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DECEMBER 2013

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



EUROPE



ZODIAC PLATINUM

Reviewer: Srajan Ebaen

Financial Interests: click [here](#)

Source: 27" iMac with 3.4GHz quad-core Intel Core i7, 16GB 1.333MHz RAM, 2TB hard disc, 256GB SSD drive, ADM Radeon HD 6970M with 2GB of GDDR5 memory, PureMusic 1.89g in hybrid memory play with pre-allocated RAM and AIFF files up to 24/192; Audirvana 1.5.10 in Integer mode 1, Metrum Hex, AURALiC Vega, SOTM dX-USB HD with Super-clock upgrade & mBPS-d2

Preamp/Integrated: Nagra Jazz, Esoteric C-03, Bent Audio Tap-X, Crayon CFA-1.2, Bakoon AMP-12R, *Clones Audio 25i* [on loan]

Amplifier: First Watt SIT1, Goldmund/Job 225, *AURALiC Merak* [on loan]

Speakers: soundkaos WAve 40 + Zu Submission, Boenicke Audio W5, AudioSolutions Rhapsody 200, German Physiks HRS-120

Cables: Complete loom of Zu Audio Event, KingRex uCraft and Light Harmonic LightSpeed and Zu split USB cables, Van den Hul AES/EBU cable, Tombo Trøn S/PDIF cable, AudioQuest Diamond Toslink

Stands: Artesania Audio Exotyeric for front end, Rajasthani hardwood rack for amps

Powerline conditioning: Vibex Three 11R on front end, Vibex Two 1R + GigaWatt power strip on amps

Sundry accessories: Extensive use of Acoustic System Resonators, noise filters and phase inverters

Room size: 5m x 11.5m W x D, 2.6m ceiling with exposed wooden cross beams every 60cm, plaster over brick walls, suspended wood floor with Tatami-type throw rugs. The listening space opens into the second storey via a staircase and the kitchen/dining room are behind the main listening chair. The latter is thus positioned in the middle of this open floor plan without the usual nearby back wall.

Review component retail: \$5.495



The Number's Wars. Diaries of a survivor. I hear you protest. This isn't the Brad Pitt vehicle *World War Z* based on the Max Brooks book of a cataclysmic zombie rising. You're right. Wrong movie. This is a lead-in for Igor Levin's latest, a 32bit/384kHz USB DAC capable of 4 x DSD aka DSD256. The present catalogue of authentic DS64 files outside Japan is still small. By the time we get to DSD256 it's closer to zero. Which reminds me of a recent press release for the Canadian exaSound e28 deck. It was touted as "the world's first high-end eight-channel DAC capable of DSD playback at a 12.288MHz sampling rate of DSD256". I'd run the release but cheekily added "good luck finding native files to exploit these specs". The designer wasn't happy. He proudly informed me that the first 8-channel DSD256 file had just come out earlier in the year. I rather thought that made my point. He disagreed. As a small company it was important to be first. And be acknowledged for it. Setting records at the audio Olympics?

