

dCS Vivaldi ONE APEX

A giant step for music.

\$95,000
dcsaudio.com

Spinning a copy of Graham Parker & The Rumour's *Stick to Me* (an incredibly average-sounding CD) is an entirely different experience when played through the dCS Vivaldi ONE/APEX. As was a number of my other average to dreadful-sounding CDs. Even modest-level players will do a decent job playing your favorite audiophile CDs or SACDs that have been mastered and pressed with extra care. However, achieving musical engagement with mediocre source material always separates the best players from those less than.

Of course, dCS passes this test quickly, which is why I've used their players as a reference for nearly 15 years now. It's always amazing to put an awful disc like *The Monkees Greatest Hits* or *Kiss-Alive!* in the tray and hear them actually sound musical. Moving to Impex Records' recent SACD release of Al DiMeola's *Saturday Night In San Francisco* is more incredible – if that's even possible.

As someone who still collects and plays SACDs, it's nice to see a manufacturer pay so much attention to disc playback. For those concerned, dCS uses the TEAC Esoteric VMK3 VRDS-neo transport, so you can be assured of product longevity, even if you play physical media often.



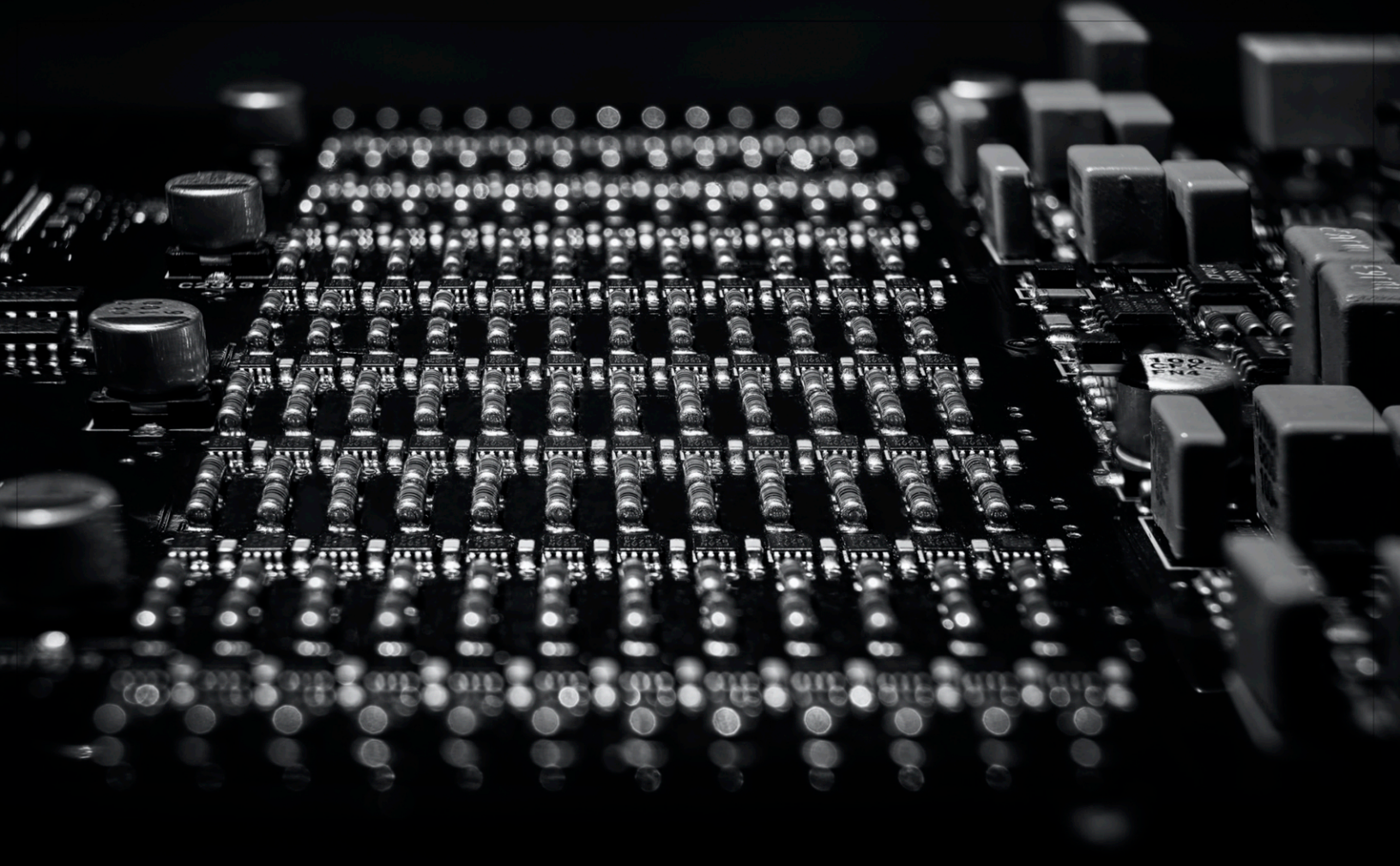


If you need to get more familiar with dCS, it's worth reading the in-depth tech stuff on their site. It explains in great detail what and why dCS does things the way they do. In the town of Cambridge, UK (less than an hour from where a disproportionate amount of F1 engineering firms call home) the dCS factory feels a lot like a miniature version of McLaren or Mercedes/AMG. The level of performance of dCS gear is so high they've had to build most of their own test gear to measure it!

I've visited the factory several times, and the commitment to perfection is impressive. No detail is left unexamined in the construction of one of their products, from circuit board design to software development, to the casework. If you are even the tiniest bit OCD (guilty as charged), you'll appreciate the density of thought at work here.

I'm taking the liberty that you already know about dCS and their core technology built on their proprietary RingDAC™, utilizing a Field Gate Programmable Array (FGPA) to convert digital bits to analog sound. Their software-based approach assures a much longer useful lifespan than a DAC based on whatever current chipset is in vogue. And oh boy, is it nice not to have an 80-thousand-dollar door stop because a new chipset has been released. You can get the full story on the technology here:

<https://dcsaudio.com/ring-dac#>



Pure logic

