





## HEGEL HD10 DAC

List Price: \$1,200

Review by  
**Dr. John Richardson**  
&  
**James L. Darby**

### Is it warm in Norway this time of year?

From the cold and austere clime of Norway comes the subject of this review: the HD10 digital to analog converter from Hegel. While this company may be new to most of us over in the states, it's actually been around for quite some time, designing high quality (and high end) audio gear for discerning European music lovers.

Based on what I have read, Hegel made something of a splash at the 2009 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest (RMAF), showing systems that included amplifier, preamplifier, integrated amplifier, cd player, and the HD10 DAC, which retails for \$1200 here. Attendees (including our own James Darby) commented on the outstanding sound of the Hegel components, making them some of the more memorable offerings at the show. Given my present penchant for computer audio and outboard DACs, I was more than pleased when James made me the offer to review the HD10.

This being my initial exposure to Hegel gear, I had no prior expectations. So go ahead and surprise me! Upon receiving the package, I found inside an understated black box, as well as an even more understated manual. I'm actually one of those rare guys who enjoys perusing the manual of any audio device before installing it and plugging it in. *All reviewers should read the manual first. One of the biggest pet peeves of designers is that reviewers take setup and use for granted, often misusing the device as it was designed - publisher* Compared to the manuals supplied by manufacturers such as Benchmark and Lavry, whose products I have recently reviewed, the HD10's manual was a letdown. While it gives the basics to get set up and running, as well as the typical rundown of technical specifications, it went into no detail regarding design decisions or optimization, especially when using a computer source.



On to the black box... The DAC itself is, like the Lavry DA11 and Benchmark DAC1 equivalents, a black half-width affair. On the faceplate is a single pushbutton control for choosing the digital source: coax 1 or 2, optical (toslink), or USB. The rear panel sports the aforementioned inputs, as well as two sets of outputs: single ended RCA and balanced XLR. The manual suggests that the best performance is achieved using the balanced outputs, but I stuck with the single ended since that's what my Klyne preamp accepts. Altogether, this is a minimalist but attractive package. Nowhere to be seen are the headphone outputs or user accessible processing options available on the pro audio units I have recently reviewed; this product is obviously meant for the home audio market. Inside, according to the manual, is a 24 bit, 192 kHz sigma-delta DAC chip offering "synchronous upsampling" as well as a toroidal transformer boasting 30,000 microfarad capacitors.

Given the HD10's simplicity, interfacing with my computer was a breeze. My Mac Mini immediately recognized it in the Audio MIDI as "USB Audio DAC." However, unlike the Benchmark and Lavry DACs, it appeared that I was limited to 44.1 and 48 kHz resolutions at 16 bit word length as my only input options when using USB. Hmm, a bit disheartening, no? Well, not a problem if we feed the HD10 Red Book material, but what about hi-res music files? According to the "FAQ" section for the HD10 on Hegel's website, hi-res files are fine, but they will be downsampled by iTunes (or other playback software) prior to reaching the USB receiver chip and then upsampled again (presumably to 24/192 resolution) by the internal DAC. Indeed, I fed the HD10 digital files from my hard drive of all manner of word length and resolution, all the way up to 24/96, and noticed no problems with regard to playback. However, I often wonder if all of this processing is a good thing, as I tend to be somewhat of a minimalist when it comes to massaging bits. Ultimately, the answer will lie in the listening... so hang in there! *You're right John...it's always better to play back files in their native bitrates - publisher*

## So, really, how warm is it in Norway this time of year?

OK, so back to the original question. Norway is known for snow, cold, wind, and lots of darkness. So is that how the HD10 sounds? In a nutshell, not at all! In fact, I'm pretty sure that this is the warmest, most analog sounding digital playback I have had in my system. After listening for a few weeks, James Darby asked me for my initial impression of the HD10.

