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POWER OF THREE...

MiZiK RE-WRITES THE DIGITAL RULEBOOK

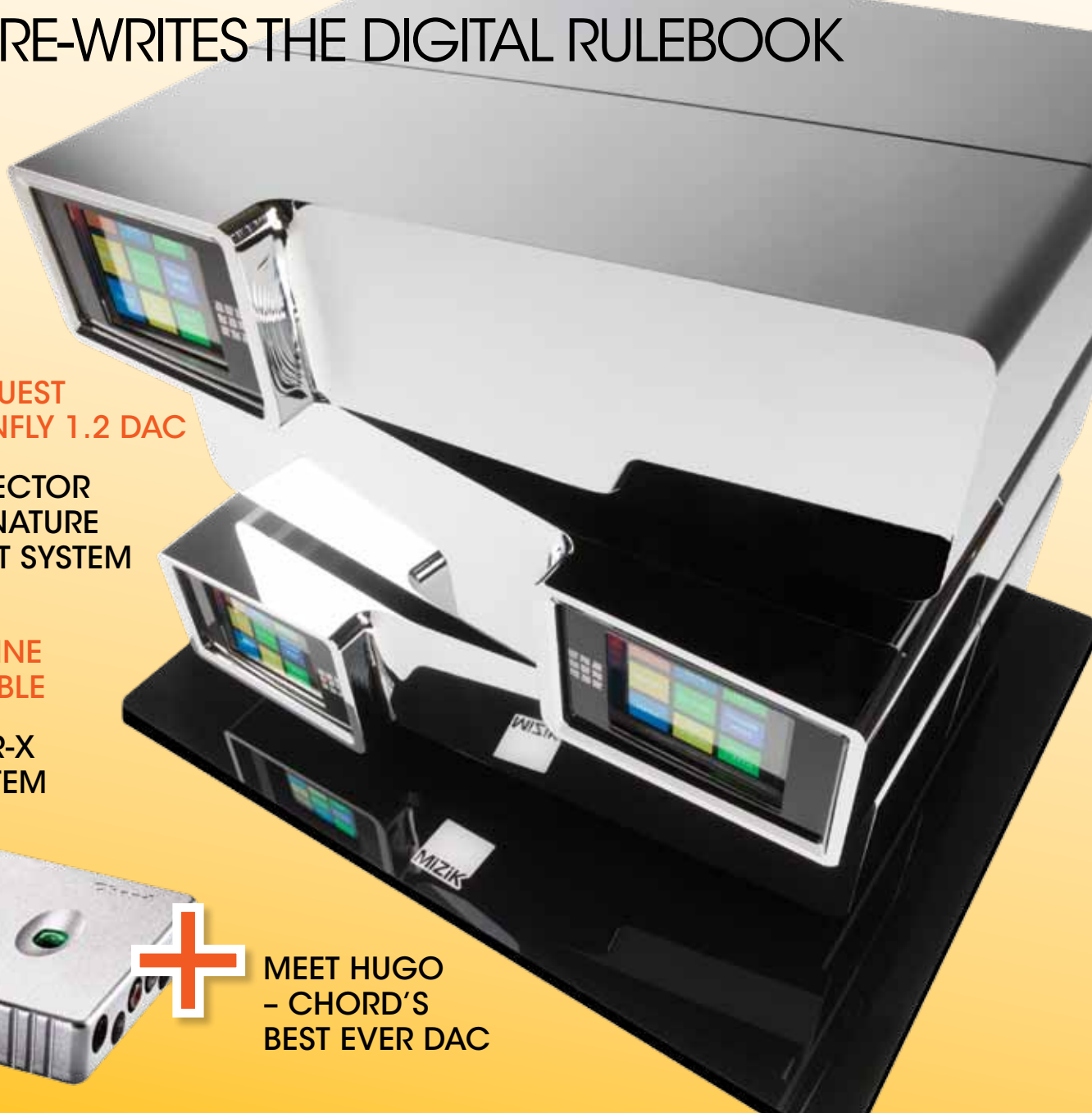- **AUDIOQUEST DRAGONFLY 1.2 DAC**

- **AUDIOVECTOR SI 3 SIGNATURE DISCREET SYSTEM**

- **CRYSTAL DREAMLINE PLUS CABLE**

- **ELAC AIR-X 403 SYSTEM**

+ MEET HUGO – CHORD'S BEST EVER DAC

Audioquest Dragonfly v1.2 DAC

by Alan Sircom

We missed out on the first version of the Audioquest Dragonfly DAC, but the game-changing DAC recently saw a simultaneous price drop and upgrade. That makes it all but irresistible.

The Dragonfly concept remains the same. The Dragonfly is a USB-powered DAC, with a Type A USB connector at one end and a lone 3.5mm analogue jack at the other. It's small; in fact, it's little (pinky) finger, USB memory stick small. You can use this with headphones, earphones, IEMs, or with an appropriate 3.5mm-RCA cable, into a traditional audio system. If you want a little extra room between USB socket and Dragonfly, there's an optional DragonTail female-male USB cable, and it comes supplied with a little 'pleather' pouch that smells faintly of sandlewood. The Dragonfly's rubberised, none-more-black demeanour is purposeful, and offset all the more when the dragonfly logo on the top of the device lights up to denote sampling rate. The logo glows red in standby mode, green for 44.1kHz, blue for 48kHz, amber for 88.2kHz and magenta for 96kHz sampling rates. Audioquest placed the resolution ceiling at 96kHz with the original Dragonfly and chose not to pursue higher resolution files. This may not sit comfortably with audiophiles intent on playing maxed-out DSD files, but it means easier installations for a wider audience, as there's no need for custom drivers on Windows computers (it works with Win 7 and Win 8 PCs, and even Win XP if you enjoy being hacked).

