Music Hall DAC 25.2

By Mark Marcantonio

In the past few years, my audio affections have leaned to those companies that recognize both the value of tried-and-true methods as well as the future of audio. Topping that list is the simple acceptance that digital music servers, whether portable (iPod, etc) or streamed from the computer, are a permanent part of the audio landscape and need to be a part of the design of audio components. This concept starts with the inclusion of USB as an input source.

The Music Hall DAC 25.2 is one such multi-purpose unit. Not only does it have the traditional digital RCA and Toslink inputs for a DAC, but USB as well. The designer, Roy Hall, wisely saw the rise of music streaming not only from the computer hard drive but Internet radio as well. When I setup the DAC 25.2, one thing I was anticipating was the dearth of quality online radio, but more on that later.

Under the hood, the DAC 25.2 is designed around the Texas Instruments PCM 1796, a 24-bit, 192kHz chip, formerly Burr-Brown.

As with other products in the Music Hall lineup, the front panel of the DAC 25.2 is well laid out. The power button on the left is slightly larger than both the input button and sampling choices buttons. Just as nice, the distance between them is far enough to avoid confusing one for the other while pushing without looking. The headphone jack has a sure grip.

Straightforward Setup

Though the DAC 25.2 is only 8.5 inches wide and offers four inputs (COAX, Optical, XLR, USB) and two pairs of outputs (RCA or XLR), the back panel doesn't seem crowded. I filled up all the inputs for fun and found that my slightly thick fingers had no problem grasping individual cables. If there is one feature I've always appreciated about Roy Hall's products is that the labeling of the inputs and outputs is in a large-enough font to be easily read by the middle-aged and beyond.

Under the hood, the DAC 25.2 is designed around the Texas Instruments PCM 1796, a 24-bit, 192kHz chip, formerly Burr-Brown. Clocking, sampling and jitter are under the control of the TI SRC4192 chip. The physical layout is a bit unusual, with the power supply situated just behind the front panel, followed by the board. A single Electro-Harmonix 6922 tube bathes the interior in an orange glow.

Since the DAC 25.2 was created with the computer/digital audio crowd in mind, virtually all my time was spent with it paired with my iPod 160 gig with the Wadia i170 Transport, iBook laptop, or through the COAX out of a McIntosh MS 300 Music Server. Normally, I only have lossless files installed, but for this review, I loaded in a handful of lossy ones at 128, 256 and 320kb/sec sample rates.

Headphone Prowess

Music Hall solidly addresses the head-fi people by including a respectable solid-state headphone amplifier inside the 25.2. The volume-control knob rotates with just a slight tick for each incremental movement, an ergonomic feature I've always preferred. I tried a budget headphone, the Sennheiser 650, and their over-the-ear, top-of-the-line HD800. Good headphones are nice, but great ones transport you into musical nirvana, and that's where I stayed.

The HD 800's in combo with the DAC 25.2 did a fine job of covering up my frustration with not being able to listen to my main system while my wife worked the phone from her home office. *(continued)*

Cold Play's *Viva La Vida*, a recording usually listened to only when she is out of the house, became a part of my daily playlist. The same went for several Elvis Costello discs as well. The headphone amp section gives the listener a fairly wide soundstage.

Obviously there are some fine dedicated headphone amps out there that will go beyond what the DAC 25.2 can do, but remember that this is a jack-of-all-trades unit for just $599, so there are going to be a few compromises along the way. Hardcore headphone enthusiasts might want to invest in their dedicated ph 25.2 headphone amplifier, which is an additional $395.

Choices, Choices, Choices

It's highly suggested that one play around with the three sampling choices – non-upsampling, 96kHz and 192kHz – to find the one most sonically pleasing. The real treat for me was the bump up in musicality when hearing the DAC 25.2 output with the glassy warmth of the 6922 tube. With the exception of the Neko D100, budget DAC's and some others exude a dryness that ranges from subtle to downright sterile. With the 6922 in place, Roy Hall found a reasonable way around this issue.

With its slim footprint, the DAC 25.2 was easy to plug into my three systems, keeping the power cord and interconnects consistent. In my home-office system, the DAC 25.2 plugged into an Aura Note 50wpc all-in-one music system powering ACI Emerald XL mini-monitors. This setup gave me an excuse to try out a variety of Internet radio stations, including two from my college days. The DAC 25.2 really shines in this sort of non-headphone setup. Between the chips and the tube, the office never sounded better.

For classical- and jazz-music fans who live outside large population centers, Internet radio is a great ride. The DAC 25.2 tube output brings out the third dimension that gives horns and strings the rich sound quality that goes missing so much of the time with digitally sourced music. Even the 128K streaming from Pandora improved to where I could actually listen without being critical of the quality I was hearing. The DAC 25.2 is no Paganini, but it does bring back a portion of liveliness that was lost during the compression process.

With lossless files, the news is even better. The DAC 25.2 is a tremendous step up from the D/A conversion coming out from the built-in chips and software of a desktop or laptop computer. It's instantly recognizable that improvement is at hand, much like a new set of tires on a car. The acoustic guitar work on my favorite William Ackerman CD's had the depth and decay that were missing prior to the inclusion of the DAC 25.2.

System Synergy

Tubes for all their intoxicating warmth can get too heavy in some situations. I found the combination of the DAC 25.2's 6922 tube paired with the all-vacuum-tube Vista Audio integrated amplifier too gooey for my taste. Speed and attack lagged; much like a really rich dessert, it's good but just too much. However, those with a system that's a little more on the sterile side, particularly many with class-D amplification, the DAC 25.2 could be a pleasant upgrade. When paired with my modded PS Audio Trio C100 integrated amplifier, the additional warmth and detail was welcome and female vocals that were thin in the past now had an extra dose of sultriness.

The DAC 25.2's final stop was my reference system, featuring the Sim Audio i7 integrated amp, Neko Audio D100 DAC, McIntosh MS300 music server and Eficion F200 speakers, connected with AudioArt cabling and Shunyata Venom cords. In comparing the DAC25.2 with the Neko Audio D100, the Neko offered up greater resolution, speed, warmth and a bigger sound. The DAC 25.2 has advantages in that it offers four input sources, user-switchable sampling choices, and the headphone output.

Final Call

At $599, it's tough to find fault with a product as versatile as the DAC 25.2. This is an affordable DAC that offers great functionality, and it's a significant jump in resolution from a budget CD player, or a computer with basic soundcard.

The narrow footprint makes it easy to integrate into a compact space, and when used with something like the Wadia 170i, it can be the cornerstone of a great office system. Thanks to balanced and RCA outputs, it also works well as the control center of a digital-based HiFi system. Or a dedicated, compact headphone system. I'd love to see Music Hall follow Benchmark's lead and add one analog input for those wanting to add a turntable to the mix. ●

The Music Hall Dac 25.2
MSRP: $599

MANUFACTURER

Music Hall Audio
www.musichallaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Amplifier Simaudio Moon i-7 integrated, PS Audio Trio C100, Vista Audio

Speakers Eficion F200 w/ MartinLogan Grotto i Subwoofer

Digital Sources McIntosh MS300, Wadia i170, MacBook Pro

Cable Shunyata, Audioquest