

Hegel HD12 digital converter

by Jason Kennedy

Hegel is one of a small but consistently impressive band of Norwegian audio electronics companies, and it's probably the youngest to have made an impression on the British market place. Its philosophy is to "offer caviar for the price of a sausage": a simple and rather appealing approach even if you like neither sausages nor caviar. Although it implies that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy of right – property is the embodiment of personality – is only tangential to the company's *raison d'être*.

Hegel makes amplifiers, DACs, CD players, and even a very compact portable headphone amplifier, but apart from the latter they all look pretty much the same, which is dark and plain. The HD12 is the middle model in the converter range and sits in a small case with only a display and a headphone output on the front. But the

HD12 is a far more versatile piece of kit than its subdued fascia would suggest. Fundamentally it's a digital to analogue converter but it can also be used as a digital preamplifier, the analogue output can be varied with a remote control, and it has a "very high quality" headphone output. The absence of front panel controls is misleading and slightly inconvenient, the remote control is a credit card size device that could easily slip down the side of the sofa and leave you stranded. I kept it by the DAC for this reason.

The dark exterior gives little clue as to the level of technology inside. It seems that understatement is the word at Hegel, as what lies beneath is a 32-bit DAC chip with the ability to handle DSD64 natively, that is without conversion to PCM. It accepts PCM up to the standard 24-bit/192kHz via its USB, coax and optical inputs and DSD through the USB input only – not that there are many sources that output it any other way. Unusually, DSD requires a driver for both PCs and Macs; usually the latter can get by without extra software but Hegel provides a driver all the same (the beta version of which did not make my MacBook Air particularly happy).

In the system with the aforementioned laptop providing the signal via a CAD USB cable, the HD12 proved to be a strong and vital presence. It delivers high detail levels and reflects the recording with considerable aplomb. Its style is not as laid back as some but neither is it brash or forward. It's definitely the sort of DAC that calls a spade a spade, although I doubt they have that saying in Oslo. Either way in a neutral system it works well. Playing one of ▶



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► Keith Jarrett’s most robust sounding solo performances [*Testament Paris/London*, ECM], the power and body of the piano are immediately evident in a soundstage that totally escapes the speakers. Detail retrieval is strong too; Jarrett’s utterances are far too clear, but that is the price you pay for resolution, as no DAC can sift the good from the bad.

I compared the HD12 with another DSD ready DAC, the Consonance Don Curzio, which sounded more rounded and finessed by comparison. The latter clearly has a sweeter or smoother output stage, which is nice with certain material but ultimately not as solid, transparent, and convincing as the Hegel. I can see that some would prefer its silky balance, but those wanting to get to the nub of the matter – and especially anyone who likes precise timing – is likely to enjoy the Hegel a bit more. Another DAC at this price that I like a lot is the Metrum Octave MkII. This is a non-oversampling converter with excellent timing and a great musicality, yet next to the Hegel it seems warmer and fuller. This difference is partly down to a change in coaxial cable from Chord Co Sarum TA to vintage Roksan – the Octave only has a BNC coax input, the Hegel only RCA and I don’t have identical cables with both connections. So, I leveled the field by using USB. Here the Hegel still has a bit more edge definition, which gives it more drive than the Metrum as well. I was impressed by how coherent the Hegel is, especially as that always seemed to be a strong point of the Metrum. I was playing the Hot Club of San Francisco’s ‘Hot Lips’

[*Yerba Buena Bounce*, Reference Recordings 24/176.4], which features guitars and a fiddle, and often sounds huge in a slightly unnatural fashion. The Hegel didn’t go ‘large’ on scale, but brought out the timbre of the fiddle, making it sound like a proper wooden instrument, rather than the overly smooth, plasticky thing that many DACs present.

