

HRT Music Streamer III DAC

by Alan Sircom



The High Resolution Technologies Music Streamer was one of the first USB-powered digital converters, and the brand was one of the first in its field to be taken seriously by audiophiles. The latest Music Streamer III continues the trend. This new version of the entry-level HRT DAC brings asynchronous USB transfer and 24-bit, 96kHz support, without the need for additional drivers. But, computer audio in the home is a numbers game; five years on, is 96kHz enough?

In this case at least, I think it is. It gets past the 'more is better' demands of the public by virtue of being inexpensive enough to be both mass market in approach (where 24/96 support is not important) and 'forgivable' by the audiophiles (who might spend the cost of the Music Streamer III on high-end fuses). This is a difficult admission to make in audiophile terms, but from a

studio engineering stance, 24/96 is inherently 'right'; a lot of studio equipment tops off at 24/96 precision, and 24/192 is at best overkill and often simply upsampled. This might not sit well with those obsessed with DSD, and this is not the place to create a lengthy aside over high resolution, but it strikes me that there are possibly more people crossing products like the Music Streamer III off the list because they like the idea of high-resolution audio, and FOMO (fear of missing out). This is wrong.

Grey end cheeks and the roman numeral 'III' aside, visually and on-paper, there's not a great deal separating this generation of Music Streamer from the last. In fact, there's not a great deal separating the more up-market model II+ from the III in some respects too. The design still uses a TAS1020B chip as USB receiver, with a Burr-Brown PCM1794 as DAC, but where the II used a single output chip, the newer model uses three chips in an arrangement very similar to the II+. It's also subject to some more miniaturisation; the EPROM that used to sit in a chip holder is now a surface mount device. This last, however is merely part of continuous development; it's the three-chip output stage that represents the big difference, and brings the performance of the III up a notch.

Like its bigger brothers, the Music Streamer III is entirely powered by the USB host device. But, unlike its bigger brothers, it doesn't make quite as big a set of demands as the Music Streamer II+ or HD models; just 250mA in fact. This means that there's less demand for additional power with the Music Streamer III, and something like an AQVOX USB power supply is not so strongly recommended. It is also unfussy with regard to the cable used to give it power and signal. All of which means not only is it cheaper to buy than its bigger brothers, but getting the best from it is cheaper, too.

This makes comparison between the two Music Streamers more complex than first thought. If you take the Music Streamer II+ out of its comfort zone (no AQVOX power supply, and do without a good aftermarket USB), and use it as befits the Music Streamer III, the difference between MS II+ and MS III is very small, and many would ultimately prefer the MS III. However, take the MS III up to what makes the MS II+ happy, and the results flip in the MS II+'s direction.

This is labouring the point somewhat, as the two have more in common than they are different. The MS III retains that rich, but not thick, and warm-sounding presentation that makes it one of the best examples of true high-end without high-price I can think of.

What set the original HRT models apart from the rest half a decade ago still stands today. The sound has a sense of flow and space around the



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► instruments, especially on well-recorded music. I played ‘She’s Already Made Up My Mind’ by Lyle Lovett on his *Joshua Judges Ruth* album [MCA], and the separation of those instruments, the clean extension (without excess brightness) of the percussion and angrily-strummed guitar, and the depth of that bass are excellent. The dynamic range of this track shows both how good the MS III can be, and how the MS II+ when pushed to its limits can go further. If you are prepared to spend the extra, and devote the extra time to better sound, the MS II+ shows a stronger hand, but the MS III is the better performer for a more casual user, not willing to use add-on power supplies and the like.

The original Music Streamer had no real challenges. The MS III doesn’t have as clear a field today. Undercutting the MS III by £50, the AudioQuest Dragonfly is now the obvious rival. In fact, they target different people entirely; the MS III is a USB soundcard to connect your computer to an audio system, where the Dragonfly is a USB headphone DAC/amp with the potential for domestic audio use with the right cable, which is not supplied. The sound of both is different, too; the Dragonfly is forward and very ‘now’ sounding, where the MS III is more about refinement and unforced dynamics. Dragonfly lovers will find the MS III ‘laid-back’; MS III supporters will find the Dragonfly ‘frenetic’. Which one of those you find yourself in step with should define your next budget DAC purchase.

The portable DAC market is a volatile one. Try as we might, we can’t quite disabuse that world of the idea that a year old product is six months out of date. We therefore have to accept incremental changes as a function of keeping a product in the public mind. The Music Streamer III fits this well. It’s better than the MS II it replaces, and is still not quite as good as the MS II+, but the gap is closing. Five years ago, the original HRT Music Streamer helped change the way we think about audio. It’s still doing that today. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Solid-state USB digital-to-analogue converter.

Digital Inputs: One Type B USB input (asynchronous, Class 1, galvanically isolated)

Analogue Outputs: One stereo single-ended (via RCA jacks)

DAC Resolution/Supported Digital Formats: PCM formats from 16-bit, 32kHz to 24-bit, 96kHz

Frequency Response: 20Hz – 20kHz, +0dB, -0.2dB

Distortion (THD + Noise): 0.002% (1kHz, full scale)

Jitter contribution (DC-30kHz): >130dB below full scale

Power requirements: 250mA

Dimensions (HxWxD): 25 x 61 x 133mm

Weight: 165g

Price: £189

Manufacturer: High Resolution Technologies

URL: www.hirestech.com

UK Distributor: Audiofreaks (UK)

URL: www.audiofreaks.co.uk

Tel: +44(0)208 948 4153