

Vertex AQ Aletheia dac-1 digital converter

By Alan Sircom



It's funny. The Aletheia dac-1 DAC has received several public outings in the UK, usually in The Right Note's rooms at events like the National Audio Show at Whittlebury Hall in September last year. The rooms have almost universally won praise for good sound, even from some of the more cynical forum elements who fail to believe anything unless they can find it in an A-Level physics textbook from the 1950s. Of course, the good sound can't be due to something as left-field as a NOS converter, especially one that represents a synthesis of all the RFI, EMI and microphony-countering technologies Vertex AQ has amassed over the years... can it?

Those who know their way around ancient Greek (and are partial to a bit of phenomenological thought) may know the word 'Aletheia' means 'truth', or more literally 'a state of disclosure'. Martin Heidegger expanded on this in his impenetrable *Being and Time*, suggesting that the term equates to an 'unconcealedness' that exposes the truth in the whole. Although Heidegger's philosophical writings were retrospectively tainted by his later support of Nazism, *Being and Time* remains one of the most important works in 20th Century philosophy, and the concept of the world 'unconcealing' itself to us is central to that particular magnum opus. And 'Aletheia' is certainly apt here, because the DAC has that 'unconcealing' nature, and extends that out to the whole audio system. But that's for later.

As suggested, the Aletheia is a 16-bit non-oversampling ('NOS') digital converter. It uses the TDA 1543 converter in current output mode – which is almost *de rigueur* in NOS circles. It can cope with higher sampling frequencies up to 96kHz without complaint and deals with 24-bit files like they were 16-bit and slices off anything beyond that bit depth. As someone who feels much of the hi-rez movement is smoke and mirrors (and still more of it is made up of appalling music unworthy of warranting such a handle-with-care approach) this doesn't pose any problems, but those who are assembling a collection of delicately-coiffured dandy-digits might find solace elsewhere.

NOS, by extension, also means no filtering and no noise shaping after conversion. Thinking it through a little, the filtering used in digital audio could

be considered to be doing the same things to the time domain that Vertex AQ products are trying to eliminate, and it's not far of a jump to see how the action of a reconstruction filter is not dissimilar from microphony, just at higher frequencies. This will already irk the no-nothings who complain the phase shifts and ringing of a filter are at something approaching 'homeopathic' levels of influence over the sound, but I'd wager that few things that people consider 'good' in audio deliver less than 1.5kiloWhines per square Grumble at the best of times, so the Aletheia is in good company.

There are already NOS DACs out there, and some are a good deal cheaper than the Aletheia... so what makes this special (and so expensive)? First, a great deal of attention has been paid to making the power supply as clean, stable and as fast as possible, with multi-stage, individually regulated supplies. Each stage of the DAC is also very carefully separated from its surroundings, protected from its fellow building blocks to the sort of degree normally seen in biohazard labs. Any connections to the outside world and similarly any internal connections are designed to limit pollutants (microphony and EMI) both coming in, going out and from section to section. But that's just the icing on the cake; it goes right down to key components and subsystems each having their own individual Kinabalu labyrinthine acoustic absorption platform. Factor in a mains input with its own RFI shunt filter, solid-core silver wiring coming off the mains transformer, with EMI absorbing tubing and more and top-spec 4.7µF Mundorf MCap metalized silver/gold capacitors in the output, and you are already looking at an expensive, hand made product.

Perhaps a better way of looking at this is that inserting the Aletheia is like having a Vertex AQ nerve-centre parachuted into the heart of your system. Or, as a ludicrous BOGOF offer – you Buy One (Aletheia) You Get One (whole heap of Vertex AQ devices) Free. Inside that Aletheia is a HiRez Roraima mains lead and a HiRez Jaya passive shunt filter, the S/PDIF input has a HiRez Ilmani digital cable on the input, and a pair of HiRez Solfonn interconnects on the output. The fact that these modules are within the DAC doesn't prevent them from having an influence on the sound of the Aletheia, and on the rest of the system. Of course, adding the external versions of the same – and the accompanying Kinabalu platform – would help improve matters even further, but simply by adding the Aletheia brings the combined effect of several thousand pounds worth of Vertex AQ products in one.