Going back to the email I sent him, I see descriptive words such as "warm," "round," "pleasant," and "tubelike." If I were to compare the HD10 to either the Lavry DAC family or the Benchmark offerings, I'd definitely say that the HD10 offers a much more similar sound signature to the Lavry DA10/11 units, but

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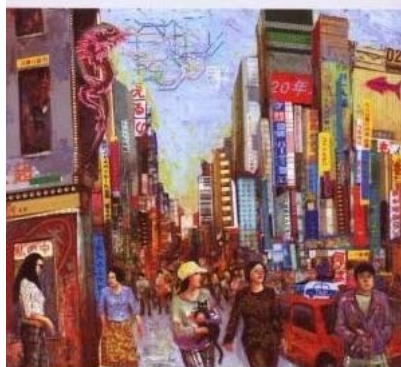
with even more warm and fuzzy goodness if you know what I mean. Gone entirely is the slightly analytical and threadbare midrange of the Benchmark DAC1. Notes emanated rounder, fatter, and with more natural decay and timbre, sort of like one would expect from a good classic vacuum tube amplifier.

As you may have picked up from reading my other reviews, I like to digitize vinyl, primarily for the convenience of playback using my computer server. However, I like the music to still sound as analog-like as possible. For better or worse, the playback from the HD10 sounds the most like the original vinyl of any DAC I have tried to date. In fact, after doing appropriate noise reduction, I would dare say I almost prefer the digital files played back through the HD10 to the original vinyl!



So then, what are the drawbacks? Well, I detect a very slight loss of resolution when compared to my present digital setup, which consists of a Lavry DA10 fed via the coaxial input using an ART Legato USB to S/PDIF converter. I must say that overall, the Lavry/ART combo has given me the best (Red Book) digital playback to date: just the right combination of detail and warmth. However, the Lavry/ART duo gives up a little bit of warm, analog goodness to the Hegel, so personal preference and system matching (as always) will play an important role in each prospective buyer's decision. Keep in mind that these are minor differences, and I can honestly say that I could live quite happily with either for a long time.

PAT METHENY w/ CHRISTIAN McBRIDE & ANTONIO SANCHEZ TOKYO DAY TRIP LIVE EP



As I write this, I'm listening contentedly to Pat Metheny's new album "Tokyo Day Trip." On "Troms" the bass sounds wonderfully full, yet punchy, with Metheny's guitar sounding as syrupy and sleepily nebulous as ever. The beautifully struck cymbals sound burnished, yet alive, hinting at little (if any) lack of resolution or extension whatsoever. On this type of Red Book material, the Hegel acquits itself quite beautifully. I should note here that I'm listening

via the optical input, straight from my Mac Mini. OK, so let's now try the same cut with the USB input and see what happens... Now, the cymbals seem just a tiny bit synthetic sounding, as if the decay I was noticing before isn't quite as prominent, but Metheny's guitar still sounds as it should, and the bass has kept most of its weight and punch. Overall, this is a good showing, as the USB seemed to give up little to the optical input.

Another compact disc I have been enjoying lately (thanks to fellow Stereomojo reviewer Mike Peshkin, who somehow seems to try everything...) is the Oscar Peterson Trio's "We Get Requests" from Winston Ma's Lasting Impression Music (LIM) label. This is a beautifully mastered disc that truly enhances this original 1964 Verve outing, providing a great opportunity to further compare the coaxial, optical, and USB inputs of the HD10.

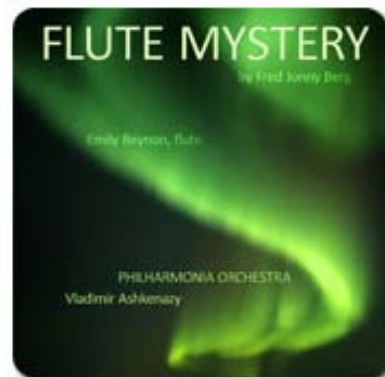
For this test, I picked a single cut, "D and E," and listened to it in its entirety using each input. Here's the good news, folks: on this cut, I could barely distinguish any difference between inputs. If anything, the coax (fed by my Jolida JD100 cd player) and the optical (fed by my Mac Mini) sounded identical. The USB input maybe, just maybe, gave up a bit of resolution to the other two (as evidenced by a very fine haze or mist), but I really had to listen very carefully to hear it. This is the first DAC that I have spent time with whose inputs sounded so nearly identical, and



that's a good thing! At least for 44.1 kHz/ 16 bit source material, it appears that Hegel has a winner here, and the USB input seems especially well-engineered, as opposed to a "me-too" gimmick that is found on some competing products in and above this price range. *This recording is our Best Jazz Reissue of 2009 - publisher*

