



The dCS Elgar

Still Impressive!

By Jeff Dorgay

It's always a blast to take a trip in the wayback machine, especially in the world of digital audio, where years are like dog years. Back in 1996, dCS introduced the world's first high performance DAC, the Elgar, with 24/96 capabilities. (And a \$12,000 price tag) It was later updated to Elgar Plus, allowing for 24/192 and DSD capabilities and there was no price increase of note, until the exchange rates forced the importer to raise the final price to \$15,000. Having spent the last six years using dCS as my digital reference, revisiting the Elgar, or in this case an Elgar Plus, supplied to us by Music Lovers in San Francisco – a premier dCS dealer.

Oddly, the current dCS facility in Cambridge, England, is located in the Meridian Office Park, though Meridian Audio is a bit down the motorway. More ironically, the casework of the Elgar/Elgar Plus was designed by Allen Boothroyd, the man at Meridian Audio responsible for all of their industrial and casework design. Talk about wacky British humor! The laughs stop the minute you turn the Elgar on. This is still a serious DAC almost twenty years later, and with a Paganini stack and Rossini DAC with clock nearby for comparison, it's easy to see why dCS has gone on to dominate the digital world.

FEATURE



With a bevy of inputs (RCA, Toslink, AES/EBU and FireWire) along with balanced XLR and RCA analog outputs, the Elgar, like current dCS DACs, can be used without a preamplifier. This is the aspect of performance that dCS has improved dramatically over the years; the current Vivaldi and Rossini can easily be used without a linestage, as the Elgar delivers the maximum with a preamplifier in the system.

Listening to the Elgar at length reminds me of getting back into a first generation Audi S4 after driving the current car. Today's S4 has a lot more horsepower and refinement, but driving the early car makes it easy to see and interpret the design team's vision. Spinning a few discs via my Paganini transport, which feeds the current Rossini DAC that is now my reference.

Everything that makes today's dCS DAC a stellar performer is in place in the Elgar. This DAC features dCS's now famous Ring DAC, which performs all decoding functions in software rather than off-the-shelf chips. Though a few manufacturers have managed to achieve state of the art basing their architecture on a chipset, the dCS approach not only allows for complete optimization, it allows for easy updates.

FEATURE

Version 4.31 is the final software update for the Elgar Plus, but this gives it the ability to play everything but digital files via USB. Even this can be solved by adding a used Puccini U-clock, which will also provide an overall increase in performance. Adding the Rossini clock takes everything to a higher level of transparency.

Comparing the Elgar Plus to the current Rossini and Paganini, the lineage is tight. Pace, timing and sonic accuracy are still there in spades on the original box. What the new products bring to the table is even more low-level resolution in the quietest musical passages, (and this Elgar Plus is still no slouch in this department) a silkier top end and more transparency overall. But when was the last time you heard a nearly 20-year-old digital component and thought it sounded great? For that matter, when have you listened to a 20-year-old digital component that still works?

And much like that first gen Audi S4, after a few hours in the seat, you find yourself thinking, "I could live with this just fine..." So, even if you can't afford a new dCS Vivaldi, think about a nice, used Elgar. Once in a blue moon they pop up for about \$4,000-\$7,000 and still provide great sound and great value. This is a major part of why dCS products have established such a high level of excellence and have become an object of desire for audiophiles all over the world. ●

