

DAC Shootout II

Review by David Das

I had the pleasure of attending the DAC Shootout II event hosted by Cinematic Home A/V on Saturday, November 8, 2025.

There were 6 contenders in this line up.

RME ADI-2 FS (\$1000)

[RME](#) AD/DA converters are widely used in the professional audio recording industry and mastering studios.

The original version released in 2017 came with the AKM AK4490EQ DAC Chip. Later in 2019, it was upgraded to the AKM AK4493 Chip. This has the characteristic warm AKM sound. I have this version.

After the AKM factory got destroyed by a fire in October 2020, RME switched to the ESS ES9028Q2M DAC Chip. I bought a second unit when they went to sale for \$999 at [B&H](#).

The ES9028Q2M Chip has a sharper and edgier sound compared to the AK4493 Chip.

Out of curiosity I decided to bring this newest version to see how a professional DAC used during mastering stacks up against audiophile grade DACs designed to enhance the listening experience.

To my surprise the [RME ADI-2 FS](#) came in dead last in the shootout!



LAiV Harmony R/2R DAC (\$1,200)

The LAiV [Harmony DAC](#) is an R/2R DAC. It retails around [\\$1,200](#).



Club member **Todd Krieger** brought this in. The Harmony DAC got rave reviews on [The Headphone Community](#), [Sound News](#) and [6Moons](#).

Auralic Vega G1 (\$4,000)

Club President **John Harvell** threw in his [Auralic Vega G1](#) into the Shootout. This is a network streaming DAC. This retails for \$4000.



Schitt Yggdrasil R/2R Forever DAC (\$2,300)

Club Treasurer **Paul Johnson** provided his [Schitt Yggdrasil](#) Forever DAC.



This DAC has been optimized for PCM decoding up to 384kHz. It uses four 20-bit R/2R ladder devices from Analog Devices (AD5791), two per channel in a balanced configuration. These expensive \$80 chips offers additional horsepower to support complex and longer filters to extract and enhance every bit of information from PCM signals.

Robert Harley from The Absolute Sound wrote a glowing [review](#) giving details of Mike Moffat's design architecture.

This performed surprisingly well for the money.

Bricasti Design M3H DAC (\$7,500)

The [Bricasti Design M3H DAC](#) was entered into the shootout at the last minute by club member Curtis Cummings.



This comes with a fully differential headphone option. It is also a wired Network Streamer supporting PCM decoding up to 192kHz and DSD (64/128/256) over USB. This device is Room Ready.

Future Audiophile ran a glowing [review](#) of the Bricasti M3 Audiophile DAC.

Bricasti Design is a pro audio company. All their gear carries a distinctive pro audio look and feel that blends perfectly in a studio setting.

Linn Selekt Organik DAC (\$12,000)

Club member **Joe Roberts** graciously offered his [Linn Selekt Organik DAC](#).

The [Organik](#) DAC is a no compromise design encapsulating over 30 years of engineering at Linn. This was the most expensive state-of-the-art device presented by our club members.



This is a wireless streamer that accepts every possible source format from 320kbps MP3 files to 24bit/192kHz PCM, DSD128 and 180g vinyl.

The Organik DAC features Linn's ultimate in-house design in dual mono architecture. This device is a DAC, Streamer and Preamp (with a phono stage) in one unit that can be expanded into a fully integrated 5.1 surround sound receiver.

Here is a product [review](#) on Sound Advice.



Esoteric N-01XD SE DAC/Streamer (\$26,000)

John Akers, President and Owner of Cinematic Home AV threw in his [Esoteric N-01XD SE](#) Network DAC as the Reference unit in this shootout.

This is considered as the ultimate [Network Streamer and DAC](#) that fully supports 384kHz/32-bit PCM, 22.5MHz DSD, DSF, DSDIFF, Apple Lossless, FAC, WAV, AIFF, MP3, AAC and MQA formats.

This device is Room Ready and supports streaming from Qobuz, Tidal and Spotify.



This is an impressive piece of Japanese engineering with a fanatical attention to build quality.



Inside the N-01XD SE (upper section)



Inside the N-01XD SE (lower section)

Photos from the DAC Shoot Out Event

John Akers began hooking up and testing the 6 DACs an hour before the event. Here you see John making the connections behind his equipment rack.

The Bricasti Design M3H unit is sitting on the very top.



