

Product of the Year Awards

DAC of the Year

dCS Bartók APEX

\$20,950 (\$22,950 with Class A headphone amp); APEX upgrade, \$9000

Improve the dCS Bartók? NG was skeptical. And then dCS went ahead and did it, with a collection of sophisticated advancements known as APEX. Let's back up for a minute and recollect that the original Bartók (dCS' entry-level network-streaming DAC) was the replacement for the vaunted Debussy DAC. It sported the latest dCS digital-processing platform and Ring DAC technology originally developed for the Rossini series. Capabilities included streaming over Ethernet from a NAS drive, online music services such as Tidal, as well as full MQA decoding and rendering, plus a much-improved interface and app. The Bartók APEX, however, does the unthinkable: It furthers what Bartók began and then surpasses it. As before, it accomplishes for digital playback what was once the exclusive province of analog playback, establishing the same visceral and addictive connection that enthusiasts have with their LPs. It remains as tonally accurate as an atomic clock, but its voice has opened further, exhibiting greater bloom and wider micro/macro-dynamic swings. Listening to it is like witnessing a recording from inside the microphone capsule; music is fully expressed from opening transient to the last gasp of acoustic decay, calling to mind the finest vinyl playback. The APEX is not inexpensive, but the sonic improvements are a triumph of naturalism that will floor even the most jaded audio listeners. The very definition of what a Product of the Year is all about. (300, 344)

