

Metrum Hex DAC

By Jason Kennedy

Scale doesn't always count in this business. Sure, the bigger companies have the marketing clout to get their products the widest exposure, and some of them have the R&D facilities to do things that small brands can only dream about. But, when it comes to inspiration, one man is as likely to succeed as 20 and that seems to be the case with Dutch electronics company Metrum Acoustics. The Hex is its latest and most ambitious converter, but it was preceded by two others of which the Octave still remains. That £699 non-oversampling (NOS) DAC is the best I've heard at its price point and some way beyond. It's small, comes in two boxes and only has S/PDIF inputs, so no USB, but delivers stunning sound quality. As the name infers, it has eight DAC chips (four per channel) and these are of a type that Metrum describes rather vaguely as high speed for industrial applications, the point being that they are not off the shelf 24/192 chips that are found in most other DACs.

The Metrum converters will run at up to 24-bits/15MHz, so in speed terms are considerably more capable than they need to be, but apparently are not straight forward to implement in an audio circuit. The lack of a USB input was about the only thing standing between the Octave and global domination, that and the fact that Metrum is a small operation with rather limited clout in the market-place.

The company released its latest DAC in 2012, Hex has twice as many converter chips as Octave which makes you wonder why it has a name that

means six, as it turns out the name is short for hexadecagon which is a sixteen sided object. The Hex is a single box converter with multiple S/PDIF inputs including BNC and the option of both asynchronous USB and/or AES/EBU. Outputs are both single ended, with Lundahl output transformers, and balanced which reflects the fact that Hex is a balanced or dual differential converter. I used the RCA phono single ended output for this review.

It is solid rather than elaborate in construction, with buttons for each input and an LED on each that blinks when there is no signal. This is useful during set-up but slightly irritating when the DAC's not in use. The key is to select the input that has a connection when you are using another source, presumably it's only reviewers who have multiple converters powered up but only one connected to the source so this will not be an issue in normal situations.

In the system with a Naim UnitiServe hooked up to the BNC input Metrum Hex is a truly inspirational sounding DAC, it is relaxed, open, extremely revealing and has superb timing and dynamics. The Octave is good, but this is in another league to most of the other converters on the market, I don't know which converter chips it uses but I urge other DAC makers to investigate at the earliest opportunity. I didn't have one to hand but the DAC that comes to mind as being close in many respects is the MSB Platinum IV Signature, a £12,000





► converter last time I looked and among the very best on the planet. The Hex really does punch at that level. It is high definition in terms of detail resolution, very strong on dynamics and beautifully timed. You get all the life out of a recording without the grain that often accompanies vibrant sounding digital audio. It is vinyl standard in all except noise levels which are naturally much lower. It doesn't sound like vinyl because there isn't the character of mechanical playback that is intrinsic to the format but it does all the good things that vinyl can; energy, excitement and considerable musical communication. Put on a decent hi res recording like Antonio Forcione's *Meet Me in London* (Naim Label, 24/192) and the musicians are placed firmly in the room in such living, breathing form that only your eyes will tell you it ain't so. Despite Forcione's undoubted skill on the acoustic guitar, it's the fretless bass playing that caught my attention. It comes across because the Hex reveals almost as much about the quieter instruments in the mix as it does for those at centre stage. This is clearly an extremely quiet converter, one that keeps highs clean and presents them in a solid, tangible fashion so that they recreate the defining edges of each note in a convincing fashion.

Inconveniently it can't turn an OK recording into a great one, someone suggested I revisit Zappa's *Make A Jazz Noise Here*, which I did in the hope of finding

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something that the original CD had not revealed last time I played it. Sadly this was not to be; it remains one of his more difficult works both tonally and in performance terms but at least it revealed the reggae guitar on 'the Black Page' and inspired the notion that Zappa was the Ellington of his era, even if the music he chose to make didn't win quite such a wide audience.

When using the Hex with a computer it needs the M2Tech Hiface driver and with this installed on a MacBook Air alongside the Decibel software player I discovered that the DAC doesn't need the 5volt connection to the PC – I had a prototype cable from CAD that cuts this link. This set-up revealed the Hex's open and detailed presentation rather well, bringing out the depth of tone in voices and an all round subtlety with lots of reverb if less muscle than the UnitiServe. It worked particularly well with string quartets where the openness served the melody beautifully and revealed the timbre of the instruments.

On a higher level it also revealed the mercurial playing of Keith Jarrett on the piece 'Flying Pt. 1' (*Changes*, ECM), the piano has a very strong presence in the room almost as powerful as that of the player with all his verbalisations. But they don't matter, nor do the slightly glassy high notes of the recording because the focus is totally on the mesmeric nature of the performance. A better and younger recording of Jarrett playing solo (*Testament*, ECM) reveals ►

- ▶ more of the instrument's scale and weight which helps to produce the visceral power of the live experience.

The CAD 1543 I reviewed a few months back has quieter backgrounds and a calmer more revealing presentation but it is three times the price. The Hex is a bit more upbeat, it seems to emphasis leading edges and so times better and produces a less refined but equally compulsive musical experience. That's not to say that the Hex is forward or lacking in refinement, it's just that most DACs suffer in this respect next to the CAD. The Hex is in fact more subtle and transparent than the majority of converters on the market which at the price is a remarkable achievement. Next to DACs that are strong when it comes to pace, rhythm and timing it ups the ante and makes them seem merely eager to please. Next to some well regarded alternatives at pretty exalted prices it improves both focus and coherence, imaging is precise and soundstages are fully extended both in depth and width, the only limitation appears to be the rest of the system in this regard.

More important than that is the degree of musical enjoyment it can extract from a CD transport or digital file player, so much so that I 'sat on' the Hex for several months before I told the editor about it. Once a review has been commissioned and the deadline met it's inevitable that the product will be wanted by its owner and I was keen to hold onto it for as long as I could. In truth I contemplated establishing what I could buy it for. Then I remembered all the more pressing expenses that get in the way of the pursuit of audio nirvana, I really must get a proper job!

The Hex worked well with a number of components including Naim, Townshend and Velvet amps and PMC, Bowers & Wilkins and ATC loudspeakers alongside various digital sources. In each case different facets of its abilities were revealed and all of them were enthralling.

Will this DAC get the recognition it deserves? I think so, Metrum may not have the marketing budget of a major but the word will spread once enough early adopters have enjoyed it. It's interesting to look up the Octave on various forums, it seems many have traded in more expensive converters and use S/PDIF to USB converters to play files through it. Not only do you not have to do that here but you get a genuinely high end DAC with balanced and SE outputs. Perhaps I should put this plainly: Hex is a beg, borrow or become a banker high end bargain. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Non oversampling

S/PDIF digital inputs: 2x optical Toslink, RCA coax, BNC

USB: 24/192 option

AES/EBU: 110 ohm option

Outputs: RCA Neutrik SE, XLR balanced

Output impedance: RCA 40 Ohms, XLR 80 Ohms

Sampling frequency: Optical 44- 96kHz, Coax, USB, AES/EBU 44 – 192kHz

Size WxDxH: 320 x 320 x 85mm

Weight: 5.5kg

Price: £2,299

Options: USB input £163.20, AES/EBU input £163.20, USB & AES £325.99

Distributor: iStereos

URL: www.istereos.co.uk

Manufacturer: Metrum Acoustics

URL: www.nosminidac.nl