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Totaldac D1-Direct DAC Review

Rafe Arnott | Jan 18, 2019



LA

Expectations can be a tricky thing. Some people say they are *essential*, others are of the “don’t get your expectations up” camp.

I usually fall somewhere in the middle, but when it was time to write the review of the totaldac d1-direct which sprang forth from the mind of French high-fidelity electronics guru Vincent Brient, I must say I had some serious expectations.

Having previously spent a considerable amount of time with his d1-integral DAC (\$8,970 USD) as part of a long-term review and having heard both his d1-tube mk2 (\$10,380 USD) and d1-six DAC (\$14,000 USD) several times at hi-fi shows, I was familiar with the high-resolution, but corporeally-imbued sound of his R2R (ladder) DAC designs, so when he offered me his latest design, and highest spec’d single-box unit for review (along with the d1-seven) – the d1-direct (\$19,820 USD) – I didn’t hesitate to accept.

And to be perfectly honest, not only did I have expectations, let me also add that I had a few palpitations.



Let me explain... Brient's creations have a bit of the dark arts in them in my experience. They are possessed of mystery when listening to them in the sense of I don't really want to know (or care) what's going on under the sleek casework. More alchemy by candlelight in their build than fluorescent lights and sterile laboratory to my mind, I sometimes wish I could be ignorant of the electronic machinations occurring within turning digital bits into analog waves. I *like* the whole "magic in a box" idea. Sometimes I get gear in (like the d1-direct) that just simply *creates* sound. Summarized more as physical musical instrument or organic entity which I imbue with human traits, than a processor and translator of binary information: a silver box traversing this mortal coil if you will.



Let's now talk about the man himself...

Brient grew up, lives and plies his trade near the landmark Mont Saint-Michel in France and in my conversations with him over the years told me that his interest in electronic design started when he was young and he took it upon himself to start improving high-fidelity electronics equipment because of his passion for both music and electronic circuit design. His initial forays into the hobby started with DIY DAC projects. Many of which were met with enthusiasm by local audiophiles who wanted that same signature sound, but in a plug-and-play chassis specification – not something they had to build themselves. Over the intervening years more and more high-end sound system owners wanted Brient's designs as a core component to their set ups and today it's not unusual to see his flagship three-box d1-twelve mk2 DAC (\$34,000 USD) in \$100,000 USD+ home systems.



Utilizing custom DAC technology developed in-house for conversion and custom FPGA (Field Programmable Gate Array) technology for processing, along with proprietary anti-jitter clock, output stage and massive copper-plate chassis damping, along with an unique trapezoidal-shaped enclosure, Brient has created a dedicated following of audiophile customers who continue to support his designs over other similarly-priced high-end DACs. The core of the totaldac designs is the R2R ladder itself, which in the case of the d1-direct contains 288 hand-matched 0.01 per cent VAR Bulk Metal Vishay Foil resistors at its heart and *direct* unbalanced 1.6v outputs which feature newly configured offset management and optimized filtering to pass along the delicate signals converted by the proprietary non-oversampling DAC. An ergonomic, easy-to-use remote control is included as is a dedicated, separately-housed and shielded umbilical-connected linear power supply.

Like all totaldac DACs equipped with the server option, it is RoonReady. My d1-direct did not come fitted with this option (USB-in only) so I fed it the ones and zeros (FLAC, WAV, DSD, mp3, MQA) via an Aurender N10 Music Server. Totaldacs are not MQA certified and Brient has no plans at this time to offer hardware-decoding of MQA so it's software unfolding only via the Aurender MQA core decoder (in this case output sampling rates of 88.2kHz or 96kHz from MQA encoded content).

Associated Equipment



For this review I used the Aurender N10 music server (for those not in the know, it does on-the-fly precision DSD to PCM conversion by FPGA) connected to the d1-direct using a combo of local library files along with Tidal and Qobuz-sourced files via the infinitely-capable Aurender *Conductor* application. The d1-direct fed into a McIntosh C2600 tubed preamplifier via RCA which in turn passed the signal along via balanced XLR to a pair of McIntosh MC611 mono blocks that were connected alternatively to Harbeth 40.1s and DeVore Fidelity Gibbon Xs. All digital and analog cabling was TellriumQ Black, UltraBlack, Silver or Diamond. AC cabling was supplied by Clarus Cables in the guise of their Crimson line and all power was handled by a PS Audio Power Plant P20 DirectStream.



Listening

I listened to *everything* I could think of through the d1-direct: jazz, electronica, blues, punk rock, classical, folk, new wave, classic rock, chamber music, grunge, experimental – you name it. That's the beauty of Tidal and Qobuz through Conductor: millions of songs and albums are at your fingertips in either 16/44, MQA-24/48, 24/96 or higher sampling rates – even 24/192 through my Qobuz account... never mind all the high-resolution or DSD albums I've got stored locally on the Aurender's internal 4TB drive. And despite my best efforts to get the d1 to put a foot amiss, not once did it ever let me down. Let be clear, not only did it not let me down, it thrilled, surprised, wowed and disturbed me with its preternatural ability to translate digital content into emotionally-charged musical playback.



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COMPANY INFO

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COMMENTS



How about some comparison
Submitted by ohlins on January 18, 2019 - 7:46pm

How about some comparison with the d1-seven?

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Seriously compare?

Submitted by Rafe Arnott on January 18, 2019 - 7:56pm

I'm not sure if you read the whole article...? I clearly state I've had the d1-integral in my home, and that I've heard the d1-six and tube mk2 several times at shows. I don't mention hearing the d1-seven at all. I don't have the d1-seven... so how about I don't compare something I haven't heard.

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Yes, I did read the review

Submitted by ohlins on January 19, 2019 - 10:58pm

Yes, I did read the review but didn't notice who was doing the review. I thought Michael was doing the review.

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Michael Lavorgna

Submitted by Venere 2 on January 25, 2019 - 12:52pm

Michael has moved on from Audiostream. He left last year.

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Totaldac review

Submitted by rugbyboogie on February 24, 2019 - 9:19am

Congrats on the new addition to your family. Hope that mom is doing well. Do you still have the Totaldac in your system?

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Thanks!

Submitted by Rafe Arnott on February 24, 2019 - 10:14am

For the kind words... yes, the totaldac is still in my system and I plan on doing comparisons between it and the LampizatOr Pacific, dCS Rossini and the Audio Note DAC 5 Special once those forthcoming reviews are completed.

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Dac

Submitted by rugbyboogie on February 24, 2019 - 4:04pm

That is quite the list of Uber dac's to review. This will take some time and looking forward to reading your review/impressions. Take care and enjoy your sunshine.

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Sooner...

Submitted by Rafe Arnott on February 24, 2019 - 4:38pm

...rather than later is the plan. I'm very lucky to have this level of gear to compare – it's difficult to come back down from these sonic heights.

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I cannot wait to hear the

Submitted by Ejlif on February 28, 2019 - 11:50pm

I cannot wait to hear the comparison between the DCS Rossini and the TotalDac!

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totaldac d1-direct

Submitted by nick on September 7, 2019 - 7:39pm

Just picked one of these up, and can confirm it's spectacular. More so than anything I have heard before, it sounds like a cross between an analog source and digital. My friend said it sounds like what would happen if a turntable and a CD player had a baby.

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HA! I love it.

Submitted by Rafe Arnott on September 8, 2019 - 3:07pm

Great description of the totaldac... I'll use that analogy some day. Thank you!

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