Here is a photo of the Esoteric N-01XD SE DAC in silver supported by the [SXR Audio Stand](#) made by Harmonic Resolution Systems.



The Linn Selekt Organik DAC with the black faceplate is below the Esoteric unit.

Below the Linn Selekt Organik DAC you see the Vitus Audio [RL-102 Linestage](#) Reference Pre Amplifier that was used for level matching the inputs from the different DACs.



This was my RME ADI-2 FS DAC sitting on top of the [Transparent POWERWAVE](#) Power Conditioner.



This was Paul Johnson's Schitt Yggdrasil DAC.



This was John Harvell's Auralic Vega G1 Streaming DAC.



This was Todd Krieger's LAiV Harmony DAC.



This was the Linear Power Supply for the LAiV Harmony DAC.



This is how the 5 DACs were spread out before the Bricasti Design M3H was added to the mix.



Here is a close up of Joe Robert's Linn Selekt Organik DAC sporting the black shiny faceplate.



The speakers used in this DAC Shoot Out were a pair of floor standing [Estelon Forza's](#) in dark silver liquid gloss finish. [Cinematic Home AV](#) carries this brand. They retail for [\\$213,900](#) a pair.



The Estelon's were powered by this massive [Vitus MP-S201](#) mk1 stereo Power Amp delivering 500 Watts per channel of pure Class A amplification.



Level matching all the DACs

John Aikers had every DAC operating at their maximum output level. This allowed each DAC to maximize their performance by taking out any volume attenuation circuitry if present.

The maximum output level on the DACs differed by 6dB. So, John had to meticulously match their output levels for each DAC on his Pre Amplifier using an SPL meter at the listening position.

The hottest output was from the Schitt and LAiV. The preamp had to be dialed down to -35dB to produce 79dB at the listening position.

The lowest output was from the LINN. The preamp had to be dialed up 6dB to -29dB to get the same volume level.

DAC	Matching Preamp Level
Schitt	-35dB
LAiV	-35dB
RME	-34dB
Auralic	-30dB
Bricasti	-30dB
LINN	-29dB

The initial Level Matching phase was crucial to level the playing field.

This took about an hour.

John had everything ready by 1pm.

We were ready to start our listening tests.

DAC-IT-OUT Comparison Worksheet

Joe Roberts supplied a stack of printouts and pencils to write down our subjective evaluation of each of the 6 DACs. We were asked to listen to short excerpts from the same two songs and write down our ratings (1~5) and comments on each DAC.

Joe kept the evaluation sheet short and simple.

Arizona Audio Video Club Presents:

11/8/2025

"DAC-IT-OUT"--- A Listening Comparison

Host: Cinematic Home AV

Rating Method: Use #'s 1-5, with #1 being least liked and #5 being most liked

DAC #1	Song #1	Song #2	Song #3
[]			
High Frequency			
Mid Frequency			
Low Frequency			
Comment: Likes/Dislikes			

DAC #2	Song #1	Song #2	Song #3
[]			
High Frequency			
Mid Frequency			
Low Frequency			
Comment: Likes/Dislikes			

DAC #3	Song #1	Song #2	Song #3
[]			
High Frequency			
Mid Frequency			
Low Frequency			
Comment: Likes/Dislikes			

DAC #4	Song #1	Song #2	Song #3
[]			
High Frequency			
Mid Frequency			
Low Frequency			
Comment: Likes/Dislikes			


John Akers had a clear strategy for helping us with our comparative evaluation of each of the 6 DACs:

1. Play Song A on DAC #1
2. Repeat Song A on DAC #1
3. Play Song A on DAC #2
4. Play Song B on DAC #2
5. Repeat Song B on DAC #2
6. Play Song B on DAC #1

A short 30 second excerpt was played for each song.

John specifically selected these two Songs for our evaluation:

Birds – Dominiqu3e Fils-Aime



Nameless
Dominique Fils-Aimé

Released by **Ensoul Records** on February 1, 2018
R&B • 8 Tracks • 25m 54s

Available in

Hi-Res 24 bits
AUDIO 88.2 kHz - Stereo


Jealous – Labrinth



Jealous - EP
Labrinth

Released by **Syco Music** on November 22, 2014
Pop • 4 Tracks • 20m 36s

Available in

 16-Bit CD Quality
44.1 kHz - Stereo

Listening Evaluation during Round 1

We were all set to compare 2 DACs at a time. John made a wise decision to pair them up based on their price ranges.