It's capable of outputting in balanced or single-ended mode, and comes with two S/PDIF inputs (one BNC, one phono... use BNC if you can) and a Toslink. There's no AES/EBU or USB, which are unfortunate – but not insurmountable – omissions on an expensive DAC. In a way, the lack of USB is more of an issue at slightly lower price points – where a DAC needs to be all-inclusive. A converter at the Aletheia's price can hand the USB conversion duties over to something dedicated (such as the M2Tech HiFace) without that being seen as arrogance. There is also a trio of toggle switches at the rear of the Aletheia (that and the power switch represent the sum total of user control of the DAC). These allow you to select between optical and coaxial digital input, between balanced and single-ended output and whether or not to turn off the LED on the front panel.

By putting all of these toggles on the rear panel, it makes a relatively bold statement – this is a one-device DAC, not a digital hub. At this time, given the whole Vertex AQ schema is to try to limit the deleterious effects of EMI ingress into the system, putting the one thing that's almost guaranteed to introduce

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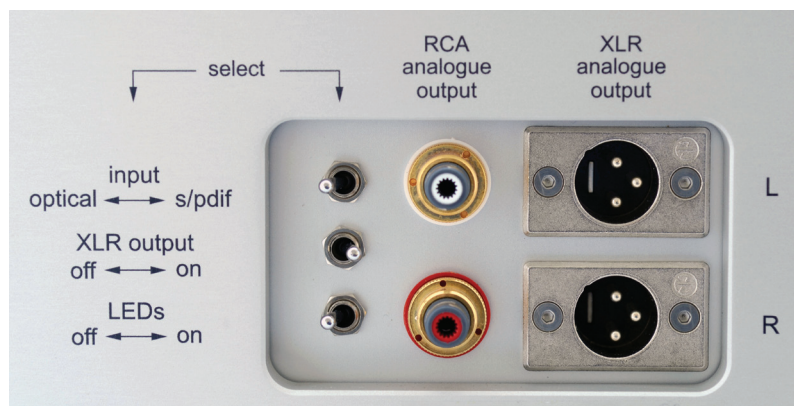
such interference (a computer) into the signal chain is not exactly a smart move, so a CD transport would be a more preferable source. Personally, I'd love to see just what would happen if someone did a product as internally 'sorted' and as non-polluting as the Aletheia in the computer domain, but I suspect the world isn't quite ready for that, yet.

How the Aletheia sounds is oddly almost irrelevant, next to what it does to your perception of how music sounds. That reads like Grade A pomposity mixed in with a liberal dose of BS, but it's the nearest I can get to describing what happens over the Aletheia ►

► head-upgrade process. It begins by pointing to surface detail of the DAC's performance. It's a nicely stress-free, very direct sound with excellent leading edges, rather like a very good sounding and natural turntable than a digital device. Like most NOS converters, it seems to stress precision of tempi, but unlike most NOS converters, that doesn't come with a heavy penalty in the accuracy of frequency response. The word may be overused and nebulous at best, but there is something intrinsically 'musical' about the Aletheia's presentation that makes you hungry for more.

This is probably not the DAC to show off your audiophile credentials with a host of wonderfully recorded but musically bankrupt tracks. It's far more oriented toward real world music that has something to say. I found myself quickly shifting gears from plinky-plonky sounds that show off how 'nice' your system sounds to just enjoying Al Green's voice, Jaco Pastorius' fretless bass and Steve Howe's guitar playing. And you know you are on to something when you start listening to early 1950s Chuck Willis or Little Brother Brown boogie-woogie records on Okeh compilations.

