

Musings on travel and the Purity Audio Design J-Dac

I am fortunate enough to have good friends.... One of those is someone that has completely altered the course of my audio journey by way of their generosity. We are regularly swapping and loaning gear and that gives me a chance to hear different components for myself. This has been transformative as I am spending time with this gear and getting to hear how it interacts with my system in my listening space. With this relationship, I have learned more within the last 6 months than I have in the past 20 years with respect to component choice, design and system synergy. While I have been in this hobby for some time with a lot of experience in the world of room construction/treatment as well as loudspeaker auditioning, assembly and Fabrication; what I lacked was exposure to different types of gear.

I have always been a “solid state guy”, but not for the reasons I told myself. I silently opined that solid state measured and sounded “real” and that if most studios are using SS gear then, well, I should too. The reality is that tubes were foreign, I did not take the time to learn or understand them and chose to focus myself in other audio areas. What I did not realize was that I was robbing myself of significant audio enjoyment. This all changed with getting some tube based electronics in my space for audition. This included the Schiit Freya + (the gateway drug to the world of tubes), other products from Purity Audio design, their Harmonia Pre-amp and their Musica Class D hybrid tube amp.

In addition to tube gear, this year brought different DAC's, the addition of stereo subwoofers, as well as the new heart of my system. The Grant Fidelity Rita 880, which is a Class A 45 WPC tube integrated amplifier.

Several months of listening to different gear and combinations; mixing tube pre-amp's with solid state and hybrid amps, rolling tubes and learning the different variants and varieties, It has truly been a fun and enlightening experience. What I did not realize was just how MUCH I was growing in my ability to listen. This is not a golden eared proclamation, simply, a frame of reference relative to experience with gear and an open mind to learn as much as possible. Another disclaimer before I continue, I believe in the oxymoronic term.... Subjective Objectivity, it is the lane in which I do my utmost to travel. I try my hardest to stay off the dotted yellow lines dividing the other lanes in the audio experience highway. Based on this analogy, I have covered a LOT of miles this year and am much more aware of which lane I prefer for my sonic travels. This has brought me to my biggest lesson, everyone has a different lane preference on their audio journey. It is with this ideology that I will approach sharing my thoughts on gear.... Which lane might a product fit in and as such, who might most enjoy a given component. Now let us define the lanes of travel and point out that I am only talking about ONE side of the highway; I believe we are ALL headed towards the same destination ----- Enjoyment of the music and gear.

The left lane:

This is the fast-moving side of the road. I find those traveling in this lane might prefer the “quick” nature of solid-state gear. Speaker designs that pedestal neutrality above all else, amplifiers and DAC's that tend to measure at the top of the stack with features like oversampling and filtering to extract every last bit of information in hopes of revealing absolutely everything in the recording; good, bad, or indifferent.

The Middle Lane:

This is the lane for those that split the difference between the left and right lane. Perhaps it's the ability to change lanes as needed and return to the safety of the middle lane. Perhaps it's to mix and match products from the left and right lanes to suit their tastes, whatever it is, those traveling in this lane likely prefer products that give equal consideration to measured performance and perceived sound quality.

The Right Lane:

While some people may call this the slow lane, the fact is, those in the right lane are typically content in their pursuit and are not in a hurry to get there. It may be the journey itself rivals the destination; whatever it is, sonic bliss is the only consideration and measurements for these travelers are likely best reserved for shoes and a pair of trousers.

With these descriptions, I believe that EVERYONE prefers an audio lane. Take a moment and think about that, EVERYONE.... Ahhh yes, that's right, not just the end users but CERTAINLY the designers and engineers. After all, EVERYONE means just that. Based on this, it seems reasonable to deduce that audio products cater to different folks and we all may be better off if we do our best to put our lane preferences aside and determine to which lane a product may best fit. The reason for this stance is simple, to try and get maximum enjoyment out of this hobby and for me, that includes the people and relationships as much as it does the gear and music.

The subject of this particular trip:

With that out of the way, I'd like to talk about my time with the Purity Audio J-DAC. It came to my space in the hands of a friend for what was going to be a quick swap on a Friday night listening session. The DAC in place at the time of his arrival was the Teac NT505, an often overlooked but fantastic digital to analog converter. This DAC uses dual Verita AK4497 chips on each of the two channels. It is capable of DSD512 native and 768khz/32bit PCM. MQA as well as non-OS and several OS/US modes it offers a ton of performance and sounded quite good in my system.

The Purity J-DAC is a collaboration with Geshelli labs. It uses the well regarded Geshelli J NOG2 DAC combined with the Purity Audio Design tube output stage. I won't regale you with the technical details, instead I will point you straight to the source below.

<https://purityaudiodesign.com/foundation-tube-dac>

Having heard Purity Gear before I was aware of what their tube output designs were capable of and I must also admit, I was biased against the J-DAC based on the tube buffer. Using a full tube class a integrated as the base of my system, I was CERTAIN that more tubes were not the answer and that it would not only invoke my occasional neurosis relative to an increase in variables! Surely we would have too much of a good thing and the detail and resolution the TEAC and solid state DAC's provided would be replaced with bloom that rivals a botanic garden in late spring.

As I said, the Purity J-DAC was just a “let’s see how this sounds compared to what’s in there”, hang out, and listen to music. It was completely casual. After firing up the J-DAC I was immediately struck by the fact that my bias was warranted.... It was too warm and soft and despite it being a beautiful piece of gear, perhaps it was not a good fit for my middle lane travel. Before I could say anything to said friend, he was already out of the seat and unboxing a different set of tubes. While I was hopeful a different set of tubes might return the detail and pinpoint placement of the Teac, I was fairly certain it would not. A quick power down, a whiff of o-zone, a flicker of light, and the Telefunken Tubes were starting to warm up for a listen. OK so there was no whiff of o-zone or flicker of light but it’s nearly Christmas and I cannot help but play the scene of Ralphie’s old man working his magic on an overloaded extension cord.... What followed with the Telefunken’s was all the reviewer superlatives you have ever read. Veils lifted, layers exposed, air, inky blackness, depths that rival the Mariana Trench.... You see where this is going.

