensive changes to the Ring DAC’s hardware. Apart from the DAC’s resistor array, which remains unchanged, the latest-generation Ring DAC hardware is all-new. One of the first areas Chris Hales, the lead engineer on the project, looked to improve was the reference power supply that feeds the DAC circuit board.” There you go: the power supply.

“The resulting enhancements lowered the output impedance of the Bartók, making it even more impervious to external inter-

ference from cables and other electronics.”

This is interesting because more than my other reference DACs, the HoloAudio May and Denafrips Terminator Plus, my original Bartók could and did sound quite different depending on which interconnects I chose. For now, I can’t say whether there was an improvement in this area, because for these auditions I kept it simple by using the same Cardas Clear Beyond interconnect with both Bartóks, old and new. As part of my process, I auditioned both Bartóks with and without HoloAudio’s Serene preamp between them, with Parasound’s Halo A 21+ power amplifier driving my Falcon Gold Badges.

“More impervious to external interference from cables and other electronics” could mean quieter, less grainy, and possibly more corporeal.

“Chris Hales redesigned all the subsequent stages of the Ring DAC, including the summing and filter stages. In this portion of the Ring DAC, he identified several areas where improvements could be made, such as the overall symmetry of the summing stages. Drawing on dCS’s latest research, Chris and dCS’s engineering team redesigned the layout of the Ring DAC circuit board. Finally, Chris completely reengineered the output stage. He replaced individual transistors on the board with compound pairs. The result of these various improvements is a new, enhanced Ring DAC that is even quieter than previous iterations. Most importantly, the Ring DAC Apex is over 12dB more linear than the previous design. This results in the Ring DAC having improved distortion performance, particularly at lower signal levels.” Quieter. More corporeal.

The second thing Gaucho put on his wish list was more low-level data retrieval, especially texture and atmospheric. He got that, too, from the Apex.

I don’t listen with a list, but after about five weeks of switching back and forth between the old and new Bartóks, it was obvious: Once the Apex is in, I have zero urge to take it out. It pleases me completely. The Apex version is unquestionably smoother, less grainy, and more powerful sounding—hence more transparent and emotionally engaging—than the pre-Apex.

The Bartók Apex has a wet feel to its clarity. The original leaned toward transistor-dry. I am crediting this improvement to the upgraded power supply and analog output stage. The Bartók Apex appears to put less artificial digital-mechanical grunge between me and the files I stream, making it more invisible. When I switch back to the “old Bartók,” it seems less clear and refined.

I asked Gaucho what other improve-

ments he experienced with the Apex upgrade. “What I heard is more depth in the sound. The soundstage was more holographic; the sound was more relaxed—as if the output stage had more power. I felt that tone, especially piano tone, was a tad better. I would attribute that to slightly better bass performance.”

What I heard was fantastically appealing, reference-quality digital playback. When the Bartók Apex was in my system, I felt like I was listening to recordings at a rarefied level of harmonic insight, which precluded any thought of taking the DAC out of the system. With my amps and speakers, the Apex’s most obvious improvement was how much less digital it sounded. It mixed an R-2R naturalness, such as what I get from the HoloAudio May and Denafrips Terminator Plus, with a muscular, free-flowing dynamic that kept my attention focused on musical content.

dCS requires users to program the Bartók’s processing platform, choosing among options in upsampling, digital filters, and DAC-entry “mapping.” All my old-to-new comparisons were made with selections matched in each category. In the end, I favored DXD upsampling, filter three, and mapper one.

As for pricing, without a headphone amp, the Bartók Apex is \$20,950. *With* headphone amp, it costs \$22,950. To upgrade an original Bartók costs \$9000. According to John Giolas, “If you purchased your Bartók after September 15, 2021, you may contact your dealer for special pricing.”

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