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PRODUCTS OF THE YEAR  
REPORT

THE 60 BEST PRODUCTS OF 2011

DECEMBER 2011

# stereophile

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grade their CD player or music server should check out the m903. Highly recommended.

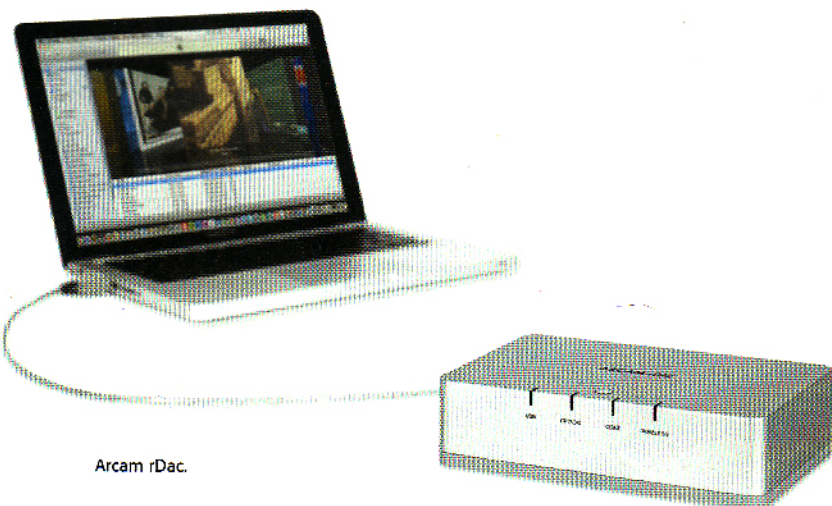
### Great Cheap Headphones

If you like to listen to your iPod while doing yard work, such as using a leaf blower, have I got a pair of headphones for you! For the ridiculously low price of \$36, industrial-safety company Howard Leight offers (on amazon.com, as well as elsewhere) the Sync: passively noise-isolating headphones. I compared them to my Audio-Technica ATH-M50s, and the Syncs held their own to a surprising extent, and really did isolate (to a claimed -25dB) outside noise. They fit me just fine, but common sense should suggest that their noise-reducing function depends on their sealed earcups making a very tight seal—I wouldn't want to wear them all day. But over and above yard work, these should also serve very well as affordable isolation headphones for garage bands, basement recordists, or drummers. The cord detaches from the left earcup, so they can also be used as hearing protectors only. Neat!

### Arcam rDAC

Running out of space here, so must be brief. I really like Arcam's rDAC (\$479)—a stripped-down, basic product with an interesting "unique selling proposition." For the rDAC, Arcam licensed asynchronous USB technology from ultra-premium digital engineers dCS, which makes the rDAC, as far as I know, the least-expensive DAC with asynchronous USB. The size of a paperback thriller, the rDAC has elegant industrial design and a resilient, rubber-like bottom that keeps it from sliding around on your desk, and which is claimed to damp vibrations. It has S/PDIF, optical, and USB inputs only. Its DAC is a Wolfson Microelectronics 8741—again, a hi-zoot component that's a pleasant surprise to find in such an affordable product. The rDAC can handle 24-bit/192kHz via S/PDIF, but USB is limited to 24/96. (There is a wireless version, but I prefer wired versions.) It uses a wall-plug 6V power supply.

Over the past several months the rDAC has been in and out of my system, and has never sounded anything other than very listenable and very musical for something that costs \$479. In



Arcam rDAC.



Howard Leight Sync noise-isolating headphones.

short, I would rather listen to it than to Musical Fidelity's \$699 M1DAC—the rDAC had more air and detail and sounded a bit livelier. While not as revealing as the Grace m903, the rDAC's timbral balance was similar: warm and a bit rounded, though perhaps slightly leaner than the Grace's. The rDAC couldn't unravel musical layers or present soundstage depth the way the Grace can, and just forget about comparisons to the Bricasti M1 DAC that I reviewed in October. The synth strings in "So Do I," from Christy Moore's *This Is the Day* (CD, Columbia Sony Music 5-3225.2), were on the same plane as everything else via the rDAC; via the order-of-magnitude more expensive Bricasti, they were layered.<sup>2</sup> The rDAC's USB

performance was at least as good from USB as from S/PDIF, and perhaps USB was slightly more dimensional and lively, even with iTunes; with Amarra, the differences were more pronounced.

The only thing that might keep people shopping in the rDAC's price tier from closing the sale is that the rDAC is *only* a DAC; it's not a headphone amp. I can understand the logic behind such a design decision. I think the rDAC is aimed at people who want to get better sound out of their stereo systems while playing music stored on a computer or a Squeezebox or Sonos system. And doing a headphone amp "right" is neither easy nor cheap.

To sum up: handsome styling, great USB performance, sonic defects that are sins of omission rather than commission, and unfailingly musical and listenable; just not the last word in resolving power—and for \$479, you shouldn't expect it to be. Recommended.

### Happy Holidays

A few gift recommendations: *They Came to Play* on DVD, which I wrote about in April 2011; *Light & Gold* (CD, Decca 001485002) a new recording of Eric Whitacre conducting his own choral works; and Shunyata Research's cryogenically treated SR-Z1 wall outlet (\$75). Peace!

Questions or comments: stletters@src.com

<sup>2</sup> Plaudits to Moore for using a synth. I just hate it when four rapacious conservatory-graduate string players beat one keyboard player out of a gig.