The APEX update delivers a vast jump in every aspect of the Vivaldi ONE's performance. The expectation was about half the difference that a master clock makes. That alone would have been worth the \$9,000 update. Considering the new Vivaldi ONE/APEX is \$95,000 and the original model was \$80,000, this alone is a value. Only 250 Vivaldi ONEs were produced, and now there are only an additional 50 Vivaldi ONE/APEX models. Considering how few of these have shown up on the used market, you better snap it up if you want one.

The ONE is the solution for those wanting very, very close to 4-box Vivaldi performance (and you can cheat this with a Vivaldi ONE/Master clock, 2-box setup) with a reduced footprint and cable compliment The full 4-box still offers a touch more performance, you will need four power cords and about a dozen top-quality digital interconnects to put a 4-box together. However, the 4-box Vivaldi/APEX will stay in regular production.

Does an investment equaling 11% of the original purchase price increase performance by 11%? It's not emotions running rabid; it's math. If it offers more, it's a bargain, if it provides less, it's questionable, as if you must strain to hear it. Using this model, even the \$17,500 Vivaldi Master Clock is worth the price because it offers such a significant increase in performance in every way. I know more than one Porsche owner that's dropped \$10k on a set of wheels for zero increase in performance, merely because they look cool. Your finances are your business, however, both of these upgrades are such a big jump I think it will be difficult for a Vivaldi owner to resist – and as usual, once you experience it, you can't put the genie back in the bottle.

Getting back to listening, whether streaming via Qobuz or Tidal (and yes the dCS does a better job of unfolding MQA files than anything we've heard if that's your bag), ripped files, or playing discs, the APEX upgrade is special.



It's tough to believe that the analog versus digital debate continues on the internet in 2022. At the level of sonic excellence, the world's finest digital front ends resolve musical data; I'll take a stand and call it different, but to be fair, my experience with six-figure turntables is limited at best. Back when the 4-box Vivaldi stack was part of my reference system, and a pair of AVID Acutus Reference tables (one with Goldfinger and the other with Atlas mounted) were available for comparison, there were times when the analog front end revealed more musical tone and nuance, while other times, digital files through the Vivaldi took the honors. Most of the time, it was more different than a clear-cut superior verdict.

