

Reference mark

ACCUSTIC ARTS DRIVE II/TUBE DAC II (€6750/€6150)

This heavyweight transport and DAC combo represents a high-end statement from Germany's Accoustic Arts

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HIGHLY
COMMENDED



Our tendency to attribute the revival in separate transports and DACs to the rise of MP3 players, DAB et al, didn't anticipate Accoustic Arts' flagship models. Its Reference Series' TUBE DAC II and DRIVE II offer neither USB nor mini-jacks to suggest the welcoming of lesser/newer digital sources. This pair is almost retro, recalling the earliest, most over-engineered high-end transports and DACs, with valves thrown in for good measure.

That they're handsomely-styled, ergonomically intelligent exemplars of Teutonic build quality goes some way toward accounting for painfully high prices of £6150 for the DAC and £6750 for the transport. This places them in direct opposition to dCS, Esoteric and too many other acclaimed specialists to list. Suffice it to say, they have their work cut out for them.

A TWEAKER'S DELIGHT

Fortunately, the pairing is intrinsically tweakable, for two reasons. The first is that you have access to switchable polarity and mains filtering on the back of the transport, for the user's experimentation without performing any irreversible mods. Audibility is down to one's own or one's system's sensitivity to polarity inversion, and the condition of the mains. The second is a choice of S/PDIF (via 75ohm RCA phono and BNC) or balanced AES/EBU (via XLR) digital transmission, although my own findings are that the XLRs win hands down every time. But, again, this is a painless way to experiment and fine-tune one's set-up.

Despite my preference for front-loaders, the 130x482x375mm, CD-Pro2LF-equipped DRIVE II is a pleasure to use because of the tactile reward of the sliding door. The magnetic puck snaps into place with ease, the front panel controls – rotaries rather than prosaic buttons – are easy-to-use and nicely weighted,



PROFESSIONAL CONNECTIONS

In order to compare phono, BNC and balanced XLR digital hook up between transport and DAC, you need to have the same make of cable for each termination. If not, you'd hear cable differences rather than variations between connection types. Once this was addressed, I was reminded repeatedly of something I first experienced years ago: that XLR bettered the others consistently. Regardless of music genre or disc type (normal CDs, golds, SHM-CDs, etc), XLR connection offers – to these ears – three benefits: superior dynamics, greater detail and more rounded, natural bass. I can think of no reason why the owner of any transport/DAC combination with AES/EBU digital connection between the two would use any other.



and the display is perfectly clear. A well-made remote accompanies the DRIVE II.

The disc transport's accompanying TUBE-DAC II, marginally shallower at 100x482x375mm, features a 12AX7/ECC83 valve output section, which made for an ideal comparison with my trusty Musical Fidelity KW/DM25 combination. Both were heard, along with Quad's CDP99 II, through the McIntosh C2200/MC2102 pre/power combination feeding Wilson Sophias.

INTO THE STUDIO

Willy DeVille's latest, *Pistola* is graced with a gorgeous track called 'When I Get Home', which opens with a lone, strummed guitar and harmonies almost on a par with Poco. Sparse and atmospheric, it showcased the Accoustic Arts combination's 'signature' virtue, a quality so admirable that it may be the system's primary selling point: the recreation of space, allied to wonderful scale and openness. Although less transparent than this might

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suggest – I'm at a loss to explain how one can exist without the other – it ensures that the combination produces a huge, impressive, room-filling soundstage.

What does that have to do with a recording that's virtually 'unplugged' and minimalist? Simple: it allows you to hear the much-vaunted 'air' alluded to by golden ear-types for decades: the sound of the studio, or the room, or the stage. The notion carries on to the next track, 'Louise', a light country ballad, which also possesses its own sonic environment.

Rather more 'wall of sound' is Nick Lowe's 'So It Goes', sounding sensational on the recent best-of retrospective, *Quiet Please*. Superb transient attack is evident here, as well as rapid recovery: the refrain vocals appear in numerous locations, emerging out of nowhere and vanishing just as quickly, the Accoustic Arts package never failing to locate each voice as precisely as Lowe must have positioned them when sitting at his mixing desk. The impression of power is better revealed by the pounding drums of 'Heart of the City', which never overwhelm Lowe's primary instrument, the bass guitar.

