



dCS Bartók Apex DAC

\$20,950 (\$22,950 with Class A headphone amp);

Apex upgrade for existing owners, \$9000

To begin, I couldn't have been more satisfied with the performance of my Bartók DAC. So, it was with a tiny dose of disbelief that I took the plunge and upgraded to Apex level—a comprehensive package of software and hardware advancements. Was this going to be an “emperor’s new clothes” moment or a sonic home-run? Well, Apex did the unthinkable, and a Golden Ear nod became inevitable. It furthered what the first-generation Bartók began and then surpassed it—and not by a small margin. The DAC remains as tonally accurate as ever, but its voice is more open and exhibits superior bloom and wider micro/macro-dynamic swings. Music felt as if there was a weightier unmovable foundation supporting it and locking it down. Yet ambience was airier and “wetter” with reverberant fields of energy. Like an ultra-high-resolution photograph, the edge-to-edge expanse and focus within the soundstage was pristine. It’s like witnessing a recording from inside the microphone capsule—from opening transient to the last gasp of acoustic decay. In summary, the Apex “effect” was more than just a laundry list of subtle and not so subtle improvements. Apex is not inexpensive, but the sonic improvements floored me—a triumph of naturalism and harmonic detail. The end result was a stirring and more emotional experience of the music I treasure. A component that continues to endure. (300, 344)

Neil Gader