1st pairing – Affordable DACS

- RME ADI-2 \$1,000
- LAiV Harmony DAC \$1,200

The RME was the cheapest DAC of the bunch. It was paired against the LAiV.

The LAiV R/2R DAC was the clear winner. Every club member preferred the sound from the LAiV compared to the RME. The LAiV had more clarity, better instrument separation and overall sense of space.

I was surprised to find how poorly the RME performed against a comparably priced DAC designed for audiophiles. The LAiV sounded much more musical and pleasing.

If you have a \$1,000 budget for a DAC, it would make better sense to pay \$200 more and get the LAiV Harmony DAC.

2nd pairing – Mid-tier DACS

- Schitt Yggrasil \$2,300
- Auralic VEGA G1 \$4,000

For the second pairing the Schitt was pitted against the more expensive Auralic. They both decisively beat out the contenders in the 1st pairing. They brought more clarity and musicality to the sound.

Between the Schitt and the Auralic it was a close match with a slim majority preferring the sound of the Schitt.

I was surprised how well the Schitt held its own against the Auralic costing almost twice as much. There is a reason why Schitt has gained such a huge following. They are selling 65,000 units each year mainly to the younger generation who are discovering high-end sound.

For someone deciding between the Schitt and the Auralic it would make monetary sense to get the Schitt and pocket the \$1,700 difference. Paul Johnson has wisely purchased the best sounding R2/R Streaming DAC at this price point.

3rd pairing – Expensive DACs

- Bricasti Design M3H \$7,500
- LINN Selekt Organik \$12,000

The 3rd pairing showcased the 2 heavy weights in the line-up. The Bricasti Design M3H was played first. This \$7,500 DAC outperformed the Schitt. It was like having a veil lifted. I heard greater clarity, better soundstage and depth of space.

Next, we heard the LINN.

The \$12,000 LINN Organik DAC surpassed the Bricasti sonically. The imaging was more focused with sharper boundaries between each individual instrument. The voice sounded sweeter and lifelike. The LINN had an extra level of refinement. This is the DAC I can listen to all day long without fatigue. If someone has the resources, this is the DAC to get.

The majority of the club members preferred the sound of the LINN over the Bricasti.

Listening Evaluation during Round 2

It was decided by show of hands to have the Schitt, Bricasti and Linn go head to head in the 2nd round. The RME, LAiV and Auralic were eliminated.

John selected two different songs for Round 2 adding a 3rd song as a tie-breaker.

Song #1

No Sanctuary Here – Chris Jones



Roadhouses & Automobiles
Chris Jones

Released by **Stockfisch Records** on December 11, 2003
Pop • 12 Tracks • 51m 50s

Available in
Hi-Res AUDIO 24 bits
44.1 kHz - Stereo

Song #2

Fields of Gold – Eva Cassidy




Songbird
Eva Cassidy

Released by **Blix Street Records** on May 18, 1998
International Pop • 10 Tracks • 43m 17s

Available in
Hi-Res AUDIO 24 bits
44.1 kHz - Stereo

Song #3 – Tie Breaker

Trouble's What You're in – Fink



THE LOWSWING SESSIONS
FIN K

Released by **R'COUP'D** on August 27, 2025
Folk/Americana • 7 Tracks • 33m 31s

Available in
Hi-Res AUDIO 24 bits
96.0 kHz - Stereo

The first comparison was between the Schitt and the Bricasti.

The Bricasti definitely sounded better in Round 2 after having time to warm up. However, the Schitt edged it out by a whisker. I was pleasantly surprised to hear how well the Schitt sounded against the much more expensive Bricasti. The Schitt was the winner by show of hands.

Next, it came down to the final round between the Schitt and the Linn.

This time the Linn was the clear winner. The Linn sounded razor sharp, controlled and imparted a higher level of refinement than what the Schitt could deliver. The soundstage on the Schitt sounded diffused in comparison.

I selected the Linn as my personal winner of this Shoot Out. The club members in attendance overwhelmingly thought the Linn was the best DAC of the bunch.

At the end of this long audio listening event, John Akers had a surprise in store for us. He played the Eva Cassidy track on his reference \$26,000 Esoteric N-01XD SE DAC.

