

Exogal Comet DAC

by Alan Sircom

Watch this space! Before long, the Exogal name will be springing up time and again, in the systems of music lovers and audiophiles who know their way around good sound. The Comet DAC is the first shot from this bold 'new' brand, combining digital converter with an output stage of the sort of quality and drive to make it a viable digital hub/preamplifier in its own right. There's a matching power amp to follow. This could be the start of something truly special.

What's with the 'air bunnies' around the word 'new' in the last paragraph? Exogal may be a new player in the game, but it has some very wise heads on those young shoulders. One of those heads is Jim Kinne, and his audio hits include Wadia's highly respected 27 Decoding Computer. The Comet is in essence the distillation of a career (or three) designing ultra-high performance audio devices.

Exogal – like Wadia before it and Chord Electronics today – eschews standard DAC technology, instead using an FGPA (field gate programmable array) for the conversion process. Six of them in fact, each acting as stereo DAC chips for the balanced, single-ended, and headphone circuits as standard.

This array of FGPAs is inherently 'open ended'. It's less of a DAC design set in stone, more of a digital platform capable of significant upgrades through firmware. While nothing is ever entirely 'future-proofed', this inherently upgradable design means your Comet DAC is less likely than most to fall obsolete. Any prospective change is just lines of code: even if tomorrow we end up listening to multichannel music, with those six fully programmable DACs in tow, the task is not beyond the Exogal's reach. We shouldn't play down the amount of work required to write that putative code, but for the end user, it offers some guarantee against your Comet being Last Year's Big Thing.

The other great advantage to a fully programmable array is this allows for custom filter options, and the Comet offers one linear, two minimum phase, and one spline filter. These options are best accessed using the smartphone or tablet app, rather than the teeny tiny remote supplied with the Comet.

Where the Exogal really moves into 'tomorrow' technology is it has a pair of line-level phono inputs, which pass through a custom 24/96 A/D conversion, that is upsampled to 24/384 for internal use. This turns the Exogal into a digital hub. ▶





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► I was never lucky enough to spend enough time with the Wadia 27, but what little time I spent with it left its mark. It was one of the most natural, unforced, exciting, and detailed converters money could buy, and even today its performance would be hard to replicate. Except the Exogal Comet does just that. It doesn't serve up a clone of the Wadia 27 sound, but it has that same sense of music unconstrained by the electronics being played, especially in soundstage terms. You get a sense of why that 'holographic soundstaging' cliché exists when you hear something like 'Church' from Lyle Lovett's *Joshua Judges Ruth* [MCA]; those handclaps and voices from the choir really do appear in a three-dimensional space in front of the listener, whatever the system.

The Exogal's strongest suit perhaps is that it isn't the most immediately revealing revelation. If that sounds like a contradiction in terms, it's simply that a lot of audio seems to be initially impressive, where the Exogal slowly, but inexorably, convinces you of just how damn good it is. Some will never get this, because they want the ten-second 'wow!' demonstration. Others will realise music is about more than just being impressive and discover their music holds deeper joys. I played 'The Pull' from Richmond Fontaine's excellent *We Used To Think The Freeway Sounded Like A River* [Décor] and felt wrist-slittingly 'uplifted' rather than blown away by the sound, which is precisely how you should feel when listening to this track. High-res is great through the Comet (it will happily play

32/384 and DSD128) but it isn't mandatory, because you find yourself drawn to the music rather than the sound it makes. You can do that to almost any genre or style of music: I even ploughed through some truly wonderful – but horribly recorded – 1970s Ethiopian jazz-funk by Mulatu Astatke ('Yègelié Tezeta' on *Ethiopiquest Vol 4* [Buda]) and the Exogal simply got out of the way to let the groove play on. It also did the same through the digitised line input,

Add the separate power supply, and the difference is immediately justified in the listening. The bass becomes more solid, more authoritative, more 'real', and the stereo image extends even further from the boxes. It's not a vast change – certainly nothing like the difference between most DACs and the Comet, but it just makes the Comet more 'Comet-y'. Put simply, it's a 'no going back' upgrade.

