



Audio Research Corporation

DAC7 Digital to Analogue Converter

Back in the early 70s, when the audio world was on an OCD-Bend regarding ever-increasing power outputs from the new ‘wonder child’ that was high-voltage solid-state technology, American engineer William Z. Johnson bucked the trend and embarked on a quest to build the very best amplification under the Audio Research brand. He may have been labelled a ‘retrograde’—or a renegade—by exclusively using what was then considered *passé* valve technology. The rest is history. Over the ensuing decades the words Audio Research have become synonymous with American high-end audio and the company is probably the single company most responsible for the subsequent—and on-going—revival of valve amplification.

Several ‘classic’ designs followed and the products’ distinctive styling and purposeful look also set them apart from the competition. Of course the world has moved on since the company’s early days and Audio Research Corporation (ARC) as it’s now known, now manufactures both valve and solid state products, including this DAC7 digital to analogue converter (D/A or DAC).

The Equipment

The DAC7 has the typical ‘ARC’ look—the prominent *albeit* redundant rack-mount handles—with a faceplate available in the original and traditional silver or in black. A central cut-out houses various status LEDs that inform the user of what’s going on inside; power on, lock (digital data from CD player/transport), mute,

and phase invert. There are also LEDs to indicate input signal status.

‘Round back, the DAC7’s comprehensive set of inputs can be a ‘hub’ for a number of digital devices via a variety of connecting options. From left to right we have a USB-B type data input followed by S/PDIF coaxial via RCA and next to that, via BNC. XLR-type AES/EBU is also provided for and, finally, there’s an optical S/PDIF via Toslink. At the other end of the rear panel are the analogue signal outputs in both RCA and balanced XLR electrical formats.

Unlike the majority of ARC products, the DAC7 is completely solid-state, with the fully-balanced design comprising a new direct-coupled FET output stage and seven stage-regulated multiple power supplies. Digital duties are the domain of a 24-bit/192kHz Burr-Brown device.

The supplied remote replicates all the controls on the front panel, obviously very handy for input switching, phase inversion and muting from the comfort of your listening chair. In addition, there’s a set of buttons for direct playback control when using the USB input. Of course this USB input is catering for the growing number of audio enthusiasts using media servers and their computer hard drives to store music. Whether uncompressed music files or otherwise (FLAC, WAV, etc), stored music files can be played back in glorious non-jittered quality via the DAC7. So Audio Research has kept in mind ‘traditionalists’ wanting to reap the best from their optical discs (CDs,

SACDs) and those *avant-garde* listeners who are moving on to what will no doubt be the future of music playback.

Sonically DiDActic

Being in the ‘traditionalist’ camp at this stage—I am open to change but not optimally set-up for computer audio yet—I used Audio Research’s entry-level player (the CD5) as a transport to supply all the 1s and 0s. I tried both the S/PDIF 75Ω RCA and the XLR AES/EBU 110Ω connections and, at least in my set-up, found that there was no difference between them sonically. And no matter what input I used, the DAC7 was ultra-quick to recognise and lock onto the data signal.

The DAC7’s considerable strengths came to the fore pretty much at the outset. This is a DAC that is totally smooth and balanced throughout the frequency range but with a superbly-powerful bass. Having just used the word ‘balanced’ and then stating, ‘superbly-powerful bass’, may sound like an oxymoron. Describing a product as ‘totally balanced’ may suggest to some that no frequency range should stand out over any one other. But the DAC7’s bass register, outstanding as it is in terms of its power and quality, still beautifully blends in with the rest of the spectrum. It just provides an added foundation and sense of fullness to the presentation: It’s speedy, too. Electric bass in particular has a bop and rhythmic groove-beat that is kind of addictive.

This lower frequency flow truly blends in and becomes an organic part of the complete