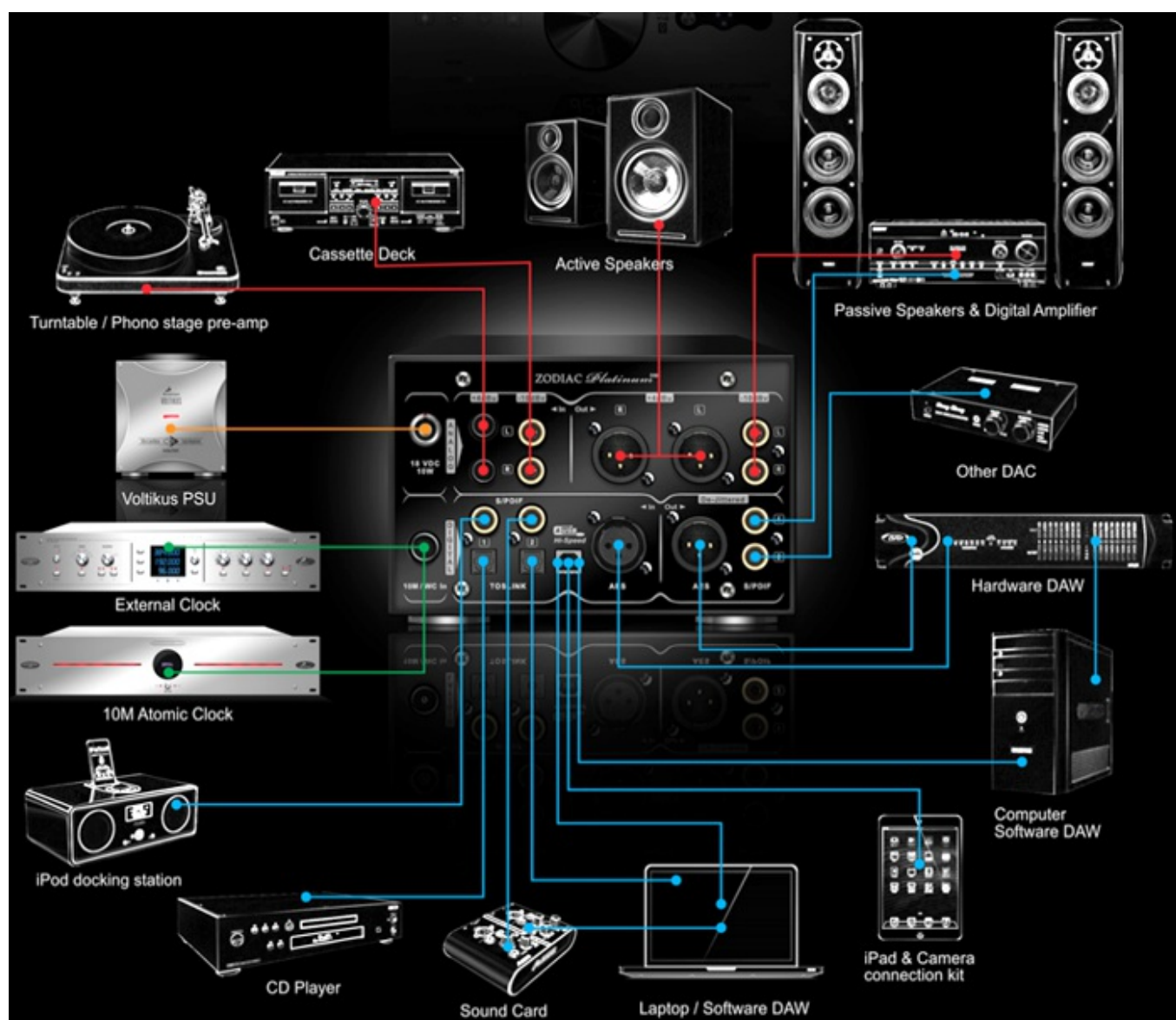


KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES - 2008.

Antelope Audio marketing communications manager Georgi Lazarov's email spoke to it. "We very recently changed the originally announced 768kHz sample rate to 384kHz. Being pressed to release this model there's little sense in further delays which won't have any immediate value to our customers. Hence we prefer leaving that feature for a later update. For now we will announce 384kHz. On a different note Antelope Audio actually is an international rather than Bulgarian brand. Igor himself is a US citizen of Ukrainian extraction. He launched Antelope in the US right after Aardvark. Later he opened the Bulgarian division which he supervises closely by traveling to Europe often. Our team there consists of folk from the UK, Cyprus, France and Syria. We operate test centers plus sales and marketing offices in the US, Germany and Japan. Perhaps you could replace the Bulgarian flag in your header with one of Europe?" Done.



