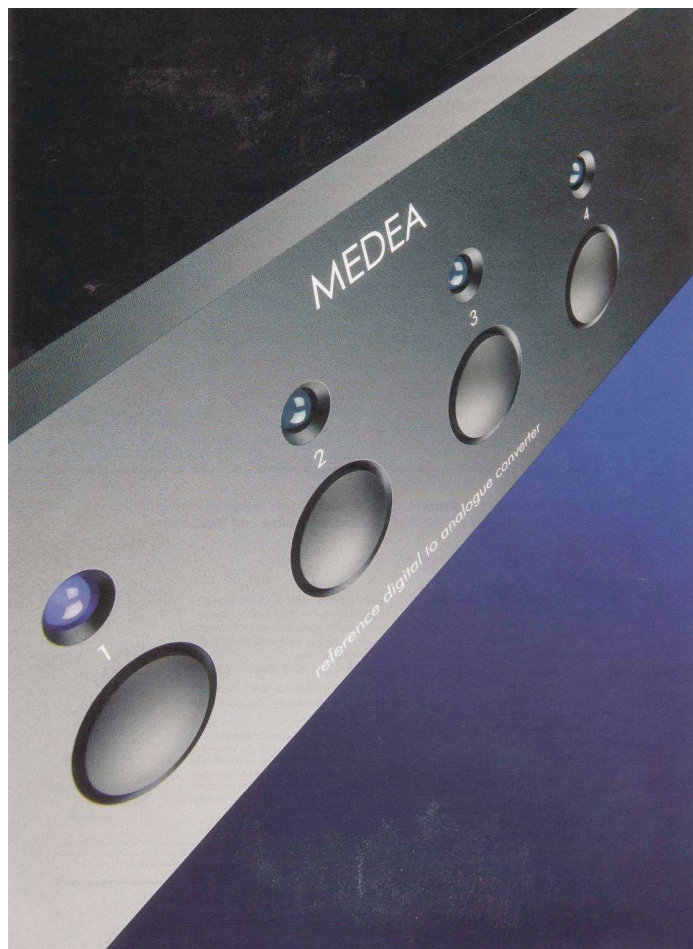


Weiss Medea DAC

by Jimmy Hughes



There was a time – say four or five years back – when the mention of someone sending me an expensive high-end DAC for review would have resulted in severe misgivings. Put simply: the concept of having a separate DAC seemed to have run its course. Although outboard DACs were fairly popular in the late '80s and early '90s as a way of upgrading the performance of an existing CD player, the idea began to lose its sparkle as the '90s progressed and single box CD players kept improving.

More significantly, many manufacturers stated their belief that having everything in one package was actually a technically better solution. It had become clear that having a separate CD transport and outboard DAC created its own problems; specifically, increased levels of jitter. Any sonic advantage achieved by splitting transport and DAC into two packages was far outweighed by the drawbacks. The days of two-box CD players seemed to be drawing to a close...

True, Arcam had tackled the two-box jitter problem as long ago as the mid '80s by providing their Black Box 5 DAC and Delta 170.3 transport with an extra data cable to help 'lock' the two together. But it wasn't until Chord introduced their DAC-64 converter, which put the digital signal into a buffer and then re-clocking it, that the problem was finally dealt with. The DAC-64 was a product that significantly improved CD sound using any transport – precisely what's required from an outboard DAC.

A quick flick through the Weiss brochure on the Medea DAC certainly raises one's expectations. If it actually does what the makers say, it's going to

be a significant piece of kit. Founder and President Daniel Weiss cut his teeth at Studer/Revox in the early '80s, leaving the company in 1985 to start Weiss Engineering. The company have largely concentrated on making products for the pro market, especially professional mastering studios, and their client list reads like a Who's Who with many big-name users.

They've now decided to make something for high-end home users wanting the very best from CD.



So – enter the Medea Digital to Analogue converter.

As a company, Weiss seem to have a definite feel for what's required to make digital audio deliver subjectively satisfying results. They seem to know most of the problems and – more importantly – appear to have some of the answers! But, would the Medea really perform as well in practise as it appears to do on paper. I couldn't wait to find out...