Brendel’s take on Mozart’s Piano Concerto No.26 in D [*The Piano Concertos*, Marriner/St.Martin-in-the-Fields, Philips], on the other hand, is open and spacious, reflecting the nature of the venue. It also times beautifully, revealing the charming nature of the composition and the pianist’s effortless skill. Moving over to the same material via the coaxial feed from a Naim UnitiServe increases resolution, this source revealing the reverberant character of the space as well as the precise nature of the tempo. It became distractingly good in fact. I’ve no doubt that a ►



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- ▶ better USB source than my MacBook Air could narrow this gap, but I suspect that coax will always be stronger in terms of timing. All you have to do is listen to Sam Amidon’s ‘Walking Boss’ [Lily-O, Nonesuch, and reviewed this month] to appreciate that speed of bass, vitality of acoustic guitar and banjo and menace of electric guitar are extremely well served by this DAC with a high quality coax source.

Whenever I review a DAC these days, I begrudge the fact that my computer audio set up is not dedicated to the task and therefore somewhat compromised. However, when such things are sorted, you get a phenomenal amount of control and flexibility with the approach in comparison to streaming systems. JRiver is significantly more capable than any audio manufacturer’s software when it comes to sorting out tagging, adding artwork and playing back precisely what you want. And a good DAC is rather less expensive than a good streamer, which of course requires a DAC itself. The best streaming systems are very nice to use but usually expensive with it; if budget is limited the computer and DAC route is very hard to beat.

Once I had successfully installed Hegel’s DSD driver, it was possible to play a few pieces in this much vaunted format. DSD often produces a sound that is rather too airy and overblown for my tastes, but here the result is very similar to PCM; strong, bold, and solid, with great presence, especially in the midband. As a result Adele’s voice on ‘Rolling In The Deep’ [21, XL] has incredible in-the-room realism; the record even sounds just about tolerable during the painfully compressed chorus. This track through the Hegel doesn’t have the ability to touch the listener that it can at its very best, but a bit of judicious system matching can get exceptionally close. Or not: I tried it with the Triangle Esprit Comète Ez speaker (also reviewed this month) and have to admit that the pairing was not the easiest to live with. Both components produce a lot of energy and combining them requires very forgiving amplification and cables.

I also listened to the Hegel’s volume control. It has a smoothing/relaxing effect on results that suits a speaker like the Triangle. In more even-handed set-ups however, there is a distinct shortfall in dynamics if you turn it down too far (around the halfway point in my system) – a state of affairs that afflicts most digital volume controls in my experience.

Last, but not least, the headphone socket is not simply an afterthought. In fact, it can drive even notoriously difficult loads with ease (like the HiFiMAN

HE-6), as demonstrated by Henry Threadgill’s Sextet’s ‘Bermuda Blues’ [You Know The Number, Novus], which really kicks in; the double bass delivers power, and the saxophones have solidity without glare. It’s a very entertaining combination of qualities.

The Hegel HD12 is a welcome addition to the ranks of DSD capable converters. It has plenty of connections, volume control, and a headphone output in a neatly designed and nicely executed bit of casework. I would have liked an input selection button on the front, but that would have undermined the style that Hegel has maintained throughout its range. As it is, this is a very entertaining and distinctive sounding DAC, and one that’s definitely priced to sell well. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state high-resolution PCM and DSD-capable digital-to-analogue converter/preamplifier.

Digital Inputs: One Coaxial, two Toslink, and one asynchronous USB 2.0.

Analogue Outputs: One stereo single-ended (via RC jacks), one balanced (via XLR connectors). Both outputs have variable level operation.

DAC Resolution/Supported

Digital Formats: All PCM from 44.1kHz to 192 kHz with word lengths up to 24-bit, DSD64 (2.8224MHz)

Frequency Response: 0 – 50kHz

Distortion (THD + Noise): typically less than 0.0005%

Output Voltage: 2.5mV RMS.

Dimensions (HxWxD): 60 × 210 × 260mm

Weight: 3.5kg

Price: £900

Manufacturer: Hegel Music Systems AS

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URL: www.hegel.com

UK Distributor: as above