

# toneAudio.

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and digital sound.

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## The Sound of Power by Bentley and Naim

# DAC Mini

## The Channel Islands VDA•2

By Jeff Dorgay



**W**ith so many people using computers as a source component these days and the Wadia 170i iPod dock coming on strong, outboard DAC's are making a big comeback. Some of the recent models from PS Audio, Bryston, Wadia and Benchmark offer major flexibility in terms of inputs with everything from USB to glass optical inputs so that you can make your DAC a digital hub. Much like the way phono preamplifiers have progressed in complexity, this is already starting to happen with DAC's; some offer huge feature sets and numerous inputs, while the Channel Islands VDA•2 DAC you see here is tiny with just two inputs.

Only \$599, the VDA•2 looks like a small outboard power supply, or you can order the VAC•1 High Current Power Supply for an additional \$179, which is the same size. Together the two don't take up half the space on your equipment rack that a standard sized component would.

Don't let the small size fool you, only 4½" wide, 2½" tall and 4" deep, weighing less than a pound (per box), this has to be the highest amount of digital performance per ounce available today! I started the review with the standard wall wart power supply to get used to the VDA•2, switching to the outboard supply once I was very familiar with its character.

There is a switch on the front panel to choose between the two inputs and another switch to change phase between 0 and 180 degrees. Heck, my Naim 555 doesn't have that! The VDA•2 stays on all the time and the blue LED lights up to let you know that the digital signal input you have selected has been locked onto, it is not a power on indicator. *(continued)*

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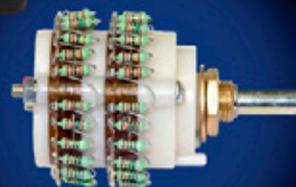
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## Setup

I used the VDA•2 in all three of my systems with excellent results and I put this little powerhouse up against some of the best digital the world has to offer: The Wadia 581i SE, the Meridian 808 and of course, my Naim 555 as well as some very good players in the 2-3000 dollar range to be fair. I also happened to have a DAC1 Pre from Benchmark and the new Digital Link III from PS Audio, so a lot of cable swapping was done over the last few months!

The VDA•2 was a breeze to set up and for the majority of my listening, I used my iPod Classic (with a mixture of uncompressed and Apple Lossless files), the Sooloos Music Server and my Mac Mini running Windows Vista to take advantage of some Super HD files from MusicGiants, as the VDA•2 will lock on sampling rates up to 192 khz through the coaxial input and 96khz via the Toslink input.

A standard issue Monster Cable optical cable went from my Mac Mini for input two and a 1.5 meter length of Audience AU24 digital cable was used for input one from the Sooloos music server. The stock power cord was used for all listening.

## Surprise, Make Mine Digital!

Regular readers of this magazine know that I am not very big on the “giant killer” philosophy in regards to high-end audio. For the most part, I believe you get what you pay for and as you go up the price scale (with reputable companies that build products in substantial quantities) you usually get more performance. *(continued)*

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Granted, some products tend to be more biased in terms of strict performance, while others tip the scale on features and functionality.

I must say that in terms of sheer audio performance, the VDA•2 offers up some of the most musically revealing and tonally pleasing sound from a digital source I've heard at anywhere near this price. There are a few in the 1000-2500 dollar range that have more inputs, fancier case work, etc., etc., which may be more appealing to you, but if you can get by with one RCA input and one Toslink input, this is the one to buy. I defy you to find significantly better at 2-3 times the price. With the additional power supply, you are going to have to spend upward of 3-4000 dollars to get a significant jump in sound quality.

Putting the first 100 hours on the VDA•2, I placed it in my main reference system and used an 80 gig iPod Classic with a combination of Apple Lossless and uncompressed music files. Pleasant out of the box, after a few days of play, everyone here was incredibly impressed at how musical this combination sounded. Switching back and forth between a couple of different budget turntable combinations that were comparably priced, everyone picked the sound of the iPod/VDA•2 when they did not know what source was playing!