Speaking purely for myself – having gotten well and truly used to the outstanding results produced by the Chord Blu CD transport and revised DAC64 – the Medea had an exceedingly

tough act to follow. It's easy to take the excellence of the Chord combination for granted, forgetting that such outstanding results from CD aren't easily achieved. As I got ready to listen and put on the first CD, I wondered if any DAC could better the revised DAC-64 – especially when partnered with the Blu transport.

The Medea certainly sounded good. First impressions were of a clean open sound of great clarity and immediacy. The tonal balance seemed extremely natural and realistic, with no sense of false highlighting or exaggeration. The music sounded vivid and lucid, yet at the same time very natural and believable. It was a winning combination: impressive fine detail and sharpness, allied to an attractive smoothness and naturalness. Put

in simpler more basic terms, it sounded right. Tonally the music sounded beautifully balanced – sharp and tactile, while at the same time smooth and integrated. Difficult things – like massed violins, solo voice, massed choral forces – had a difficult-to-describe rightness that struck me as being wholly natural and authentic. By comparison, while the DAC-64 certainly seemed able to match the Medea for detail and analysis, it wasn't quite as sweet and natural sounding; the Chord's presentation was slightly 'harder' tonally, and a tad more forward too. The Chord gave a sound that had slightly more bite and greater immediacy.

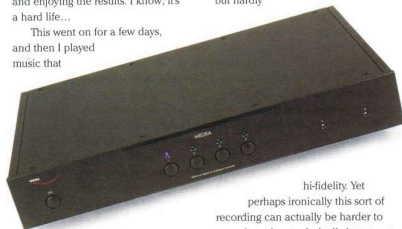
Although such distinctions in sound quality seemed strongly contrasted when I first made my comparisons, after a few days spent listening to the Medea in ▶

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

▶ isolation the difference seemed to fade. The sound was still extremely good, but wasn't the result pretty much as it had been with the DAC-64? Well, yes and no. The Medea proved very easy to listen to – so much so, I quickly 'forgot' about evaluating its performance. It was very much a case of sitting back and enjoying the results. I know; it's a hard life...

This went on for a few days, and then I played music that



hi-fidelity. Yet perhaps ironically this sort of recording can actually be harder to reproduce than technically better more recent recordings.

unexpectedly re-focused attention on exactly what the Medea was doing. Ironically, it was something from the ghaight era – something predating high-fidelity as we know it. The recording that really highlighted the difference (even without comparisons) turned out to be a four CD boxed set I'd recently bought of French Chansons sung by Charles Trenet. Most of the tracks were recorded in the late 1940s – among them, his most popular song *La Mer*.

Although in strict hi-fi terms the recordings have certain limitations – they're off '78s and in mono – the actual sound is surprisingly good in musical terms. Clarity is excellent; you can hear every inflection in the voice, and lots of orchestral detail. But, previous listening via the DAC-64 had sometimes produced a hint of hardness – especially, in some of the more vigorous, trumpet-dominated tracks. I thought the hardness was due to limitations in the original recordings – hardly surprising given the age of the material.

The Weiss DAC magically tamed the brightness/hardness without losing brilliance and immediacy.

Via the Medea, Trenet's voice had a noticeably smoother more liquid and beguiling quality. It sounded more effortless and easy. Although clarity and detail remained excellent, the recordings now sounded more relaxed – with less of the peaky brightness that had been apparent before. Not that the DAC-64 had sounded bad. But the Medea – sweeter, mellower, with a more analogue sort of reproduction – sounded even more natural, and

believable. It sounded realistic, and very easy to listen to.

The Medea produces a truly 'big' sound; quite awesomely huge. For convenience I mostly used my review sample via its unbalanced RCA phono outputs. But, those having amplifiers with the appropriate inputs, will find the Medea sounds even bigger and more dimensional when used via its balanced XLR outputs. Incidentally, perhaps due to its professional origins, this DAC is capable of massive output levels when set to 'high' – up to +27dB – fully adjustable via multi-turn trim potentiometers.