There is one mark against the Exogal – the display. Smack in the middle of the front panel is a little silver square, that most people think is some kind of logo, or maybe some sort of power indicator. Look closer: it's the lone display for source and volume level. This is elegant and discreet, yes, but silver text against a silver background is not high on the readability stakes. If the Comet is used as a DAC only, this is not really an issue, but if the Comet really does take over the role of digital 'hub', this needs to be more clearly marked. It's a measure of how good the Comet really is, though, that I'd be willing to put up with this display without turning a hair. ►

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▶ We aren't in the comparison review business, but there's something going on here that's worth commenting upon. Right now, the best DAC I know of is, on balance, the Nagra HD DAC: there are probably better ones, but the few I can think of are so expensive they cost about as much as funding a good ol' 1980s South American insurrection. But the HD DAC is not exactly cheap: I'm still clinging to the review sample, but the excuses are wearing thin, and I know sooner or later, I'll either have to man up and buy it (thoroughly Ron Jeremy-ing my bank balance in the process) or find something similar for considerably less money. The Exogal Comet (especially with optional PSU) comes close. Possibly 'close enough' close.

While we're talking of things beyond the Exogal's purview, using it with the masterful Melco N1Z music player is, quite simply, the cheapest way into digital's Premier League. This is a combination that can stand shoulder to shoulder with digital's giants like complete multi-box players from dCS, CH Precision, Esoteric, Metronome, and Nagra. I can't speak to Meitner, MSB, Playback, ReQuest, Soullution, or Weiss, because I've not spent that much time with these player systems (and my experience with Esoteric is somewhat behind the curve), but it's immaterial. The point is, the Melco/Exogal combination has the audio chops to have a dog in the big digital fight, at a price most of these big-ticket contenders might set aside for packing cases. OK, so ultimately, these top-tier players are not ousted by the Exogal, but it puts up one hell of a fight. Where it loses this fight is in bass depth and intensity, and dynamic shading. Reaching for Peter Hurford's organ (snurk, snurk) the sheer scale of Bach's Prelude and Fugue (BWV 548) in D Minor [Decca] is foreshortened slightly on the Exogal next to the really big guns. Also, the headphone output tends to sound harsh at moderate to loud levels, even on comparatively efficient Sennheiser HD25-IIs. But, try to find a more complete and more intrinsically 'right' sounding digital hub for the same money. It's almost impossible.

We keep banging on about the revolution that is taking place in home audio, and the Exogal Comet is that revolution's *agent provocateur*. It isn't the first device that replaces source component, converter, and preamp for a digital generation, but it is the first that makes that move so cogent and does so without any real compromise. If this is the shape of the future, it comes highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Comet DAC

Digital Inputs: AES/EBU on XLR, SPDIF on 75Ohm BNC, Toslink, USB-B, Analog on isolated RCA

Analog Outputs: One Pair Balanced (XLR), One Pair Unbalanced (RCA)

Sample rates supported: 16bit/32kHz–24bit/96kHz (optical); 16bit/32kHz–24bit/192kHz (AES/EBU, coaxial), 16bit/32kHz–32bit/384kHz, DSD64, DSD128 (USB)

Frequency Response: Not specified

S/N ratio: Not specified

THD+N: Not specified

Dimensions (HxWxD): 4.76 × 19.0 × 29.2 cm

Weight: 4.2 kg

Finish: Clear (Silver) or Black Anodized Aluminum

Price: £2,100

Optional PSU

Input Voltage: 85 VAC to 264 VAC

DC Cord Length: 1.5m

Dimensions (HxWxD): 15.24 × 16.5 × 5.72cm

Weight: 0.91 kg

Finish: Black

Price: £550

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