This is merely the starting point however. As days become weeks of listening to the Aletheia, strange things start happening. You begin to play more discs. Not just CDs, more LPs. You start listening to internet radio more, even though the computer is connected via USB to another DAC into the same amp. You find you play music quieter, for longer. Music, even talk radio seems to make more sense.



No, there is no magic improvement to the loudspeakers and it doesn't mean you start listening to some loony on *PM* describing how he split the atom on his kitchen stove and thinking it a good and sensible idea, it's just that sound appears more cogent to you the Vertex AQing of your neural-aural pathways begins to take hold.

Now is a good time to go visiting friends and relatives who have audio systems, especially anyone who has a hi-fi system that you thought sounded pretty good a few weeks ago. In most cases, you'll begin to wonder what all the fuss was about and why so many audiophiles consistently the flawed-but-musically-intact sound of things like the Tivoli radio range. In fact, you begin to hear why the Tivoli is better than a lot of high-end audio systems in some key aspects.

If you have the Aletheia on extended loan – especially if it came with its own loaner Ken Barlow (sorry, Kinabalu) platform – the strangest part is the bit when you give it back. First, you find yourself missing the directness of the DAC, but rationalise this by saying 'perhaps that's no big deal'. Then you almost unconsciously go and do something else instead of listening to music through your system. A few days later, you are in a fugue state, uninterested and disinterested in music, not because things sound bad, just that they sound like they always did – slightly drab and grey. Pretty soon, the puzzle pieces begin to form patterns in your head, and you spot the root cause of your ennui is a distinct lack of Aletheias in your system and emails begin travelling.

We end where we began, with some head-scratching. It's a DAC: a good DAC; an expensive DAC, but still 'just a DAC'. There is no justification for 'just a DAC' doing what it does here, whether that is to pieces of music that pass through its circuits, to pieces of music that pass through your system (but not through the DAC) while the Aletheia is in circuit, or whether it's the not-so-subtle brain rewire it does to the listener over time. That's because it's not 'just a DAC'; it is a distillation of all the things Vertex AQ (and, by extension, those who 'get' the whole foundation theory) has been banging on about from the outset. To the uninitiated – or to those who lost their way somewhere down the line – the Aletheia dac-1 is the Black Ops version of that foundation theory. It's a crash course, in a kind of kick down your door, throw in a few flash bangs and pin you to the floor so that you get the message quick sort of crash

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course. And it works; once it goes out of your system, you simply lose interest in listening to music through your system. It just sounds so trite, contrived and artificial after the Aletheia experience.

As a reviewer, you tend to go through a lot of equipment. And in fairness, some devices pass through your system almost unnoticed. Others, you remember for the excitement, the energy or the detail they brought. A few leave a lasting impression. But this is different. When it left the listening room, I experienced something close to mourning. No, not the mourning for the loss of a loved one, a cherished pet, a broken vase that came with a lot of deep-seated memories, a lost love or even that dream job you completely failed to get back in 1986. This was mourning for the loss of music. That’s how far under your skin the Aletheia gets and I can think of no recommendation higher than that. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Vertex AQ Aletheia DAC

D/A engine

Digital interface DIR 9001.

DAC TDA 1543 (current output).

Non-oversampled.

No digital noise shaping.

No output filtering.

16 bit, 44.1 to 96KHz

Housed in poly box with EMI/RFI absorptive lining.

Inputs/Outputs

S/PDIF (75 Ohm) and toslink optical.

S/PDIF RCA input WBT silver nextgen socket.

Analogue single-ended RCA outputs.

WBT silver nextgen sockets.

Analogue balanced XLR outputs.

Gold-plated Neutrik XLR sockets.

Dimensions (WxHxD): 46x14x38cm

Weight: 13kg

Price: £11,500

Manufactured by: Vertex AQ Ltd

Tel: +44(0)1597 825993

Web: www.vertexaq.com

