

Weiss Medea 24/192 Digital to Analog Converter

There is no resistance between you and the music

Reviewed by Lincoln Cheng
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In the last couple of years, most audiophiles are having problems deciding how to upgrade their digital front ends because of the confusion caused by the digital formats war. Except when one is braved enough to invest in the SACD equipment, then the choices for new CD player, transport and DAC are very lacking and always carries ultra high price tags. In the last 12 month, most high-end audio manufacturers understand it will take a long period of time to settle the digital format war between the SACD and DVD-A. However, there are so many CDs in the market right now (Current estimate is around 17 billions copies and the number is still growing everyday). It will be almost impossible to ask audiophiles who own so many CDs at home to give up their collections. Moreover, the latest digital recording, mixing, mastering and replication techniques are improving at a faster pace compare with few years ago. Obviously, the quality of CD media is also improving. For such reasons, we can see new CD players and DACs appearing again in the high-end audio market during the last couple of months.

Let's get excited

Our magazine, the Audiotechnique, writers are pioneers who always walk on the leading edge of the technology. After our writers tested the <Sony SCD-1> SACD player with good results, most of us became faithful users of <Sony SCD-1>. I even took it a step forward and purchased the <Accuphase DP-100 and DC101> SACD transport and DAC combo. This Accuphase flagship combo produces wonderful SACD/CD playback, and it matches so well with my audio system. I never felt that I would want to change or add any new digital playback equipment until one day....

Michael Wong from <Radar Audio> called me with an extremely excited voice. He said, "Lincoln, I just got a new distribution of a Swiss digital audio company. I heard the prototype of its latest DAC and it sounds phenomenal! Tomorrow I will bring it to you for a first audition. Oh! I forgot to tell you, the

company is called Weiss Engineering, Ltd., and the DAC is called Medea!" As you may or may not know, Michael's company <Radar Audio> is one of the biggest high-end audio distributors in HK and China. He distributes more than 30 high-end brands, and it is so rare that any equipment can make him so excited. The Medea DAC must be something really special.

From my understanding, Weiss Engineering, Ltd. is one of the most advanced digital audio manufacturers in Professional Audio. Its owner, Daniel Weiss, worked at <Studer-Revox> during the 80s. In 1985, he opened his own company and started to produce the highest quality mastering equipment. Daniel is rated as one of the most important digital audio pioneers. Weiss users include Sony, BMG, EMI, Warner, Phillips, Abbey Road, Telarc, Teldec, Bob Ludwig, Bernie Grundman, Bob Katz and many others! It seems that more than 50% of our CD collections have been produced or mastered with Weiss Engineering's equipment!

The best matching system

The next day afternoon, Michael brought the Weiss Medea DAC to Audiotechnique magazine's office. The Medea DAC is not big in size; with its silvery white color outlook, it is the most solid construction that I have ever seen. Its weight is quite substantial as well. From its chassis design and construction, the Medea is definitely produced in best of Swiss, ultra-high precision tradition. On the front there is a Weiss logo and a power on/off button on the left hand side. And then there are four selectable input buttons in the middle, plus two small potentiometers to set the balance of L/R channels at the right hand side. The whole layout is very simple, clear and elegant. With the combination of the two potentiometers and the high/low output switch at the back of the unit, Medea's user can change the output from 0dBu to +27dBu! (In low output mode, the RCA outputs from 0dBu to 9dBu which are equal to 0.775v - 2.2v and the Balanced XLR outputs 0dBu-15dBu (0.775v - 4.4v). If the output is not enough, the high output mode produces 0dBu-21dBu (0.775v-8.7v) and balanced XLR outputs 0dBu-27dBu (0.755v-17.4v)) This is the best voltage matching design I have ever seen in DAC. Any preamplifier, including tube, solid state, active or passive preamp will work perfectly with the Medea DAC.

Digital Input and Analog output features

The back of the Medea includes all useful features. Input 1,2,3 have SPDIF and AES/EBU digital inputs. The input 4 accepts SPDIF and Toslink digital inputs. Medea accepts the following sampling rates: 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, 96kHz, 176.4kHz and 192kHz. Since AES/EBU at maximum can only carry signals up to 96kHz, 176.4kHz and 192kHz playbacks are implemented using both Input 1 +2 for dual wire setting. The analog outputs include both single ended RCA and balanced XLR.

My first impression

Since this is a prototype, we are not allowed to open the chassis and look inside the Medea. From my high-end audio experiences, the final product usually sounds better than the prototype in most cases. After I hooked up the Weiss Medea with our reference system, although it has not been fully warmed up, it already sounds superb! The playback resolution has already reached a high level, if not the highest! The extensions in both the low and high frequencies really shocked me! The only little complaint is the mid range which is not yet fully warm up. Of course this is normal for such a new condition unit, especially a prototype unit. I am sure the Medea's true potential must be much higher than this. The Medea is definitely not cheap (HK\$68000), but it can compete with any DAC in any price range. It seems to fit the description as "the BEST solution for anyone who is looking for the highest quality DAC". I am really excited about it, and I look forward to audition the final product.

