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Senior Member

 Join Date: Jan 2015
 Location: Coggeshall, Essex, UK
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 I'm chris.

SW1X: A review of a new DAC from a new company

This is my first review --- be gentle with me !

The purpose of this review is to describe my time with the **SW1X DAC1**, as designed and built by Dr Slawa Roschkow

I will not be writing this review from a technical perspective, firstly because there are others far better informed than myself, but also because I don't believe I listen to music and enjoy it with the technical side of my brain. Music can soothe me, and excite me in equal measure, and I can and I do lose myself in it. Only when I am painting my daubs do I detach so thoroughly.

Therefore, I want a hifi system that puts as little between myself and the performer as possible - if I notice the system itself (after the inevitable initial adjustment for it) then the system is probably not for me.

I have bought enough hifi gear - especially in my early days - from very well known dealers and even better known manufacturers based on a 15/30 minute audition where it's brightness and I now realize (misplaced) 'detail' impressed me so. Only to live with the same components and after a while find them almost unlistenable.

Upfront I have to state that I am personally convinced that all DACs *do not sound the same*. I have no desire to enter into a debate about all DACs being equal and that it is only 0's and 1's after-all, and also that higher sampling rates *have* to be better. *From my own experience I know that this is incorrect*. I will leave Slawa of SW1X and others better qualified than myself, to explain why; be it the impact of sound shaping, master clocks and negative feedback loops etc -- basically *I am* interested in the reasons why - but *not that* interested!

I have been something of a box swapper in the past and as a result I have tried quite a few DACs; at least a dozen, from the very cheap Chinese, via the latest tube-based favourite, or the new must-have simplified USB-only model and onto a 2 box design - and in most cases I have been able to find something I liked about them; but they always felt digital and somehow synthetic - it didn't always *feel like music* is the best way I can describe it. I was always drawn more to tube based units and was resigned to accepting the accusation - that I now know to be false - that I seemed to prefer distortion over transparency. Indeed, even with a well regarded £1,000 transistor based DAC, I found myself putting a Musical Fidelity tube buffer in the listening chain - I now realize this probably helped with an impedance mismatch as much as adding tube 'warmth' but whatever - I knew something was lacking.

What is it that was lacking?

When I hear music live I perceive it as a whole and complete experience and my aim will always be to try and recapture that, I will inevitably fail but some systems can bring me a lot closer than others. There have been numerous times when I have been sidetracked in this - just as I had been with my early hifi shop auditions, by the increased *perceived transparency* I was hearing - with some DACs I initially marveled that I was witnessing more detail in the percussion for example, and I focused on that. What I failed to realize was that the music shaping was unbalancing the sound and in fact the detail was now too prominent - if the band were playing live in front of me I would not have been homing in on the drummer or the pianist, I would be listening the music in the round - the detail would be there but it wouldn't drown out other parts - the very details I was treasuring were in fact proof that I was not hearing the music as it was played - *I wonder how many others can relate to this?*

How did I come to discover this?

I guess the first time I heard a truly balanced and *truly musical* system was an audition at the SW1X designer Slawa's house. But now I can hear something very similar in my own home with the SW1X DAC 1. This DAC is not the last word in what can be achieved (it is the SW1X base model) and the same goes for the rest of my equipment; but it provides me with great pleasure and at a price I can justify and afford --- in truth I can often justify spending more but right now I can't afford it!

The DAC 1 is in a simple but sturdy and reassuringly heavy casing and has nicely understated labelling -- it weighs in at roughly 5.5kg and the craftsmanship inside is excellent.

Much of the wiring is solid silver (not silver plated copper) the RCA connectors are of obviously quality and it uses the TDA1543 chip a Non Over Sampling design.

It employs a tube output stage with zero feedback.

For this review I have it coupled with a SW1X USB 1 transport (a USB/SPDIF convertor) and connected to my Innuos Zen music player (NAS & Server) and onto a Clones 25i integrated amplifier that plays through Impulse H2 speakers.

(The USB 1 converter – *to my slight surprise if I am honest* – makes a meaningful difference to the sound quality, but that can be discussed elsewhere.)

My summary of the SW1X DAC 1: *it is musical, it delivers a human quality and ultimately it does not feel digital.*

I have heard an analogy of taking a veil off of the music and I understand that now – it is like having a pair of reading glasses for too long, your eyes adjust to the slowly deteriorating sight day by day – but then you get a new pair with the correct prescription and everything is suddenly clearer and more vivid and true.

This is what the DAC has been for me BUT, and it is a very large 'but' – it is still a musically balanced sound.

The music I hear is 'cleaner' without being at all clinical or cold. The detail is there without doubt and I can home in on a particular instrument should I want to – but it is not placed there for me, out of time.

Just as in real life I can decide if I want to focus on just the drumming etc because it is not imposed on me by the DAC. I read an article highlighting how wondrous and sophisticated our ears and brains are. The example used was our ability to be able to hear a conversation between two people across a room, by simply filtering out all the noise around us – it is incredible we can do that, and to me it proves that the best filtering (if it is needed) lies in our own heads and we do not need an algorithm to impose filtering on us.

I now understand a little more about the technical side of things, but that will always be secondary for me. But I am happier than ever that there is someone out there who shares the same aims and is doing the research -- and I have learned Slawa's research is all via listening tests – despite being very technical he is not persuaded by 'the numbers' which can and do lie. 'Lies, damn lies and statistics' springs to mind (I admit I was a risk analyst by trade) and as an example the reported DAC resolution and sampling rates are only theoretical and are at the chip level, not the DAC output itself, the DAC that contains all the other 'noisy' components operating simultaneously with the chip, for instance.

To conclude, I think you can tell from the tone of this review that I am a fan of the SW1X products --- I am – the best feedback I can give is that *I am listening to more music now than before.*

I am a happy customer and in time I may look higher up the SW1X chain of products but right now I am very happy with my Level One experience.

Hats off to Slawa and SW1X !



**Post-script**

For transparency I want to note that I enjoyed the DAC so much that I am considering joining Slawa in his venture, but *this review reflects my honest unbiased opinion* if I join Slawa it will only be because I believe in what he is trying to establish.

Last edited by hughandella; 15-04-2016 at 10:51. Reason: updated photos