With that housekeeping handled, we're free to inspect the Zodiac Platinum. It's an upgrade over the firm's former top dog in the range, the 384kHz Gold. Because the Gold had launched before the DoP or DSD over PCM standard hit—DSD gets packaged inside PCM container files flagged as such—it lacked said capability. Likely dictated as much by fashion to keep up with the Joneses as by any real need to gild the gold, the Platinum not only adds DSD. It does so four square. To hold you over until native 4 x DSD arrives, the Platinum includes a proprietary DSD upsampler. It takes your ordinary 1-bit files to 12.288MHz. With the ultrasonic noise of the format requiring aggressive noise shaping, shifting everything deeper into the bat sphere is advantageous. Park your trash in outer space away from our gravity. Sandra Bullock and George Clooney better watch out. Oops, wrong movie again.



For many a more important terra firma feature will be the relay-switched precision resistor ladder attenuator. With it the Platinum eliminates the routine bugaboo of deep attenuation all on-chip digital volume solutions commit. No matter what those promise—and they all do—70dB below full-scale output in the digital domain is *lossy**. With sufficient system gain, higher-eff speakers and late-night listening against neighbors, such signal cut isn't theoretical. I use it routinely. Unlike the AURALiC Vega, Resonessence Invicta & Co., the Platinum gives us analog volume like the Gold. It can stand in for legacy preamps. It even gives us one analog input. The linear outboard Voltikus power supply no longer is optional. Of course the external 10MHz clock link remains. Antelope specialize in atomic clocks like you'd want for a studio to sync various converters. Also staying are the full metal jacket remote, the PC [control panel](#) and the twin-socket headphone bay. New is a remote app for iOS and Android devices. Where the Platinum goes beyond the Joneses again and shows its pro-audio genes are dejittered digital *outputs* - two coax, one AES/EBU. To sensibly exploit those should require a (non USB?) DAC superior to the Platinum. That's likely a tall order. Even so you *can* D/A convert offboard three different ways. Calling this Zodiac extensively socketed is an understatement. It's closer to a prosumer machine than home hifi. Which makes sense. Antelope Audio are a pro company.

* As Ivo Linnenberg of the eponymous small German audio firm puts it, "unfortunately the tonal characteristic over the full operating range between -80dB to 0dB changes significantly with this cheap [digital attenuation] solution. Even if you use a true 32bit wide volume control, the analogue stages of the actual DAC chip do not sound equal as when driven at full scale. The sound gets progressively paler and thinner the greater the attenuation level gets although mathematics predict a wide usable dynamic range." My observation precisely.





To learn whether the operative math for this model really was just *Platinum = Gold + DSD* or hid more with sonic upgrades from lessons learnt since the Gold, I had to chat with designer Igor Levin. Existing Gold owners keen on DSD at least in its base 64fs flavor would want to know why it wasn't upgraded with a downloadable firmware revision as had been announced for Q1 of 2013. The answer to that had already come down in May. "DSD for the Zodiac Gold isn't just a matter of a firmware update. It requires hardware changes which cannot be implemented. This is why we will release a new DAC with DSD support."

The Platinum thus wasn't about fixing something that was broke. It was about a fashionable feature the market—dealers, distributors, customers—asked for which required new hardware. Here Antelope's approach differs from Wyred4Sound's. The latter's 3-year old non-DSD DAC2 can get updated to DSD128 due to presentient modularity. Protect your hifi investment? Anti obsolescence? Customer appreciation? On these counts the Platinum could have some current Gold owners tweaked especially since the Gold had been positioned as future-proof (this admittedly due to its 384kHz USB ceiling which remains plenty). "We haven't totally abandoned the idea of upgrading the Gold to DSD. In fact we are still working on it but it currently won't provide the same quality sound on DSD as the Platinum does. Hence we offer our best take on DSD with the new model whilst taking time investigating whether there might be a solution for the Gold that'll have its DSD performance come closer to that of the Platinum."

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