### Big Sound, Small Box

Channel Islands owner/designer Dusty Vawter said once when we were talking about the circuit design of the VDA•2 "Sometimes, it's not what you put in, but what you take out that's important. We made the circuit on this as absolutely simple as we could while still maintaining performance." With only one transistor per channel in the output stage, I don't know how it could get much simpler. But it works very well.

As always, the proof is in the listening. I started with a lot of classic rock and was surprised going through my favorite warhorses (Steely Dan, Pink Floyd, Dire Straits, and so forth) how open and dynamic the VDA•2 was. When listening to the opening riffs of the title track on Robin Trower's *Bridge of Sighs* (MoFi 24kt gold disc) I noticed the airiness and the phase shifts applied as the sound bounced back and forth between the speakers the way it does on my better players. Getting back to the 21st Century, Papa Roach's *The Paramour Sessions* is filled with a lot of layered guitars and thunderous bass lines. Again, this little DAC delivered the goods in a very impressive manner. *(continued)*



**"Sometimes, it's not what you put in, but what you take out that's important. We made the circuit on this as absolutely simple as we could while still maintaining performance."**



**If you have a better system, the power supply is a must. This upgrade took the VDA•2 to another level of transparency and dynamics.**

The real test that inexpensive digital usually fails though, is acoustic music. Dark Side of the Moon might sound great on your budget player, but the minute you listen to a violin or a piano, it all goes south in a hurry. Not this time, changing the mood to some Joe Sample that I digitized from *The Three* with the Lyra Olympos on my Raven Two turntable (using an SME iV.Vi tonearm) sounded surprisingly analog, with the decay and tonality of Samples' piano well intact. Acoustic instruments had an excellent sense of tonal correctness, which is extremely difficult to nail at this price point.

### **We all Need Power and Balance**

If you just use the VDA•2 with the wall wart, it's still a killer DAC. For many people with more budget-oriented systems, it will probably be all you ever need. I always appreciate a product with an upgrade path, especially when it is this reasonably priced. For another \$179, you can purchase the VAC•1 power supply and if you have a preamplifier with true balanced inputs, grab the VRX•1 balanced cable assembly. The VRX•1 connects both phases of the single ended output to an XLR connector for a true balanced output. Mating the CI DAC with the new BAT VK-32SE preamplifier that is fully balanced, I did observe a slightly lower noise floor with a touch more slam when playing very dynamic music with the balanced cables.

If you have a better system, the power supply is a must. This upgrade took the VDA•2 to another level of transparency and dynamics. Listening to "Screaming Like a Baby" on Bowie's *Scary Monsters* CD revealed more texture and layers of overdubs than I was used to hearing on any of the recent crop of \$3000 CD players we've had in for review. Taking the power supply out flattened the front to back imaging in a pretty substantial manner, but returning it to the system made me realize I couldn't live without it.

### **Giant Killer or Not?**

As I said at the beginning of the review, if you only need one or two digital inputs and are on a tight budget, this is your ticket to digital paradise. Correction, your ticket to *musical* paradise. No, I'm not selling my Naim any time soon, but this does such a great job on the musical fundamentals, it doesn't send you running out of the room screaming when you play a digital source. *(continued)*

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A lot of uneducated ears were floored that I was listening to an iPod or laptop through an \$850 DAC. And the snooty audiophile types were pretty impressed too!

I love analog when it's done right, but I feel it rarely is for the price of the VDA•2/VAC•1 combination. It just doesn't get any better than this; These two Channel Islands boxes are very reasonably priced, you can set it up in about 45 seconds and it sounds great. Praise the analog gods that this box wasn't available for \$775 twenty years ago. It would have been the death of analog! If this pair isn't deserving of our Exceptional Value Award, nothing is. ●

## MANUFACTURER

Channel Islands Audio  
567 W. Channel Islands Blvd.  
PMB #300  
Port Hueneme, CA 93041  
(805) 984-8282  
[www.ciaudio.com](http://www.ciaudio.com)

## MSRP

The Channel Islands  
VDA•2 DAC \$599

VAC•1 External AC  
Power Supply \$179

## Peripherals

**Digital Sources:** Apple iMac,  
Apple iPod Classic w/Wadia  
170 iTransport, Classe  
CDP-102

The rest of Jeff Dorgay's  
system can be viewed here: 