



Valve art

Chris Ward takes an exclusive look at the Mystra DAC/preamp, and discovers the joy of science and music coming together

Gregor Szymczyk of Veracity Audio hands me a heavy, armoured black flight case and says “enjoy” in his wonderfully evocative Polish accent. Unlocking the case and lifting the lid reveals an unusual, dark device nestled in grey foam that looks like it’s come from a *Star Trek* set. But no, it turns out that this is the Mystra valve DAC/preamp.

Almost every manufacturer builds to a budget, but Gregor Szymczyk confirms he mostly builds to engineering tolerances that achieve sound qualities. All components in this dual mono design are hand picked and hand construction is second to none, with silver-plated

OFC Kapton wiring and pure silver wiring in this example actually recycled from the space shuttle programme. Each Mystra or Chrysalis (Veracity’s top of the range) DAC is built to order in the UK, so you can discuss your preferences ahead of a couple of weeks of solid work and testing. This dual mono design can handle PCM feeds up to 24-bit/192kHz, but also automatically detects DSD files and routes them to a standalone DSD DAC for native processing.

Lifting the lid also confirms that this ingenious aluminium lined, British steel monocoque unit is effectively three co-joined products in separate Faraday cages for maximum isolation. The left-hand wing is devoted to four

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Veracity Audio Mystra

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
DAC/valve preamp

WEIGHT
13.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
440 x 150 x 310mm

FEATURES
● Inputs: 2x S/PDIF coaxial up to 24-bit/176.4kHz; 1x USB input up to 24-bit/192kHz and DSD128; 1x stereo RCA analogue
● Outputs: RCA; balanced XLRs; headphone output

DISTRIBUTOR
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transformers, 18 separate power supplies and mains filtering, the middle is full of valve preamp circuitry and sophisticated grounding technology and the right-hand section contains all of Veracity’s digital know-how.

I connect the Mystra to my reference Shanling CD-T100 transport via Missing Link Dark Art 75ohm digital coax and Audion Golden Night 300B monoblocks via Black Rhodium Sonata VS-1 interconnects (HFC 398). The power button and a source indicator light up blue, confirming the Mystra starts in a mute mode for about 45 seconds, until valves have warmed through. The beefy, black, brushed aluminium fascia is furnished with power button, source selector and a central motorised volume control, that is more precisely a stepped attenuator that uses a series of resistors and physical relays. The bottom right knob is an intriguing extra option that Gregor fitted especially here to enable the DAC to be switchable between non-oversampling, 4x or 8x oversampling, but owners can specify this space for a quality headphone output.

Around the back, there are digital inputs for two coaxial S/PDIF feeds and a single USB. There is also an analogue input to simply utilise the Mystra as a dual mono, dual valve rectified, pure Class A, single-ended triode valve preamp, as well as a ground lift switch in case you experience any hum in your system. Analogue output is via RCA or

A labour of love, the Mystra’s attention to detail will delight

balanced XLRs, and in this instance headphone output has been moved to the back. The valves employed are 2x 6SN7, 2x ECC82 and 2x CV574 with Veracity Audio offering customers a number of quality tube options according to preference or budget. The black Shuguang Treasure valves used here are high quality and complement the black casework. The understated remote control enables power on and standby as well as input selection and volume control, with the attenuator knob moving around as each new relay connects.

Sound quality

Stina Nordenstam’s *Little Star* on CD immediately portrays the leading qualities of the Mystra. The close-miked vocals have real intimacy without any grain. I feel like I’ve moved five rows closer to the performer at a live acoustic venue. Some DACs dredge masses of forensic information from a recording, with a downside being a brittleness that leaves you wanting less detail. Equally, some valve output stages give a lovely silky presentation, but can occasionally smooth over the finest details robbing you of some of the electricity of the performance. The Mystra avoids both pitfalls. It feels very detailed but entirely undigital in its presentation. There’s lots of realistic air around the vocals, but absolutely no glassiness to the sound. Some of this quality resides within the beautifully refined output stage, but I sense that the DAC section is refreshingly free from many of the traditional digital vices around jitter, distortion and interference. The detail is all there, but in a remarkably relaxed way with excellent timing that feels closer to the original performance. Depth of imaging is particularly good as musical layers all have effortless space and room

to breathe. Midband detail has a convincing body and presence and bass is particularly supple and fulsome. The upsampling selector is a beguiling and subtle addition. Non-oversampling seems to help tracks flow with even greater ease, 8x setting appears to give treble a little more air and bass tones a shade more force, with 4x being a half-way house. It’s not night and day, though, because the music is being handled so sympathetically through the entire signal path on all settings.

Spinning Fakear’s *Red Lines* on CD, the Mystra confirms any flair for acoustic instruments and intimate vocals is easily matched by its rendition of electronic music. Timing and transparency are critical for this exquisite track and it nails both. Opening keyboards positively glow with their rounded presence as

The Mystra feels very detailed, but entirely undigital in its presentation

razor-edged clicks and electric ticks are layered with properly metallic hi-hats and a phat, driving bass beat. The soundstage becomes an ultra-wide, high-definition image that would shame any 4K Ultra HD screen. There is something magical about the Mystra’s balance of being extremely revealing and yet never feeling like your nose is being pressed into edgy, fatiguing detail. I’m getting vast amounts of tiny insights, but I simply experience this as more ‘music’. An ethereal choir of children floats in and out of rich layers of crystalline textures and dense rhythms and the infectious track just builds and flows, making beautiful, musical sense. ▶

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Coaxial S/PDIF inputs
- 2 RCA and balanced XLR outputs
- 3 Headphone output
- 4 Analogue preamp input
- 5 USB input

Q&A

Gregor Szymczyk

Founder & designer, Veracity Audio



CW: What sets the Mystra apart from other designs?