Wow! That was a jaw dropping experience. I was sitting in the sweet spot throughout Round 2 critically evaluating each contender. Just when I felt nothing could top the Linn, I was proven wrong within a few seconds of hearing Eva Cassidy's voice through the Esoteric DAC. It portrayed Eva's voice with a greater degree of sweetness, softness and delicacy. It was emotionally captivating. I did not want the music to stop.

I became a believer in ultra-high end DACs.

However, to experience this extra resolution and finesse from a \$26,000 Esoteric DAC you must have every component in the audio chain performing at the same elevated level. You would have to invest thousands of dollars on a pair of ultra-high end speakers like the Estelon Forza's and a beefy power amp like the Vitus MP-S201 along with a reference grade preamp like the Vitus Audio RL-102 Linestage and Transparent audio cables.

There are many reviewers who say all DACs pretty much sound the same. That is true if one is listening through a pair of \$20,000 speakers that most can afford. They simply do not have the resolution to reveal the benefits offered by these ultra-high end DACs like the Esoteric N-01XD SE, WADAX Reference DAC, MSB Technology Reference DAC and the dCS Varese.

This was an enlightening experience for me. I went with an open mind. I was not expecting to hear so much of a difference from the different DACs. John's ultra-high end 2-channel Reference Audio system gave me the opportunity to appreciate and evaluate the subtle differences in soundstage, 3D space, smoothness, clarity, instrument separation, delicacy, timing and ultimate musicality through these different DACs.

Here are a few more pictures of John's Cinematic AV Show room located at 10658 N 32nd St, Phoenix, AZ 85028







Closing Thoughts

I was shocked to find how poorly my RME ADI-2 DAC performed against the competition. It sounded lifeless, uninspiring and flat.

Club member **Ben Taylor** offered his observations as a recording engineer. He explained there is a reason why the RME and Bricasti DACs got passed over by the audiophile DACs. RME and Bricasti are revered in the professional audio recording industry.

The [Bricasti Design M7 Stereo Reverb](#) is one of the finest with glowing [customer reviews](#).

They design products for million dollar recording studios and mastering facilities where the sound engineer is looking for absolute transparency with no added coloring. They are using these devices as **tools** to find and fix flaws in their mix.

On the other hand the audiophile DACs have a very different design goal. Their purpose is to make the digital source sound as musical and pleasing as possible to the listener often while applying complex digital filters utilizing the power of DSP. The choice and implementation of these filters make a difference.

While this DAC Shoot Out Event showed in absolute terms that higher priced DACs do sound better, your choice in purchasing a DAC should be in relation to the price of the rest of your system.

It would make no sense to purchase the \$12,000 LINN DAC if you are going to be listening through a pair of \$5,000 [Tekton MOAB](#) speakers. The \$1200 LAiV DAC would be the ideal choice.

If you have a pair of \$15,000 [Legacy Focus SE](#) speakers, it would make perfect sense to buy the \$2,300 Schitt DAC.

If you have invested \$329,000 on a pair of Wilson Audio [Chronosonic XVX](#) speakers, you can benefit from upgrading to a \$26,000 ultra-high end DAC like the Esoteric N-01XD SE DAC.

On the other end of the spectrum a \$170 [SMSL D-6s](#) DAC would suffice for a pair of \$1,000 [Chesky Audio LC1](#) Bookshelf Monitors.

To maximize the performance of your 2-channel audio system, the bulk of your investment should go towards room treatment followed by your Speakers, Power Amp, Preamp, DAC and lastly the speaker cables and interconnects.

Of course, all of this DAC debate is pointless if you have a pure analog system and your music source is a turntable or a reel-to-reel tape deck. Consider yourself privileged to own the best and purest music source, the closest you can get to the original analog studio recording. Nothing in

the digital domain can capture the smoothness, musicality, realism and soul of an analog recording. It is and shall always remain the ultimate reference.

I would like to thank **John Akers** for being a gracious host and offering his time and equipment for this event.

I would like to thank all the Club Members who offered their DACs for evaluation.

Special thanks to **Joe Roberts** for providing his state-of-the-art Linn DAC and bringing all the refreshments, DAC comparison worksheets and pencils.

This event was a complete success making it worthwhile for spending a Saturday afternoon.

I feel so fortunate to be part of our audiophile community where rare opportunities like these help broaden our understanding of this very special hobby that has no limits!

Best regards,

David Das