A bit of grunge is always useful for testing a system's ability to separate textures, and you don't get further

ABOVE: The CD transport offers S/PDIF digital output via both RCA and BNC sockets plus a balanced AES/EBU digital output via XLR. The outboard DAC has both unbalanced (RCA) and balanced (XLR) analogue outputs

AUDIO FILE

CD transport/
outboard DAC
combination

Made by: SAE
GmbH & Co KG

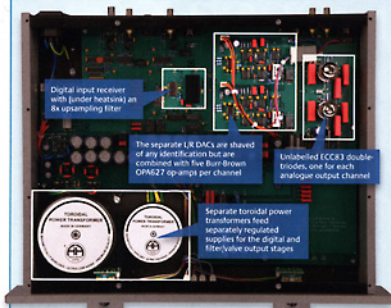
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ACCUSTIC ARTS DRIVE II/TUBE DAC II / £6750/£6150

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LAB
RESULTS



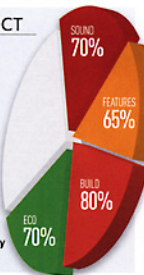
ABOVE: Spring-loaded rotary controls facilitate track selection on the transport and input selection on the DAC

apart than the guitar salvos which open Neil Young's latest, *Fork In The Road*, and his distinctive vocals. No way around it: Neil's voice is nasal and whiny and it could easily be engulfed by a guitar sound that harks back to his best work with Crazy Horse. The Acoustic Arts combination represented both voice and guitar proportionately, contrasting the sounds perfectly to show how one supports the other. Although the Musical Fidelity components retrieved more detail, the DRIVE II and TUBE DAC II demonstrated top-to-bottom coherence on a par with the kW/DM25 in valve output mode.

As for which of the two is the standout product, should you be shopping for just a transport or a high-end DAC on its own, mixing and matching showed the DAC to contribute more to the overall character than the transport, but that's consistent with nearly every two-box CD player package I've used. Because they're so closely matched in character, the DAC exhibiting a touch of warmth to balance out the coolness of the DRIVE II, it's clear they were designed for one another. To put it another way, there's no imbalance whatsoever, their synergy working as well as the two sections of the kW/DM25 or even the elderly Marantz CD-12. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

While the weak pound has upped the cost of this pair by at least 25% in the past year, even £9000 would be hard to justify: too many superior rivals sell for less. This Acoustic Arts combination, though, sounds genuinely warm and convincing – 'undigital' as it were – while the build is exceptional, the ergonomics faultless and the listening experience highly pleasurable. Extremely good, rather than great.



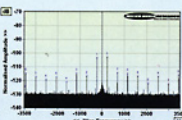
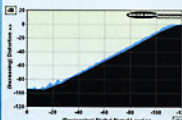
HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Acoustic Arts suggests a distortion figure of 0.003% for its TUBE DAC II which is pretty much spot-on from 20kHz through to 20kHz at the peak 4.25V available from the balanced analogue outputs. The complement is a largely benign 2nd harmonic derived from the double-triode output buffer rather than the op-amp-based differential amplifier that precedes it. Nevertheless the final A-wtd S/N ratio of just 95dB is way short of the 111dB achieved by its wholly solid-state DAC 1 (i/jFN, Oct '07).

Furthermore our sample demonstrated a difference both in noise and distortion between channels that probably relates to the tolerance in valve matching. At -30dBFS, for example, distortion was "0.01% through the left channel but "0.006% through the right which had a uniformly lower (some 6dB) noise floor.

Other parameters including the fine 99dB suppression of digital images, excellent low-level resolution at high frequencies and characteristically 'rippled' distortion vs. level trend (see graph, below left) are all linked to the choice of DAC technology, not the valves. The moderate 475pssec jitter [see graph, below right] is also inspired by the digital interface's upsampling and DACs rather than the analogue output. The output filtering is the responsible for the subtle tailoring of the DAC II's response, however, which rolls gently away through the mid-treble to reach -0.1dB at 5kHz and -0.8dB at 20kHz.

Readers are invited to view an extensive QC Suite report for the DRIVE II/TUBE DAC II CD transport/DAC combo by logging onto www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE LEFT: Distortion vs. digital signal level over a 120dBFS range at 1kHz (black) and 20kHz (blue); **ABOVE RIGHT:** High resolution CD jitter analysis

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|---|------------------|
| Maximum output level (balanced outputs) | 4.25Vrms |
| A-wtd S/N Ratio | 95.3dB |
| Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS) | 0.0022% / 0.006% |
| Distortion (20kHz, 0dBFS) | 0.0020% |
| Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz) | +0.0dB to -0.8dB |
| Digital jitter | 475pssec |
| Resolution (-100dB) | ±0.6dB |
| Stereo separation (20Hz-20kHz) | >65dB |