



Flower power

Nick Tate finds not a single thorn in the side of HiFi Rose's new RD160 digital-to-analogue converter

When it comes to pricetags, the best-selling DACs aren't even close in price to the £4,700 of HiFi Rose's RD160, but there's still plenty of interest in designs to aspire to. Chord Electronics' Hugo TT2 (*HFC* 468) is a case in point, as it offers great sound, good connectivity and decent upgradability. It's precisely the sort of product the RD160 has to take on, if it is to succeed.

The RD160 is interesting for two reasons. First, the vast majority of its fascia is taken up by a large, fine-pitch display that can be switched between different modes. One of these gives a diagrammatical representation of the digital input selected, digital filter in use, upsampling status, output selected and volume. It might seem like a gimmick, but you end up knowing exactly what the unit is doing. This isn't always a given when its rivals are concerned – exhibit one being the Hugo TT2's colour-coded illuminated 'lozenges', your honour!

Second, it sports a bespoke implementation of AKM's popular flagship AK4499EX DAC chip and its partnering AK4191 digital filter IC. One per channel is used, and both get HiFi Rose's custom 'I2S alignment' system and OXCO clock. There's a choice of six digital filters, including two minimum phase types and two linear phase types. The RD160 can work in either PCM or DSD mode, and offers switchable upsampling up to 768kHz.

The RD160's finish is superb, the display excellent and the remote good. The rear is rich in socketry, including a choice of RCA and balanced XLR outputs. The fascia sports a range of buttons, giving source selection in addition to control of its digital filters, upsampling, etc. Thanks in no small part to its display, this is one of the most user-friendly DACs we've come across.

Sound quality

The defining characteristic of the RD160 is its glass-clear sound. It is extremely open and detailed, offering up a clean window on whatever you play. By the standards of most DACs, this is a revelation. It is as if a bright searchlight is being shone on the mix, through clean, crisp air. Lesser DACs sound hazy, muddy and/or opaque by contrast.

Cue up Mercury Rev's *Holes* and you'll hear the amazing insight. It's immensely detailed, yet doesn't add tonal colour or other embellishments. The sound is highly immersive as you 'peer' into the mix and marvel at the clarity of the vocals, timbre of the violins and artfulness of the guitar. The switchable digital filters offer subtle changes to the sound, but there's no definitive best setting – it depends on your system and taste.

Play classic Sixties rock such as Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young doing *Woodstock*, and you get a totally different experience. This dramatically different recording was made a

generation earlier, with different studio technology and instruments. It's still lots of fun, but the limitations of the space are clear to hear – you can make out desk noise and hum. All the same, the groove is a joy and the RD160's excellent timing captures it perfectly. It's accurately resolved, and hearing the way Neil Young's vocal floats around the beat in front of the backing guitars and piano is lovely.

This is just as apparent on modern techno music. The Flashback Project's *Friendly Fire* is an absolute banger with a pounding electronic sub-bass, bass drum and hi-hats. The RD160 zeroes in on the rhythms and also shows off the seriously expansive soundstage. This track sounds huge, immediate and in your face, yet that iron fist keeps its velvet glove on. It's definitely brighter tonally than its aforementioned Chord Hugo TT2 rival, but you would never call it shrill. No matter what music you play, this DAC sounds highly entertaining.

Conclusion

HiFi Rose's RD160 is a class act and one of the best DACs we've heard at this price point. Its excellent sound is nice enough, but it also has a welter of facilities, excellent connectivity, great build and a class-leading display. All things considered, it is impossible not to recommend ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
HiFi Rose RD160

ORIGIN
South Korea

TYPE
Digital-to-analogue converter

WEIGHT
10kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 88 x 330mm

FEATURES
● AKM AK4499EX/ AK4191 DAC/digital filter
● Digital inputs: 2x coaxial; 1x optical; AES/EBU; HDMI/I2S; USB-B; SFP
● Analogue outputs: 1x RCA; 1x XLR balanced stereo

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Henley Audio

WEBSITE
hifirose.com
henleyaudio.co.uk

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Super sound; features; build

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: High-performing, versatile digital hub