For classical music, voices and acoustic instruments, the Medea edged it for sheer relaxed naturalness. For non-classical material, the extra bite of the Chord DAC sometimes created a more exciting 'up-front 'in your face' sort of presentation. Not that I'm saying the Chord lacks the finesse and refinement necessary for acoustic instruments – by any standards it's exceptionally clean and refined. It's just that by comparison the Medea has even greater refinement and delicacy.

Everything in hi-fi is relative. Always remember that. By the highest LP standards, the Medea still isn't quite as smooth and open as the very best analogue. You don't quite get the subtle individual tone colours and effortlessly articulate detail that's somehow sharp and smooth at the same time. But it's a pretty close-run thing.

A wide range of sampling frequencies can be utilised – ▶

▶ 44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, or 96kHz; plus either 176.4kHz or 192kHz using the dual wire system. Maximum input word length is 24bits. There are four inputs; four via unbalanced phono sockets with three parallel balanced XLRs, and one optical Toslink. Analogue output is via unbalanced phono sockets or balanced XLR.

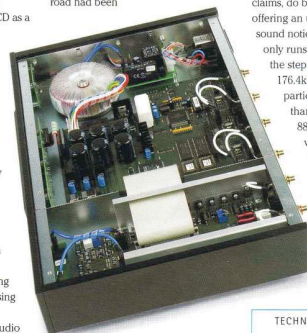
For domestic listeners using CD as a source, best results (in terms of smoothness, openness, and a mellow relaxed immediacy) are achieved when you use the Medea via its 176.4kHz dual input option. Next best is the 88.2kHz alternative. However, these high sampling rates can only be used with CD transports that have the necessary up-sampled outputs. If your transport does not offer such luxuries, then the standard 44.1kHz has to be used. I'd have liked some indication as to which sampling rate was being used.

Operating at a higher sampling rate enables some of the anti-aliasing filtering to be done in the digital domain, meaning the analogue audio signal no longer has to be 'brick wall' filtered at 20kHz. This allows the bandwidth of the system (in filtering terms) to be doubled, and seems to create a smoother more open tonality that's closer to good analogue. Although the Medea sounds very good with a 44.1kHz transport, it audibly improves with either the 88.2kHz or 176.4kHz options. But of course that's assuming a natural sound is what's wanted! Some actually like the brightness of basic CD...

Although I still believe the finest analogue retains a certain extra 'something' that even the best CD doesn't quite equal, it has to be said that CD from a DAC like the Weiss Medea is mighty impressive. Quite frankly, if you couldn't accept and enjoy CD from a DAC like this, you wouldn't be able to live with CD period. The road to Pure Perfect CD

Sound has been a long and arduous one. It's taken over twenty years for CD to finally deliver the musical results its specifications promised.

For me personally hearing Chord's DAC64 represented a turning point; the moment when CD finally came of age. Not that this meant the end of the road had been



it does so in real-time, rather than relying on a four-second buffer. This should mean the Medea is relatively insensitive to things like inter-connect cables and the quality of the CD transport used. Indeed, Weiss make exactly this point in their literature.

While I'd broadly endorse these claims, do bear in mind that a transport offering an up-sampled output will sound noticeably better than one that only runs at 44.1kHz. In particular, the step from 88.2kHz to the dual 176.4kHz option seems to be particularly significant – bigger than going from 44.1kHz to 88.2kHz. What I think you will find is that different CD transports lose much of their individual signature when used with the Medea – even quite modest budget CD players will sound fabulous with this DAC! ▶

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Stand alone digital to analogue converter
 Sampling frequencies: 44.1K, 48K, 88.2K, 96K
 Inputs: 3 x AES/EBU XLR
 4 x SPDIF RCA-phono
 1 x Toslink optical
 Outputs: 1pr RCA-phono
 1pr balanced XLR
 Output Level: 0 – +27dB
 Dimensions (WxDxH): 445 x 75 x 295mm
 Weight: 10kg
 Finishes: Black or silver
 Price: £9000

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