



Audiomat Tempo and Vecteur D-2

These two units from France may not match visually, but they have a synergy that is downright eerie.

Would we finally get to tell *Audiomat's* designers that they're not so hot after all, that what they make is not markedly different from the offerings of the people they're selling against? That they've finally made a ho-hum product?

Well, perhaps next time.

At a time when CD transports and converters all seem to be melding into single boxes, *Audiomat* has turned out this new converter, which seems to offer Cloud 9 to a jaded public that seems to be waiting for the Next Big Thing. And indeed, this DAC seems to be part of the Next Big Thing, because it uses a high resolution chip set, running at 96 kHz and 24 bits, just like those new hi-def players.

Of course that implied promise should be taken with sodium chloride. Extra resolution in the chips doesn't mean more bits or extra samples on the same old, same old CD. Nor does it mean that this unit will be able to play either DVD-Audio or SACD someday (something *Audiomat* doesn't claim). We should be grateful

if it manages to get decent music off a Red Book CD.

And as we shall see it does. No surprise, really. After we had marveled at the *Audiomat* Phono-1 (UHF No. 56) and gushed over the *Solfège* (No. 60), we had pretty much figured out what this small company is up to. They spend a third of the time building the product, and two-thirds (we're guessing) fine-tuning it so it sounds the way they want.

But we don't want to give away more than we already have. Like amplifiers of the same brand, this DAC is handsome, with a meticulous brushed finish on its substantial chassis and front panel. Underneath are three large black cones. The front panel has switches to choose among the digital inputs (coax, AES/EBU balanced, and — for some reason — TOSLINK). Another switch allows reversing the phase, to correct recordings (or systems!) that are out of absolute phase. It would be nice if this could be actuated from the listening position, but of course DAC's seldom come with remote controls. The outputs are unbalanced.

The *Crystal Semiconductors* 8414 locks onto the input signal at any sampling frequency up to (of course) 96 kHz, and feeds not one but two *Burr-Brown* 1704 converter chips. The chips lock onto the master clock frequency, and indeed a front-panel light confirms the lock. *Audiomat* has put a lot of effort into the power supply, and actually has separate power supplies for the two DAC chips. The analog amplifier stages are simple, as the company's circuits usually are, without feedback.

Though our *Tempo* was not brand new, we gave it lots more run-in time (*Audiomat* recommends an incredible 700 hours!), and moved it into the listening room. As usual, we listened to the chosen recordings with our reference player — a *Parasound* C/BD-2000 transport and *Counterpoint* DA-10A converter — and then substituted the *Tempo* for the DA-10A.

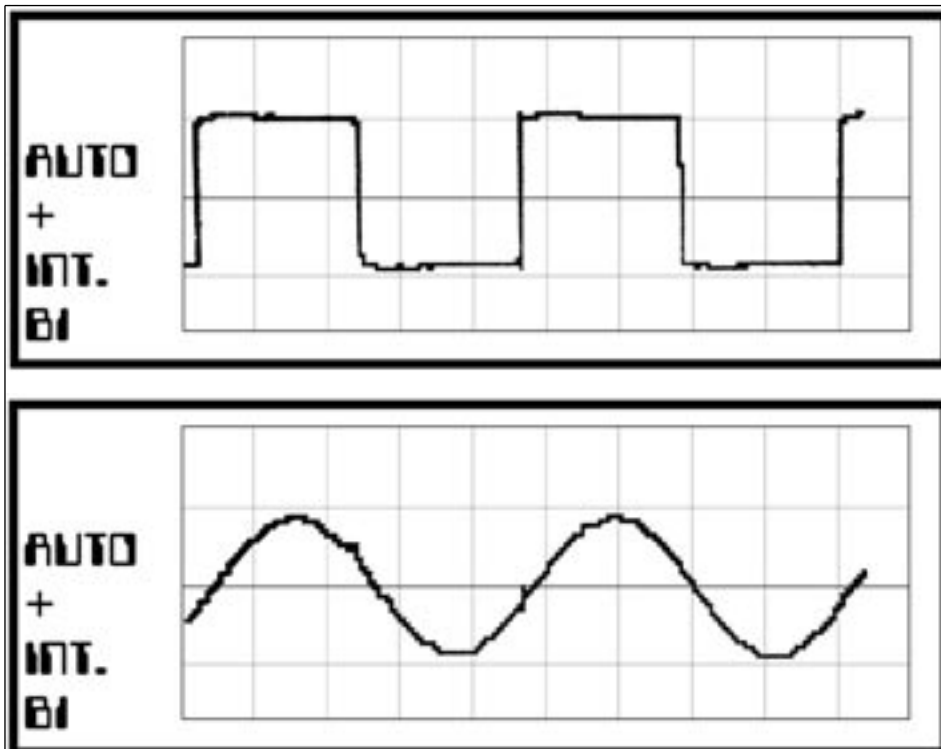
It is not news that too many CD players sound shrill and harsh, and our first recording was designed to flush the bad ones from the bushes. It's Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (*Opus 111* OPS 56-9120), played with brio bordering on ferocity by the young violinist Fabio Biondi and his ensemble, *Europa Galante*. This CD is unlistenable on some players, thrilling on those that can tame it.

