



Special K

David Price checks out Roksan's K3 DAC digital-to-analogue converter, which leaves him well and truly converted

Right now, the DAC market is reaching saturation point. Rather like phono stages a couple of years ago, everyone and his dog has one, which is great for the consumer. It's driving standards up and increasing choice. Trouble is, there are now so many to choose from. Aside from physical size and styling, the DAC chips fitted inside vary, as do the clocking arrangements, power supplies, passive components, etc.

Then there's connectivity, compatibility and functionality. Anyone with a grand in their hand in the market for a converter faces a bewildering choice. The K3 DAC is quite distinct. While many DACs are half-width (or smaller), this is a proper, full-size product that's as chunky as Roksan's other K3

separates. This gives it plenty of room on the rear panel for its wide variety of inputs. There's an XLR AES3 (giving up to 192kHz operation), an RCA coaxial S/PDIF (ditto), a Toslink optical (ditto, providing you use the right cable), plus a USB Type-B input. Unusually, Roksan has chosen to offer another USB input Type-B on the front fascia panel too.

The standout feature is its K-Link wireless functionality. The DAC comes supplied with a K-Link transmitter dongle, which allows any computer you plug it into (via the USB socket) to output music to the K3 DAC. This effectively means it sets up a local wireless network, and it works up to around 30m away. Roksan's own unique system doesn't suffer from interference from other wireless

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Roksan K3 DAC
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Digital-to-analogue converter
WEIGHT
7kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 105 x 380mm
FEATURES
● Digital inputs: 1x coaxial; 1x optical; 2x USB; 1x AES/EBU
● Analogue outputs: 1x RCA; 1x XLR stereo
● 24/192 PCM, DSD128 replay
DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Designs
TELEPHONE
01235 511166
WEBSITE
henleydesigns.co.uk

networks, and isn't dependent on them either. It's a great idea, because once configured it's a very easy and reliable way of playing music direct from your laptop, which could be on the other side of the house. New owners will have to sync the transmitter with the DAC first, which only takes me 30 seconds or so to do.

Unlike rivals from the likes of Audiolab and Chord, the K3 doesn't have dramatic displays or styling. It announces its presence with its sheer physical size on your equipment rack, and is not the sort of thing that can be unbalanced by plugging in some particularly stiff interconnect cables. It's built like all other Roksan K3 products and so has an immaculately finished and chunky slice of brushed aluminium for a fascia, and German-sourced black, zinc-plated powder coated steel casework. There's no display, the unit instead has a centrally mounted row of source LEDs on the front, and buttons that let you toggle between them. This is easy enough, but disappointingly there's no indication of the bit depth or sampling frequency; when some DACs arguably carry too much information (mentioning no names, the Mytek Brooklyn) the Roksan has too little. Still, obligingly the DAC

Unlike many half-width (and smaller) rivals, the K3 DAC is a proper grown-up full-size design

does automatically remember the last source you used upon switch-on, which is an obvious but not universal touch. There's also a remote supplied.

Inside, the K3 DAC is powered by a Texas Instruments DSD1794A DAC chip; it's interesting because it's not the same as most other DACs and it's different to Roksan's own K3 CD player (*HFC 396*), which uses a Burr-Brown PCM1798. Elsewhere it has much in common with the K3 CD Di (*HFC 403*), which can handle PCM up to 24/192 and DSD up to DSD128.

Sound quality

With so many different DACs available, it's difficult to keep track of what the current state of the art is. I'm a big fan of the Chord 2Qute (*HFC 402*) and Audiolab's M-DAC+ (*HFC 410*), both of which are the 'go to' DACs around £1,000. The K3 provides an intriguing counterpoint to both, offering an altogether different take on the sound. Whereas the Chord is tonally sweet yet super fast and very musical, the Audiolab is more punchy yet analytical. The Roksan has a good deal of the Chord's musicality, and a fair sprinkling of the Audiolab's muscle. In short, it offers a different sound to both that will appeal to people wanting something between the two extremes. The K3 DAC is big, confident and strong sounding, yet has an enjoyable suppleness.

Kicking off the listening with some classic new wave, and Elvis Costello's *Watching The Detectives* (DSD) proves to be loads of fun. This isn't the world's most nuanced audiophile recording and relies on raw energy and physical power to work. It's still a very clean-sounding thing, though, and the K3 DAC is well able to exploit all the positives. Its sound staging is excellent at the price; offering up a great big acoustic space inside which the different elements of the mix all thrive. There's never any sense of

them being squashed or subdued by others. Over this hangs Costello's vinegary voice, which is rendered beautifully. There's just a trace of edge to it, just as it should be yet you still appreciate its distinctive timbre. Most striking is his phrasing, and the way it syncopates with his band.

Moving forward in time five or so years, and Frankie Goes to Hollywood's *Warriors Of The Wasteland* (DSD) proves a pleasure, too. A sumptuous, all-electronic Trevor Horn production, it's very complex, multi-layered and bombastic in its sound. The Roksan exploits this through a mixture of low-down punch and fine midband clarity. Its bottom end is notably stronger than some rivals, suggesting

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a robust analogue output stage, and this really propels the song along. Again, its expansive soundstage gives a great 'widescreen' presentation of the song, heightening the drama. The K3 DAC is well able to scythe through the mix to get small details out though, and give a great timbre to those mid-eighties synthesiser stabs. Tonally it is a little warmer than some in the bass, but you wouldn't call it sweet. Indeed, it reminds me of various studio DACs I've heard, which have a powerful live sound that makes a lot of hi-fi sound quite anaemic.

Herbie Hancock's beautiful piano work on *The Jungle Line* (24/96) is wonderfully carried too. Those rich harmonics flood out, while the instrument fills my room and sounds so solid that it could have been bolted to my wall. Leonard Cohen's

gravelly vocals provide a poignant contrast to the tenderness of Hancock's piano work, and the effect is mesmerising. Once again, the K3 DAC's innate solidity and poise is just the job for this type of music – it offers up a combination of authority and insight that's unexpected at this price. Its glass-clear midband lets the emotion of the performance shine through, while the treble is spacious and delicate, letting those lovely piano overtones sparkle skywards. Dynamically, this DAC is very strong; it tracks the performers' phrasing in a free and easy way, without giving the impression that the music has been sat upon.

Conclusion

Across all genres, file types and resolutions – including via the K-Link – the Roksan works very well indeed. It has a clean, strong and highly assured sound that's never found wanting. Give it a poor recording and it makes a good fist of it, feed it a great one and it flies. This is its strength; it's not exceptionally distinguished in any one way, making it a jack of all trades and master of some. If you're looking for a fine quality, grown-up hi-fi DAC, you really should audition this one ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful, articulate, detailed sound; K-Link
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** No sample rate display
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** A versatile, grown-up DAC at a bargain price
FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL



CONNECTIONS



- 1 RCA analogue outputs
- 2 XLR and coaxial digital inputs
- 3 USB Type-B input
- 4 Digital optical input
- 5 Analogue XLR outputs