There's not much room for insane technology inside; nevertheless, the Dragonfly manages to support two clocks for multiples of 44.1kHz and 48kHz sampling frequencies. It also features an ESS Sabre DAC chip, and a Texas Instruments 1020 USB receiver chip and Gordon Rankin's Streamlength asynchronous USB technology. Changes in the Dragonfly 1.2 mostly involve redesigned signal paths, both in the analogue stage and between chips in the digital domain.

Dragonfly works with the host controller in the computer, rather than relying on the volume control of iTunes, J River or similar to control the Dragonfly's 60-step attenuator built into the analogue section of the tiny DAC. The Dragonfly manuals clearly explains how to connect the DAC to a host computer and to take full advantage of the built-in attenuator, complete with instructions on using the Dragonfly as a conventional DAC with line-level outputs.

Audioquest's instruction booklet in the Dragonfly box should be used as a 'how to do it' template for rival manufacturers. Nothing is ever perfect, but when the criticisms come down to fonts and sizes, rather than glaring howlers, it's clear Audioquest is on to something good. If you follow the set-up pages, and visit the Audioquest computer audio guide pages recommended on the company's website, you are almost guaranteed to get the best sound possible from your Dragonfly without some hard-core tweaking that would be outside the remit for the typical customer of a sub-£150 DAC.

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Portable 26/96 USB-powered DAC/headphone amp.

Digital Input: USB 1 (asynchronous)

Analogue Output: One 3.5mm jack for headphone and line level

DAC Resolution: PCM from 44.1kHz to 96kHz and up to 24-bit precision

Frequency Response: DC-48kHz (96kHz sampling)

Output Voltage: 2Vrms

Minimum Driven Impedance (headphones): 12ohms

Minimum Output Power (headphones): 125mW/32ohms

Dimensions (HxWxD): 64 x 19 x 10mm

Weight: 22g

Price: £129

Manufacturer: Audioquest

URL: www.audioquest.com

UK Office Tel: +44(0)1249 848873

▶ Setting aside sound quality for now, the full package is as well-designed as the literature and other manufacturers really should take note. Packed in a solid card box, with a gatefold front in the manner of all Audioquest cables, this is as colourful as it is informative, and the foam protective packaging and accompanying 'case candy' (manual, warranty mailer, pouch) all add to the impression that this is not some fly-by-night brand. While this might be old news to wizened old audiophiles who've been round the block a few times, when it comes to USB, the company has to play in a new market, and that market has no knowledge of Audioquest's history or repute.

This old-market/new-market spanning property of the Dragonfly is its biggest strength, and biggest potential stumbling block. Those new to the whole audio world will plug the Dragonfly into the side of their laptop, plug their headphones into the Dragonfly and fall for the full-bodied sound and dismiss the on-board headphone socket as sounding thin and screechy by comparison. They might not use the same terminology, but will notice and approve of the greater sense of air around the instruments in the midrange and treble. They will notice how legato music flows effortlessly from note to note, yet when the music becomes staccato, it starts and stops with military band precision. They will probably play something with a lot of bass, and find a lot to like about the Dragonfly.

It might not change their musical life, but they will find they use the little DAC with increasing frequency, and actively seek out times when they can kick back and enjoy sounds a little better through their computer. They may well even take the opportunity to invest in a halfway decent 3.5mm-RCA cable (given the provenance, possibly one from one of Audioquest's lines) and enjoy the same full, rich sound through their audio system, and notice the increased stage width and sense of stereo separation between instruments on a 3D stage, when compared to the on-board DAC. On balance, unless they are trying to drive beastly headphone loads they may well conclude, the £129 paid for the Dragonfly v1.2 was money well spent.

Then there's the older market, the group who *have* been round the hi-fi block a few times. Still reeling from the Dragonfly not supporting formats they may have little or no interest in (but like the idea of), they will carp on about how it's not as good as some £5,000 DAC from the past that no one, aside from the audiophile and the designer, has ever heard. Then, in the remote possibility they actually listen to the thing, they might grumble that doesn't have the etched, stinging treble they like, now that their high frequency hearing is just a memory. Finally, although it makes a more open and better balanced sound than its predecessor, the change from v1.0 to v1.2 (and the significant price drop) isn't big enough to represent a paradigm shift, and can they have their old ball back, please. Stuff like that.

I'm down with the newbies here. I think the Dragonfly is a great product at a great price. It's an important product too; because it opens our audio world up to people who might never discover just how good music can sound without it. Yes, there are better DACs out there, but they invariably cost more (at this price point even £5 more could be important), and for those who only use what comes with the computer, the Audioquest Dragonfly definitely has the 'wow' factor. ✚