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Wattson Audio Madison
network streamer/DAC

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Falcon Acoustics' M10
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Elementary my dear...

Swiss brand Wattson Audio's flagship streamer is small, beautifully formed and sounds sublime. **David Vivian** is impressed

Whether intentionally or not, some hi-fi components simply exude industrial chic. It isn't just a good looks thing. Myriad factors play their part on the short journey from packaging box to kit rack shelf: size, form, tactility, design honesty (only subtle frills, if any at all), functional transparency and perceived tech density – all contribute to that can't-wait-to-plug-it-in frisson.

In the case of the Wattson Audio Madison streamer/DAC the feel-good vibe is further finessed by its Swiss provenance. On a psychological level at least, that country's reputation for watch maker's precision, meticulous attention to detail and flawless quality control weigh into the mix as well. Working out of Yverdon-les-Bains, in the heart of the Swiss Romandie, Wattson Audio styles itself as a company still steeped in the initiatives of its founding operation – Engineered SA – set up 20 years ago to explore: “numerous electronic and software concepts in high-end audio” ranging

from analogue tubes and transistor circuits, to all classes of amplification, A-to-D and D-to-A conversion as well as signal treatments, interface models and digital modulation.

It counts its 'network streaming solution' as a particular highlight, describing it as a constantly evolving platform that invites smooth integration of new features and support for the latest formats and points to the adoption of its streaming interface for several elite products in the wider high-end market.

Under WA's own flag, the tech makes a powerful case, not least regarding the role of what it describes as its: “extremely advanced” DSP oversampling algorithm which, among other things, must deal with the lossless LEEDH Processing digital volume control, calculation of low-frequency correction filters and DSD-to-PCM conversion. There's also adjustable bass response to compensate for near-boundary speaker placement. The bottom line claim is an audible improvement for the digital-to-

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Wattson Audio Madison
ORIGIN
Switzerland
TYPE
Network streamer/DAC
WEIGHT
1.05kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
174 x 47 x 185mm
FEATURES
● Supports sample rates up to: 32-bit/384kHz and DSD256
● Digital inputs: optical, coaxial
● Analogue outputs: unbalanced RCA; balanced XLR
DISTRIBUTOR
VAL HiFi
WEBSITE
en.wattson.audio
valhifi.co.uk

analogue conversion in the time domain, without modifying the samples of the incoming data stream. The streaming engine is based on a Sitara processor from Texas Instruments and Wattson Audio claims that the unit's various network communication protocols and audio stream decoding have been optimised to ensure audio data integrity, transmission reliability and support for hi-res file formats (PCM and DSD) without transcoding.

Two clock generators are employed alternately to handle 44.1kHz or

Enhanced zeal and more vivid timbral contrasts than I've previously heard

48kHz (and multiples). There is no variable oscillator or synchronisation loop as the stream of audio data is directly cadenced by the active clock. The selected oscillators are claimed to have extremely low phase noise in the audible bandwidth. The distribution of the clock signals has been carefully designed to minimise jitter throughout the digital audio signal path.

Each channel of the Madison has its own separately powered, dual-differential Cirrus Logic DAC chip while the output stages, based on the latest generation of op amps, are fully balanced and differential to achieve identical performance at both RCA and XLR outputs. The power supply uses an external adapter, the averred advantage being to keep the mains voltage away from the core of the device. The following DC voltage is smoothed by a series of common and

differential mode filters and then delivered to the various components of the electronic board. Each critical section of the circuits is said to benefit from a dedicated filtering and voltage regulator to avoid undesirable interactions. For the Madison, no fewer than 15 low-noise voltage regulators seek to ensure optimal operation of each critical section.

Wattson's Alexandre Lavanchy underlines how this contributes to the company's ultimate goals: “In recent years, it seems to me that a lot of things have led us to focus on timing issues more than other criteria. We have therefore paid particular attention to clock signals and the propagation of these signals, the transient response of filters, the responsiveness of voltage regulators etc. I have the impression that the results are convincing, and I hope that these technical approaches will enable us to offer products with an interesting quality/price ratio, while integrating the economic reality of an entirely Swiss manufacture.”

Weighing just over a kilo and with a chassis that's been CNC machined from an aluminium block, the Madison is small and light, but has that solid, nuggety build that inspires bags of confidence. Connectivity runs to a 100Mbit/s Ethernet port plus single coaxial and optical digital inputs. Analogue outputs comprise single-ended RCA and balanced XLR sockets. The unit's main fascia hosts a 6.35mm headphone jack and volume control garlanded with tiny, tell-tale LEDs instead of printed calibrations.



The Madison isn't cheap, but it finds itself taking the fight to costlier options with price tags north of £5k – its sonic capabilities are that good. Naim's NDX 2 is a high-end stalwart and performance benchmark. It offers similar functionality with the added benefit of a display. Another top performer is Auralic's Vega G2.1 (HFC 476), which hits high marks across the board for functionality and sound quality, joining the Wattson in combining the subtlety and refinement of premium streaming with the weight and physicality of top-notch CD.



Sound quality

As with the simpler Wattson Audio Emerson Digital transport (HFC 478), the Madison is a dream to use. Ethernet cable in, Wattson Music app reawakened (it never left my iPad from conducting the Emerson review) and we're good to stream. I connect an Audiolab 6000 CDT (HFC 447) CD transport to the coaxial input to get a better idea of the DAC's performance sans streaming. Completing the setup is a Hegel H120 (HFC 460) integrated amp connected to the Madison with balanced Nordost Blue Heaven XLR cables and driving Audio Physic Spark 6 (HFC 496) standmounts.

Streaming as a source still excites debate among audiophiles, some championing what appears to be an innately smoother, more refined delivery, others preferring what they perceive to be CD's stronger sense of physical, palpable presence, even limited to 16-bit/44.1kHz as it is. Until listening to the Madison, I was more persuaded by the latter. But if any device can bridge the taste gap between the two, I'd put my money on it being this one. To dig up an ancient cliché, there's more than a hint of iron fist in velvet glove at work beneath its dappled grey aluminium casework and it's rewarding with all types of music.

Starting with a Tidal stream of Wayne Shorter, Terry Lyne Carrington, Leo Genovese and Esperanza Spalding *Live At The Detroit Jazz Festival*, I'm struck by the smoothness, natural tonality and precise imaging but there's a weight and authority to the sound that's as unexpected as it is pleasing. This deft fusion of force and

finesse breathes newfound life and drive into an undeniably transparent but tonally thin production of *Shake Dance* by The Crusaders, which is delivered with enhanced zeal and more vivid timbral contrasts than I've previously heard. Switching to the CD of the same track delivered by the Audiolab transport, it's clear the Madison's DAC section is seriously good, turning in a performance essentially indistinguishable from the stream and therefore gifted enough detail, warmth and texture to satisfyingly cushion the cut's core clarity and precision.

Conclusion

Sure, there are less costly options that are just as amply featured and perform admirably. But the beautifully designed and built Madison is much closer to an end-game streaming proposition with a stunning on-board DAC section that delivers consistently top-drawer sonics, whatever the input ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
FEATURES
★★★★★
OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Style; size; build; ease of use; sublime sonics
DISLIKE: No wi-fi
WE SAY: If you're serious about streaming, the Madison is a must-hear