GS: Most DACs will employ hundreds of transistors and then pass the signal to a transistorised output stage. I believe in a less is more philosophy to achieve maximum sound quality. I designed this circuit to accept a differential signal in DC mode without signal capacitors as well as performing common mode rejection. The design amplifies the signal 14-fold, works in pure Class A and has very wide bandwidth and low distortion; all this in the space of one dual triode per channel. You will hear the difference.

What's special about the Mystra's power supplies?

Power supplies are extremely important to sound quality. Just imagine a performance engine running on dirty fuel. I use four separate mains transformers with 8 secondaries to create 18 discrete power supplies (14 voltage regulators and four choke loaded unregulated rails). Two serve valve HT, four each for left and right analogue channels, four for digital sections and one each for valve heaters, volume control, remote control and switching gear. This achieves optimum power separation and purity for the cleanest possible sound.

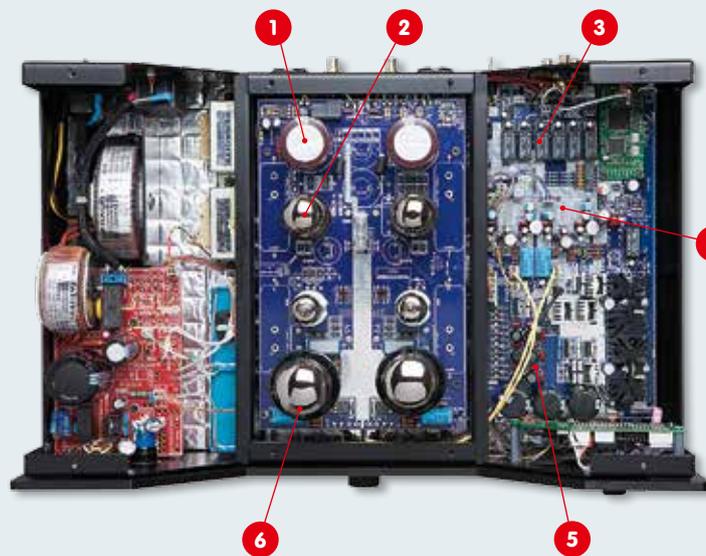
How did you select components?

Some people seem to imbue certain component manufacturers with almost magical qualities. Rather than describe certain components as 'audiophile' quality, I find that different components work better in certain circuits. Experimenting relentlessly was the only way I could arrive at the optimum sound quality.

Why do you use a stepped attenuator for volume control?

Even really good potentiometers create channel imbalances and introduce a sound signature that affects vital micro-details in music. I use a system of relays and motor so that I can offer remote control, giving customers total convenience with no sacrifice to quality.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Power reservoir cap
- 2 Valve rectifier
- 3 Input signal switches
- 4 PCM DACs
- 5 Choke/film capacitor filters
- 6 Voltage amplifier dual triode

Raising the bar, I connect my Macbook Pro via The Chord Company SilverPlus USB cable (HFC 407) and use the latest J River media software to play a 5.6MHz native DSD file of the Mathias Landaeus Trio playing a jazz handling of *What A Wonderful World*. I twist the source knob until the USB indicator lights up, which is immediately followed by the DSD LED as another relay engages, automatically detecting the native data feed. It's a sublime recording and the Mystra does a beautiful job of conveying the talented trio in the intimate acoustic space. The piano in particular is given superb body and three-dimensionality with stabbed notes and soft, sustained chords layered in a precise, deep soundstage, while the brushwork of Jon Fält on drums has more focus, texture and snap than more lowly digital files can depict. Deeper notes from the piano and double bass are distinct with the timbre of each instrument clear to hear. Timing is again strong with the syncopation and lilt of the tight trio flowing in a very fluid, lyrical and analogue way.

Often, well-recorded DSD massively outclasses humble CD files with inkier silences, better timing, more potent bass and lighter treble, but here the contrast from more modest files is less because the DAC seems to nail CD with such aplomb. Weaker recordings can be laid bare, but more frequently I'm hearing tracks I've previously written off as poor, with new appreciation. In every instance there is an utterly assured, relaxed and altogether analogue quality to the Mystra that sets it far apart from so

many number crunchers. It simply doesn't sound digital, just musical.

Conclusion

This is proof positive that hi-fi can still be an artisan purchase, blending ingenious design with uncompromising engineering to create a luxurious product that is a joy to use and own. Supreme attention to detail extends all the way through from smart data conversion to beautifully refined signal handling by the valve section, from clever circuit design and relays to precision machining and faultless assembly. Gregor Szymczyk originally designed the Mystra for himself, but now you can share his talent and superbly engineered products. This design is clearly a labour of love, fuelled by a personal passion to make digital music sing like never before. If the Mystra were made by a major manufacturer, you could instantly double or treble the price. This isn't a DAC/valve preamp, it's a work of audio art ●



HOW IT COMPARES

Hegel's flagship HD30 DAC £3,200 (HFC 408) is supremely talented, with a very natural and fluid sound and excellent connectivity. The Mystra feels more dynamic, organic and analogue, but the HD30 has a far greater array of digital input options, so if you're looking for more of a digital hub it may fit the bill better. If you are drawn to some valve magic, you may also wish to audition Audio Note's DAC 2.1x signature £3,418, which like Veracity Audio, blazes a unique technical trail using aging valves to create refined and highly addictive musical sound qualities.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Transparent and musical; exquisite valve section; superb design

DISLIKE: Styling may not be for everyone

WE SAY: The ultimate digital decoder for analogue addicts? Quite possibly