Why Weiss Engineering, Ltd. started producing consumer products after 16 years of producing professional audio equipment? Why Weiss decides to produce a DAC as its first consumer product, especially during the most confusing period of digital format war? What are the special features that enable Medea to produce such a great performance? From its audio performance, solid chassis made with typical Swiss precision, Medea should cost two, four, or even six times higher than what it sells for now. How can Weiss set such a low selling price? During the 2002 CES, I asked Mr. Daniel Weiss these questions and here are his answers:

"Although most of my time is spent on designing professional digital audio products, I am actually a music lover and also looking for a best digital audio playback system. And from collecting comments and ideas from leading mastering studio engineers and some high-end audio experts, I definitely know what audiophiles are expecting from high-end audio equipment. I keep on researching and wait until the digital audio playback technologies have reached a point where the design and production matches at the perfect stage. Medea includes all the most advanced designs in digital audio playback. All areas of a "PERFECT DAC" are considered and implemented in the Medea project. That's why we call it a Reference DAC. Moreover, the Medea is future-proof with its modular design. Users will be able to upgrade when the technology has reached another level. But after you auditioned the Medea, I am confident that it will change your mind about the

whole digital audio playback concept to a higher level."

He continues to reveal the secret about Medea's design. "We put our 15 years digital audio researches into the Medea. For example, the dejittering section is taken from our professional <Hydra-C> unit. This DSP section is immune to all jitter down to the single digit Hertz frequency area. The DSP design is implemented with our award winning professional product <SFC2 - Sample Rate Converter> up-sampling technology. A perfect DAC cannot only focus on the digital section, and I think the most important feature of the Medea is the analog output stage. This ultra-high quality output stage compares favorably with even the most expensive, highest-end preamplifier in the industry today. The Class-A discrete circuit with almost no output impedance (0.02ohm), allows it easily to drive any kind of load. "

"Regarding to its selling price, we are very new to the high-end audio industry. We use almost the same philosophy as our professional line, in that we set our selling price relative to our cost. Yes, I have heard from high-end audio consultant that with our product performances and production, we can set the price much higher. Do you think the selling price of Medea is okay? Do you think we need to set the cost few times more than we are now, so that audiophiles know our product is the best of the best? I am actually very concerned about this point." Ha! This is a really interesting question for all audiophiles to think about our high-end audio industry.

The final product arrives

After waiting for quite a while, the Medea finally arrived at my home, before the Chinese New Year. I connected the Medea to my <Accuphase DP-100> SACD/CD transport via <Venture Grand Reference> digital cable. The analog output connects to <Mark Levinson No.32> preamplifier via <Siltech G5 Compass Lake> interconnection. The power amplifier is <Halcro dm68>, and speaker is a pair of <Venture Grand Excellence Diamond SE>. As I've expected, the Medea's final production sound is even more musical than the prototype unit. Since it is a brand new unit, I used a <Sony DVP-F11> DVD player as transport to let the Medea run-in. During the first 30 days, I have checked with the Medea and found it requires a long burn-in period. Moreover, during the burn-in period, the Medea sounds unstable as well. If you just bought the Medea, no need to worry about the unstable sound, after the burn-in period, the Medea sounds phenomenal! Using the Weiss Medea to play CD produces a big improvement compared with my <Accuphase DP-100 + DC101> combo. First of all, the noise floor is lower even though it was almost dead silence with the Accuphase combo. This also improves the 3D soundstage and sound image separation. Medea is an extremely high resolution DAC. Listening to Eva Cassidy - Live at Blues Alley (G2-10046) CD, Medea reproduces the entire recorded space with all kinds of details. The timbre is so natural and realistic. I am able to feel the live ambience from this live recording. Without any

doubt, Weiss Medea reproduces the best audio quality. The combination of her voice, the guitar and the jazz drum shows the real potential of Medea. Eva Cassidy vocal sounds so real and full of emotion. The rhythms of the instruments are always in-sync. After listening to various CDs, a sudden thought comes up to my mind. When does CD sound so good? The sound is so attractive, and I forget all about the usual audiophile terms, because there is only good music! I singed along with Eva, and my foot was tapping the beat. Oh! This is the highest level of high-end audio! There is no system better than this one, which brings you only close to the music itself. Weiss has reached the ultimate goal of digital audio playback - there is nothing between you and the music. No matter whether you are listening to "Seiji Ozawa - 2002 New Year's Concert", "Eiji One - pictures at an Exhibition" or any other good quality CDs, you will be attracted by the performances of the recordings and nothing else. I do not complain about the quality of CD playback anymore.

Conclusion

The SACD media and my Accuphase combo are wonderful but I only have around 100 SACD titles.

After auditioning the Weiss Medea about two months, I decided that I have to buy this phenomenal DAC. I can not wait to listen to all my 3000 CDs again through the Weiss Medea.

There are three suggestions to remind new Weiss Medea users:

Medea requires a long burn-in period. It may take more than a month, be patient during this period of time.

I have very good results by using <YBA> tip toe and <Symposium Ultra Board> with Medea

For power cables, I got good results with <Power Snake - King Cobra II>, <PS Audio - Ultimate Lab Cable> and <Siltech- G5 Ruby Hill>

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