At least theoretically, the Hegel's ability to interpret high-resolution source material has bothered me the most, especially

using the USB input. Not that this sort of thing should matter to most of us, as there really isn't that much hi-resolution material out there yet. Face up to it, most of what we own and actually listen to is in the standard cd format. So then, how does the HD 10 stack up in the high-resolution world? Well, why not try out our Norwegian DAC with some Norwegian music? My choice here was the excellent 24 bit/ 96 kHz recording from the Norwegian label 2L of Fred Jonny Berg's Flute Concerto (from Flute Mystery, 2L, downloaded from HDTracks.com) featuring Emily Beynon on flute. First up was the optical input, with the Mini's MIDI set to the native 24/96 option.



Here, the music was rendered as superbly as I have heard it, with Ms. Beynon's flute sounding appropriately present, yet airy. I especially enjoy the interplay between the flute and the trilled strings in the second movement, which was wonderfully reproduced. I next changed over to the USB input, using the 48 kHz option in the Audio MIDI, as 96 kHz is an even multiple of 48 kHz. Even with the resulting downsampling, I felt that the USB acquitted itself quite well; in fact, better than I had originally anticipated. Maybe the subsequent upsampling of everything to 24/192 resolution has more of a leveling effect than I had expected, leading to the relative lack of sensitivity to source and sampling rate that I have been hearing. Even-handed and effective jitter suppression could also be playing a role, though nothing in Hegel's literature addresses this.



by  
James L. Darby

I honestly cannot add anything to John's assessment - he nailed it completely. I compared it to the spectacular Ayon CD-2 CD player which uses tubes in it's circuitry and which has received our highest awards. The Hegel does not have the pure musicality of one of the best disk spinners on the planet, but then it doesn't cost as much either. But the Hegel does possess a large share of what makes the Ayon so wonderful; the lack of the typical "digititus", the sterile, rather academic character that most other digital converters impart to the

music, especially when I used the coax in and the balanced outs. Personally, I think the Hegel smokes the Benchmark in terms of sheer musicality and listenability. It was a pleasure to listen to the Hegel for extended periods of time - hours in fact - where the Benchmarks, both the DAC1 and the DAC Pre (we've reviewed both) became fatiguing after awhile. The Hegel simply sounds more like real music rather than a very fine digital photograph of the sound. I think perhaps initial, short-term impressions of the Benchmarks may sound more impressive with their punchiness and top end detail. However, there is no doubt that some much prefer such a presentation and that's fine. If someone's system is a bit dull and lifeless, the Benchmarks might actually be a better call.

I also compared the Hegel to the PS Audio Perfect Wave DAC, which at \$3,000 is also much more expensive. It also does much more in terms of choosable digital filters and bitrates. It also plays 24/192 high resolution files with no downsampling. The Perfect Wave sounds more like the Hegel than the Benchmarks but has a more airy soundstage with less spotlighting of individual instruments and voices, plus even greater dynamic range than either product. And that's with standard 16 bit Redbook. With higher bitrate files like the Reference Recordings HrX, all comparisons fly out the door.



All in all, I'm very pleased with what Hegel has offered us here. For listeners who like a punchy, warm, engagingly musical digital playback system, I don't see how you could go wrong with the HD10, especially at the \$1200 asking price. As I have noted in previous reviews, I haven't had the chance to try out the "top dollar" DACs offered by some of the industry leaders, but in the \$1000 - \$2000 realm dominated by the likes of Benchmark and Lavry, the HD10 is a definite contender. Yes, you give up some of the bells and whistles offered by these other DACs such as headphone outputs, independent volume control and the like, but you do get some very nice sound along with plenty of input and output options. I definitely look forward to hearing more about (and hopefully hearing for myself) some of Hegel's other offerings.

Hegel's little wonder sounds great, especially if you prefer a warm, analog-like presentation without giving up dynamic impact. If a DAC such as Benchmark's DAC1 USB is seen as a standard for neutrality, (*it's not - publisher*) then this guy isn't exactly neutral. But who cares? Sonic neutrality is a good thing, but sometimes it's equally acceptable (and probably healthier) to throw caution to the wind and let go of your inhibitions. It's more fun, right? In that sense, then, the Hegel HD10 scores big on the Mojo meter for downright reckless abandon.



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