



Eighth wonder

Another month, another DAC, but **David Vivian** believes this eight-input converter from Denmark is a bit special

Hi-fi's hottest topic over the past few years? DACs, I reckon. The add-on kind we buy to take care of digital business with the expectation of dedicated care and, ultimately, superior sonics. Before the advent of Arcam's pioneering Black Box back in 1988, the idea wasn't even an idea. Now, outboard DACs are the rock stars of any digitally based system, agonised over and judged for sexiness of tech. Field Programmable Gate Arrays (FPGAs), bespoke code, PCM to DSD conversion, resistor-based R2R ladder DACs, non-oversampling (NOS) regimes, Ring DACs – it's all somehow more alluring than the latest 'off-the-shelf' Delta Sigma chipset choices which, nonetheless, are scrutinised for the latest model numbers and peer-trumping published specs. Obsessive behaviour? This is hi-fi, what can I tell you?

On the face of it, the NewOtech DAC 08's reliance not on a trendy ESS

SABRE or AKM chip but a 32-bit Burr-Brown device which tops out at 192kHz, appears to be curiously behind the curve. Not at all, says NewOtech founder and boss, Ole Nielsen. Its presence in the DAC 08 is informed entirely by the value of an 'intensive listening' process end-to-end which, in turn, can only be meaningfully achieved by the company's painstaking, in-house methodology.

Founded in 1990, NewOtech remains a small family business and its output – pre, power and phono amps as well as DACs – is all designed and built in-house. It prides itself in using only the best components, some of which are its own designs while, in certain cases, component choice (capacitors, resistors, connectors etc.) are made in collaboration with the customer. Now that's what you call bespoke. NewOtech will also paint your unit any colour you like if the standard chart doesn't hit the spot.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
NewOtech DAC 08

ORIGIN
Denmark

TYPE
Digital-to-analogue converter

WEIGHT
4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
240 x 90 x 290mm

FEATURES

- 32-bit/192kHz PCM/DSD capable DAC
- Digital inputs: asynchronous USB-B; 2x coaxial (one RCA, one XLR); BNC; 3x optical
- Analogue outputs: 2x single-ended RCA; 2x balanced XLR

DISTRIBUTOR
Val HiFi

WEBSITE
newontech.dk
valhifi.co.uk

The DAC 08, which effectively replaces the DAC 07 SE, belongs to NewOtech's more recent tranche of products (AMP 10, AMP 20, PRE 08 and RIAA 08) that aim to deliver true high-end performance at more accessible price points. To ensure this is more than a hollow promise, the company seeks approval from a panel of 'leading audio experts', specially recruited to scrutinise everything from design to sound quality, before anything can be signed off.

With casework fashioned from wonderfully tactile heavy grade aluminium (which can be painted your hue of choice, the DAC 08, as its

There's a palpable weight and presence to the DAC 08's glorious sound

name suggests, has no fewer than eight inputs, including one asynchronous USB type-B, two coaxial (one RCA, one XLR), one BNC and three optical. Outputs run to a pair of single-ended RCAs and a pair of balanced XLRs.

Serving the optical and coaxial inputs is a Crystal digital receiver. The receiver and its Phase-Locked Loop (PLL) have their own dedicated power supplies, while the Burr-Brown DAC chips are driven via a buffer stage to ensure the integrity of the data being fed them. The USB input stage consists of a bit-perfect Amanero USB Audio 2.0 with asynchronous clocking. The USB input feeds the

DAC through an I2S interface in an effort to minimise jitter and secure timing accuracy.

The output stage employs a discrete differential, multiple feedback filter and output amplifier, with a high cut-off frequency for use with higher sample rates. NewOtech elected not to use a sample rate converter and instead processes the data at the incoming sample rate to keep signal processing to a minimum. Jitter is minimised by synchronously clocking the digital data.

There is no display, just a power up/down button and a rotary knob to move between the eight digital inputs. You'll look in vain for a remote, too, but provision to use a PC or laptop as file storage/source is extensive and unusually audiophile-centric, with particular attention paid to eradicating the noise artefacts computers are typically plagued by.

Sound quality

The sound of a pencil drumming on an empty notepad. More drumming. This won't do. But I'm trying, I really am, to drag my attention away from the music playing – admittedly not easy listening to a Tidal Master stream of Jacob Collier's astonishingly beautiful take on *Bridge Over Troubled Water* – so I can write something down. But I really don't want to. Is this a good sign?

Arguably the best kind. And it stems, initially at least, from what seems to me a presentation with close to an absolute absence of manipulative character teamed with near perfect balance and cohesion. Nothing 'hi-fi' is grabbing me, just the emotional swell of Collier's blissful harmonic progressions.

It's obvious that the DAC 08's style is not to deliver a rendition of best-possible-case clarity, master-tape-like bandwidth and solidity. Far from it. The similarly priced Chord Hugo TT2 (HFC 468) I normally listen to



I've already mentioned Chord's Hugo TT2 which, over the last few years, has become the go-to DAC recommendation at this price point. It's a remarkable piece of kit, capable of combining fire and finesse like little else. But it sounds quite different to the DAC 08. A closer match, sonically, is a recent Group Test winner from Italy, the £2,500 Synthesis Roma 69 DC (HFC 509). It uses the much-favoured Ashai Kasei AK4495 SEQ chip and we concluded that it's a lovely sounding DAC that, like the DAC 08, is perhaps a little on the euphonic side but never less than a pleasure to hear.



sounds more 'studio' – brighter and tighter with a more emphatic sense of timing, transparency, separation and soundstage dimensionality. But, without question, the DAC 08's strengths possess more than a hint of the idealised 'warmth' and fluidity associated with good quality analogue and that's a particularly easy sonic pillow to relax into.

Whatever it's fed, the DAC 08 sounds unerringly analogue – in a good way

Its strengths very much gravitate towards body and soul. This is a musical converter for the ages, and never mind its seemingly run-of-the-mill, 'off-the-shelf' chipset. A perceived absence of overt analysis doesn't mean it isn't lushly detailed or lacks insight, more that nothing seems forced or spot-lit in any way. The voicing sounds natural, not tickled up for effect and there's a palpable weight and presence to the DAC 08's glorious sound.

Anyone with an allergic reaction to sharply etched, lean-sounding DACs will find a welcome home here. The tonal gait is more Eagles than Scritti Politti, though a spin with either artist is a richly textured joy. Bass has rewarding heft, suppleness and extension while midband and treble are similarly wholesome and expressive. Subtle dynamic gradations are more successfully despatched than extremes and perhaps this isn't the airiest-sounding DAC you'll ever hear. But it certainly doesn't want for delicacy or atmosphere and this pays handsome dividends listening to Andrea and Matteo Bocelli singing Hans Zimmer's tender arrangement of *Time To Say Goodbye*. Gorgeous.

Conclusion

Sonically warm, subtle and seductive, I wouldn't feel inclined to recommend the DAC 08 to anyone who feeds on an exclusive diet of Motörhead and Iron Maiden. That accepted, this DAC's musical tastes are wholly genre agnostic and, whatever it's fed, it does sound unerringly analogue – in a good way. Something for (nearly) everyone, then ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Warm, musical sound; 8 inputs; build

DISLIKE: No display; it's perhaps not one for headbangers

WE SAY: A fine, purist DAC that is an absolute joy to live with