In all seriousness, it sounded good, really really good. Good in a way I had not experienced in my system. For reference I use KEF LS50 METAS as my main speakers and while I would not define them as full left lane, they can ride that line. They will reveal recordings for what they are and depending on upstream gear, I would not typically categorize them as genre agnostic. I like the METAS because they excel at imaging and soundstage when setup correctly; they rival some of the best speakers out there at a near disposable price. When I HAVE heard them with gear that is less clinical, I find that they might sound good overall, but when I want to critically listen to audition tracks, it just doesn’t deliver on the soundstage and imaging experience. This is where the J-Dac was a revelation. What we discovered was that we could not only eat our cake, we could be left with an endless dessert buffet for future consumption. You might be saying it’s likely based on tube selection, and you would be absolutely right. That IS the single best characteristic of this DAC. It’s the ability to blur the lines of the left and right lanes and choose a tube to put it where you want it.

With the telefunken’s, we achieved the largest most holographic soundstage I have experienced in my room. With lots of time to listen to different gear as well as different systems over the years, the sound emanating from the modestly sized KEF’s (flanked by stereo subs) was difficult to believe. To be frank, one of my observations was that if I heard THIS type of sound in another system, at a show, or at a dealer, the debit card would be at the ready to try and recreate that experience in my own system. This coming from a system with a total budget that, at MSRP, barely scratched the 5 figure surface.

Track Selection:

Michael Godard – A Trace Of Grace:

2020 – Monteverdi – A Trace Of Grace

The title track from this album should highlight the vast depth and expanse in the stone hall of the Abbey Noirlac. This track will teleport you to ancient France and the J-DAC rendered the space in, what I can only assume is, its entirety. The boundary walls in my listening room melt away and I can imagine

the smell of cold stone and history as I stand in the space for this performance. In this track, the serpent fills every stone crevasse and blooms to life, it's a magical sound that can be, with certain components, beguiling yet fatiguing. The J-DAC allows you enjoy both the immersion of stone hall and the effect the instruments have within that space without being too lively. In a word, mesmerizing.

Shelby Lynne – I Don't Want To Hear It Anymore

2008 – Just A Little Lovin'

While the title track from this album gets a lot of play in systems and at shows, I prefer the above track. It highlights Shelby's voice in a way that stands out from the other tracks on the record. In the case of the Purity DAC a standout was the slight vocal reverb that I had not previously heard with other DAC's. The ride cymbal featured throughout the track was completely locked in place and it truly imaged. I don't often think of the sense of that word in the context of audio. Imaging.... But this was a literal image that hung firmly in space, just to the right of center, and I did not have to close my eyes to imagine it.

Cowboy Junkies – Sweet Jane

1987 – The Trinity Sessions

This single mic'd standout album was recorded in one day in the Holy trinity in Toronto. While there are other tracks on this record that I prefer to get lost in, Sweet Jane is a song I have been listening to, well, since this album was released. I have heard it in everything from a 1989 Chevy Beretta factory tape deck to my current reference system and everything in between. My notes from listening say "massive ambience and reverb within the space". I believe that translates to hearing what it might be like sitting on the floor of the church on a well aged rug and bathing in sound. It captured the melodic tempo, loafing vocals and sounded oh so "right".

Now were rollin' (tubes):

The other standout pair of Tubes were NOS RCA 12AU7's. I listened to the same "set list" and was amazed at the differences. While my personal preference was the telefunken, the RCA's were very pleasing tubes. They offered a lively top end and were well resolved, but gave up some ground in that they did not offer the expansive soundstage of the telefunken's. This is not to say they were bad in this area, they still bested any other DAC I have had in my system, it's simply that the "teles" are incredible in this area. The amount of influence the tube changes had in the J-DAC were remarkable. While I have heard this level of tube influence in my RITA 880 integrated, I have not heard this in other tube hybrid components. I believe this is a testament to the Purity tube circuit that simply, let's the tube shine. It has all the detail and resolution that I like for critical listening and the uncanny ability to cross genre's that my other DAC's could not. Truly a listener's system that allows you to nerd out on recordings and make notes about what you are hearing and then turn off the lights with the libation of your choice and have a cosmic experience. Prior to this component I did not believe that possible within my system

Before the J-DAC, I had been looking at speakers to replace the KEF LS50 meta's. I truly felt I had reached the limit of what they were capable of. Turns out, I had not reached that limit and the J-DAC made that evident. That isn't to say I won't look for speakers to add to the space (the meta's will stick around as part of the reference) but the Purity allowed the system to perform at a level that I did not think was possible. The important lesson, and one I take very seriously, is to work to extract every last ounce of performance out of your existing gear. Push the envelope of performance until a weak link is HEARD and only then truly consider a component change to remedy that weak link. I will exit the audio highway, for now, by saying that the Purity J-Dac not only pushes that performance envelope, it does not fit within a lane...It embraces them all with the roll of a tube.

The Nerdy Bits:

Bluesound Node 2i streamer

Schiit Modi 3+ DAC

Teac NT505 DAC

Grant Fidelity Rita 880 Integrated Amplifier

Kef S2 stands (filled with KEF material) topped with IsoAcoustics Aperta isolators

2 x Triad Bronze In Room DSP subwoofers