

HRT Music Streamer Pro (£475)

Thanks to plug 'n' play simplicity and a small form factor, HRT's USB-powered external DACs provide an elegant solution for high quality audio playback from PC or Mac

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Regular readers may recall the original Music Streamer USB DAC featured in these pages [see *HFN* April '09]. West coast of America hi-fi industry stalwarts Kevin Halverson of Muse Electronics and Michael Hobson of Classic Records announced their collaboration in founding High Resolution Technologies (HRT) at 2009's Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas.

Since then its Music Streamer DACs have evolved to Mk II status and there are now three models on offer: the Music Streamer II (£145), Music Streamer II+ (£329) and this top-of-the-range Music Streamer Pro with balanced outputs.

While limited to CD resolution, the original Music Streamer was excellent value and sounded surprisingly good. These days when visiting friends for a music listening evening my CDs tend to stay at home. With literally hundreds of lossless music files on my laptop and HRT's Music Streamer in my pocket, we're up and running within the time it takes the laptop to boot up.

Externally little appears to have changed, but under the skin HRT's Music Streamers have been upgraded significantly. Rather than using the adaptive USB audio mode commonly found in DACs, CD players and amplifiers sporting convenient USB inputs – whereby



ABOVE: The Music Streamer Pro connects to your preamp via mini-XLR sockets. Its USB input resides at the other end of the case

clock timing for the DAC is derived from the computer – they now employ more sophisticated asynchronous USB protocols that 'instruct' the computer when to send data packets. Importantly, HRT's Streamers now support playback of hi-res 24-bit/96kHz files too.



REAL DEAL

OK, so the prices have increased considerably, but even when listening without

a balanced connection (using mini USB-to-RCA adaptors made by Cardas) this 'Pro' model sounded tremendous. Instrumental timbre was much more 'real', the Music Streamer Pro reproducing the rich texture of acoustic bass on Diana Krall's 'My Love Is' from *Love Scenes* [Impulse IMP12342], while rendering convincingly the human quality of Diana's voice.

Switching to the Streamer Pro there is also more air and ambience than the 'old' Streamer, with better resolution of reverberation clues to indicate the size of the recording venue. It's noticeably more open and dynamic too, 'So Real' from Jeff Buckley's classic *Grace* album [Sony 4759285] sounding bold and colourful. The click of the plectrum on guitar strings and the rattle of the drum kit's

'The rattle of the drum kit's snare was most explicit'

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum Output Level/Impedance	2.22Vrms / 98ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio (re. 0dBFS)	108.0dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.005% / 0.0017%
Distortion (20kHz, 0dBFS)	0.15%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.0dB to -0.55dB (48kHz Fs)
Digital jitter (24-bit/48kHz)	43psec
Resolution @ -90dB	±0.2dB
Power consumption	From USB hub
Dimensions (WHD)	540x30x143mm

snare were most explicit, with deep and powerful bass helping recreate the drama of the performance with striking intensity.

With an ASIO driver installed in my laptop to bypass the sample rate conversion and high latency of Windows' audio mixing kernel ('KMixer'), I've been using Media Monkey as a software player for the past couple of years, preferring its user interface to Foobar 2000. Frankly I couldn't hear any difference in sound quality between the two players. But such is the resolution of this Music Streamer Pro that I now have to concur with audiophile friends who've been telling me for ages that Foobar 2000 sounds slightly better! ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

There is no simpler way of getting high quality audio out of a computer and into a line input of an amp – and sound quality is top-notch. Moreover, if your music is on a laptop HRT's USB-powered DACs are small enough to travel with you. On paper the less expensive Streamer II+ has the same specifications as this 'Pro' version, offering a considerable cost saving if you don't require the luxury of balanced outputs.

Sound Quality: 80%

