

The PS AUDIO Digital Link III Dac

By Sandy Greene

The history of PS Audio is interesting to read and it's up on their web site: psaudio.com. After about a month of unbiased listening to their new Digital Link III digital-to-analog converter, I decided to learn a little more about PS Audio. I nodded my head in a moment of "ah" when I read that PS Audio's first product was actually a phono preamp and that their move to digital was with the goal of allowing the new CD players (then Sony and Philips) to reproduce music as well as analog replay.





PS Audio introduced the first D/A process in the late 1980's. It was called the "Digital Link." What's sitting in my rack now is their newest DAC, the Digital Link III.

The DLIII measures a half-rack wide at 8.5 inches. The unit is pretty deep at 13 inches, and the attractively curved aluminum faceplate stands 2 inches tall. The unit itself is straightforward to set up and use. The manual serves as more of a promotional piece than an instructional one. There is no remote control.

Simple is as Simple Does

The DLIII does one thing and does it very well. It takes a digital signal of either optical, S/PDIF or USB, upsamples it to either 96kHz or 192kHz, and outputs an analog signal via either unbalanced RCA's or balanced XLR's. The output level is fixed and quite high, especially through the balanced outs at 5.5V. My own DAC, a Bel Canto Dac3, has an output of 4.5V and the listening adjustment can be quite jarring if your other sources have a lower output, but that's my only gripe with the DLIII. This 5.5v output level was too high to use with the pass through outputs of my preamp to powered speakers in another room.

Use and set up is simple. The DLIII will automatically choose the source from which it's receiving data. There's also a button on the front face to manually choose the input source. The other button is to choose an upsample rate of either 96 or 192kHz.

You can switch between either upsample rate on the fly, but without remote control, you'll most likely set it once and leave it that way. I ended up sticking with 96kHz after a bunch of listening. The more time I spent with the DLIII, I felt a remote might be a good addition for the user that will make this the hub of their music system, and perhaps a volume control too, like PS Audio offers on their current phono stage?

The difference between 96kHz and 192kHz is quite obvious. The 192 rate is more airy and crisp. The soundstage is much wider, deeper and fills the room with an almost omnidirectional effect. Sounds emanate from all sorts of spots up, down, left, right, in front and even behind. It can be

downright creepy sometimes. Remember "Q Sound" from Sting's, *The Soul Cages*? It's that kind of effect. If you have the CD, pull it out and you'll get what I mean right away. I auditioned the much-lauded Cambridge Audio 840 CD player about a year ago, and it also upsamples to 192kHz with the same effect. Fun, but not all that realistic.

The 96kHz rate is much more true to life. The sound stays within and around the speakers while creating a more believable and defined sound stage. While the 192 rate tends to put a little shimmer on the sound, the 96kHz lives up to PS Audio's aspiration of good analog reproduction. I found the frequencies to be more neutral at 96 versus 192. *(continued)*

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The overall feel is more natural and involving at 96kHz. At 192, I felt I was listening to something reproduced. At 96, I felt much closer to the musical event.

In Practice

Two very different recordings that cemented my observations were Teddy Thompson's, *Up Front and Down Low* and Miracle Fortress' *Five Roses*. The Miracle Fortress recording is heavily processed and multi-layered and was quite fun to hear at the 192 rate. On the track "Hold Your Secrets to Your Heart," The layers of guitars wash around your body and inside your head. When the synths come in, you are transported to another world. The low end is slightly more robust at 192kHz as well. The sound is overall warmer, smoother and tubelike at 192.

The characteristics at the 192 rate don't work as well with Teddy Thompson's "Touching Home" from *Up Front and Down Low*. The brushed cymbal wash at the top of the track is almost synthetic at 192. I much preferred 96kHz for this recording, which captures a natural acoustic space with realistic instrumental and vocal timbres.

There's one huge benefit to these sonic differences. They come from one box that costs under a grand.

Basically with the PS Audio Digital Link III and its two choices of up-sampling, you essentially get the equivalent of two devices in one. The sound is distinct enough that it's not unlike switching between a turntable and a CD player with the same recording.

As a matter of base-lining, I've been able to compare the PS Audio DLIII to my Bel Canto Dac3.
(continued)

DIGITAL LINK

COAX ●

OPTICAL ●

USB ●



PS AUDIO

Digital To Analog Converter

● LOCKED

● 96kHz

● 192kHz

I've been living with the Bel Canto for well over a year and have grown accustomed to its sound. The PS Audio DLIII was an exciting change of pace. The DLIII creates the feeling of greater dynamic punch and faster pace. The Bel Canto sounds almost slow after a quick change.

The Bel Canto delivers a more textural and subtle experience. The acoustic guitar on "Touching Home" is more defined and natural sounding, and Teddy's delivery is more meaningful. On the Miracle Fortress track, the psychedelic "Shoegaze" is more trippy through the Bel Canto. In contrast, the PS Audio delivers a tight, exciting and more-energetic sound. As with any piece of gear, it boils down to what will work in your specific system and with your own musical tastes.

Fantastic Buy

The PS Audio Digital Link III is a fantastic buy. It's well-built, elegant in physical design and super simple to use. Just plug in your sources and decide which upsampled frequency you prefer; when you want to experience a recording in a new way, it's simply a push button away. Without a doubt, the PS Audio DLIII improves the sound of most digital sources under its price point, adding life and excitement to the proceedings.

Second Opinion — By Jeff Dorgay

If you didn't notice, we revisited the original PS Audio Digital Link in our Old School column last issue and I am still pretty impressed with the sound. Interestingly enough, almost 30 years after the original, PS Audio has a much improved product for the same cost: a thousand bucks.

While I tried the Digital Link III with my Power Book, I went a different direction for sources to the Wadia i170 iDock and my old Proceed transport, which I borrowed back from staff writer Jerold O'Brien. I even hooked up my super budget Pioneer 563 that I bought on EBay for \$50 to see what kind of improvements were available with an extreme budget deck.

Bottom line: when comparing this to a number of current CD players in the \$2,000 range, the Digital Link definitely held its own. So if you have an older CD player that still works well, you can get a big improvement in sound for a minor investment and have the flexibility of USB and Optical inputs along with RCA and XLR outputs.

I found the correlation between 96khz and 192khz upsampling to be somewhat more random. I made it a point to try it with quite a few discs, but never decisively preferred one overall, so it's fun to explore!

The key word for the Digital Link III is versatility. Even if you are a vinyl lover, using this DAC as a digital hub is great because you can now switch between your digital sources, essentially giving your preamp a few extra inputs in the process.

I agree with Sandy, this one's a winner. ●