Digital always wins the race when it comes to speed accuracy. Fortunately, I am not blessed with perfect pitch, so that part of the equation is not a deal breaker. Digital is theoretically capable of a wider signal-to-noise ratio than analog, so that's a tie, as the cards don't always fall where you think they might. Ditto for dynamic range.

Unfortunately, there are too many variables – especially when different mastering engineers and master tapes/source files are involved. With so many of today's vinyl records starting as digital recordings in the first place or using an intermediate digital step, it gets harder and harder to look away. Finally, are you enough of a Jedi Master to really set up a turntable to 100% of what it's capable of? I'm not saying that to be snarky; I'm right there with you. The setup/frustration/OCD factor of the Vivaldi ONE/APEX is ZERO. Unbox it, plug it in, and you're rocking. While the test samples already had hours on them, when my Vivaldi ONE was brand new, it took about 24 hours of play before it became all it could be.

Nothing but music

Good as the Vivaldi ONE is sans APEX update, the current machine has significantly reduced everything you associate with digital. Listening to drums tonally and spatially is an entirely different movie – from the sound of the drumhead releasing energy after being struck to sheer texture. Relying on a few old favorites, listen to the bongos at the beginning of Lyle Lovett's "North Dakota." Or your favorite snippet of bongos. Go way back to the sheer dynamics of the drums in James Newton Howard's disc for Sheffield Labs or your favorite jazz record.

Via the Apex system, there is so much more of the vivid nuance and tonal contrast that is a big part of acoustic and solo vocal performances; the differences between electronic music are equally exciting. Bathing in the tonal differences of Jeff Beck playing a Stratocaster through Marshall cabinets versus Eric Clapton playing through Fender amps or the guys from Mastodon playing through Orange amps.



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It's so damn cool to hear this level of "anti-digital" from digital playback. Much in the same way the world's finest solid-state and tube amplifiers begin to converge, merely being a conduit for the music, is what the Vivaldi ONE/APEX does.

Finally, it takes a lot of work to get the sheer low-frequency extension from analog that the Vivaldi ONE/APEX delivers. Those grooves can only be cut so wide. And even when you can, if you have a pair of large, full-range system (perhaps with subs), it's tough to really crank the volume without getting acoustic feedback when playing LPs.

The phrase "digital sucks" is now banned

Because it doesn't when you're listening to a dCS, especially a Vivaldi/APEX (The ONE or the stack). This is music pure and simple at the end of the day. It's a deceptively tough thing to achieve. Not only did I write the big check for one of these, so did the guy that coined the phrase years ago. What does that tell you? No one buys a 95-thousand-dollar box that sounds lousy.

Like the original Vivaldi ONE, the APEX plays CD and SACD discs with equal prowess, and if you still have an extensive digital media collection, this is a true blessing. After over 10 years of using a dCS player, I still prefer disc playback to streaming. On a recent visit from staffer Jerold O'Brien, we compared the Qobuz 24/192 file (streamed via ROON

and the Vivaldi ONE's ethernet input) and a simple compact disc at 16/44. Now, I won't use that tired audiophile cliché "jaw-dropping," but let's just say he was startled by how much more alive the CD was.

For some, perhaps for many, justifying this purchase may be difficult. As a person who can rationalize nearly anything – just ask my wife, the way record prices continue to escalate, \$95k for a Vivaldi ONE isn't as crazy as you might think. With unopened copies of *Santana Abraxas/One-Step* LPs still in the \$2,500 range and pristine, low-number, first stamper pressings of your favorite rock records in the \$500 range (and don't get me started on original Blue Notes...) these days you can drop 100 large on not that many records. Just saying.

Please don't think I'm anti-vinyl or anti-analog. I still have my AKAI 8-track deck. And at last count, at least six turntables. I love music, no matter what format, and at my age, I was fortunate enough to buy a lot of great records when they weren't crazy money. If only I'd purchased an 88 Carrera back then too! It's wonderful to switch back and forth between formats without disappointment or uttering the dreaded phrase, "it sounds pretty good for digital."

If you have the means to buy a Vivaldi ONE, you probably don't really care what I have to say about this lovely digital player. But the other 298 of you that will end up possessing one know what I mean.

