

ACCUSTIC ARTS TUBE-DAC II

A combination of valve and digital technology that hits the mark

PRICE £5,600 CONTACT Audio Reference ■ 01252 702705 ■ www.accusticarts.de



Accoustic Arts is a brand of Schunk Audio Engineering, a German outfit offering amplifiers, loudspeakers and cables alongside this, its top digital source, and a handful of very slightly less esoteric digital models. Behind the immaculate chassis, performance is optimised by a cunning combination of old and new: valves, ultra-high-performance op-amps and Accoustic's own digital signal processing for the digital filtering function.

Everything about this unit is deluxe, from the very positive control switches, to the uniformly high quality of components inside and their immaculate assembly to the circuit board. All the usual high-end touches are there: twin mains transformers, multiple regulated power supplies, nice connectors, even a 'generalised impedance converter' – a nifty circuit configuration for the final analogue filter.

You get both unbalanced and balanced audio outputs and all three flavours of electrical digital input, including AES/EBU balanced which is the preferred mode of connection to the Drive I transport. Digital outputs are a nice touch, facilitating connection of a recorder or remote DAC.

The sound has all the hallmarks of classic high-end kit, with excellent neutrality, effortless detail and almost tangible grip, authority and control. It is, of course, impeccably well mannered. One of the consistent features we have found across a range of upmarket CD players and DACs is the high degree of polish they bring to the sound, making cheaper players sound rough by comparison. This is no exception, joining such company as Meridian and dCS in offering sounds that belie their 16-bit origin.

Even while high-sampling-rate, high-bit audio has been slowly penetrating the market, CD recording and replay standards have risen and, in the company of kit like this, one can find oneself wondering what all the high-res fuss is about. In the practical sense, this is high resolution. We had plenty of opportunity to

listen to Accoustic Arts' statement on digital replay and our respect remained high across a wide range of music and recordings.

Among many other discs, we were able to audition the TUBE-DAC with a newly-made CD of operatic voice and piano, recorded so recently that the original sound was still fresh in our ears. The recording had come out nicely, that much was obvious from the most casual listen, but the real extent to which the tenor's high notes rang true was very much more apparent via the TUBE-DAC than via our resident, modest but capable, CD player.

The human voice is such a familiar sound that any interference with its complex harmonic structure has a disproportionately large subjective effect, making it a good test of audio equipment. It was clear that both the recording and replay equipment had admirably discharged their functions and the sound was less 'digital' than we were used to.

Moving to highly processed contemporary pop, the TUBE-DAC seems similarly assured, unfazed by the multi-layered nature of studio productions. Rapid, funky synthesiser can prove a tough test for digital sources but, again, the result is confident, detailed, almost calm: certainly there is no added hysteria, which can come as a bit of a shock if you are used to more coloured audio kit.

If there is anything to criticise, it's a very slight degree of hardness in the highest registers when reproducing instruments with an extended harmonic structure, violin being perhaps the most critical. In such cases, the air around the instrument is not quite so pure, and the decay at the end of notes a touch less well defined than with the very best we have heard.

Overall, though, this is clearly a very capable DAC indeed with plenty going for it sonically. It practically exudes class. It works just fine with budget CD players or PCs as a source, but for best results pair it with the matching Accoustic Arts Drive I transport. ■

Richard Black

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