Certainly the disc sounded different with the *Tempo*, a little more distant, which in this case is just as well. The greater distance gave us a better perspective on the sound of the hall, and for the first time we could make out the reverberation. The lower-pitched strings were solid, the rhythm excellent.

But there were differences not directly related to the more distant perspective. The strings had a different coloring. Reine expressed a slight preference for the color of our reference, but admired the abundant detail in the violin's imitation of birds in the springtime. Albert wasn't certain which color was "right," but also liked the glowing detail.

The second recording is gener-

Test Bench



ally easier on the ears (and on the player!), though it takes a lot to make it sound its best. It's the moving Handel aria *Lascia ch'io pianga* from the film *Farinelli* (Auvidis K 1005). Though the voice is a computer-morphed blend of a soprano and a countertenor, to simulate the voice of a castrato, the recording quality is astonishing.

Once again, the color had changed, "More blue and less orange," said Reine. Albert thought the voice was now somewhat less rich than before, but wasn't certain the Tempo's version was actually less natural. The strings were silkier, as were the singer's powerful crescendos, yet there was no loss of detail in Handel's complex trills. Gerard noted the Tempo's superb command of rhythm. "It makes you want to sing along with him," he said.

Our third recording is also a challenge for any CD player, and it is a familiar one for us and for regular readers of our reviews. It's the choral recording *Now the Green Blade Riseth* (Proprius PRCD9093). Almost everything can go wrong with this recording. The women's voices and the flute can become unbearably shrill, and

the men and double basses thin and unsubstantial. Depth — abundant on this disc — can evaporate. And that's only the start.

With the Tempo the disc started off well, with the flute solo sweet and airy rather than shrill and hard. The voices were also sweet, though with excellent separation and rich detail. Reine noted the solidity of the plucked double bass notes, and Gerard noted once more than rhythm was stronger than with most CD players. We couldn't complain about the stereo image, nor about the reproduction of depth. The excellent clarity let us hear how wonderfully *together* these singers are. The sole complaint: Albert found the final crescendo on the opening piece a little harder than with our reference.

There wasn't even that much of a complaint with the next selection, *Needed Time* from Eric Bibb's wonderful Gospel Blues CD *Spirit and the Blues* (Opus 3 CD19401). Yes, the detail was once more excellent, but it was the rhythm that was notable. "It's this converter's strong point," said Gerard. The timbres of the two guitars — one of them a bottleneck — were subtle and delightful. Bibb's

soft and expressive voice took on a startlingly realistic tone, "as though it weren't recorded but live," said Albert, who found the piece smoother with our reference but more natural with the Tempo. Reine pointed with pleasure to the harmonica and the percussion. "Played like that," she said, "this song will do more to pull people into churches than all the sermons in the world."

We wound up the session with Lori Lieberman's *Killing Me Softly*, from her first recording *A Thousand Dreams* (Pope PM2001-2). We picked that song because Lori actually wrote the original poem that was turned into the famous hit song. She sings with great feeling...hardly surprising, since she lived it.

We loved what we heard. Lori's guitar had not only a plausible timbre but also the perfect balance between the string sound and the body resonance that too often eludes electronic reproduction. Her voice was beautifully natural, with just the right amount of detail, and sibilant essences that sounded as they would in real life. There was a little less of the warmth we can hear with our own converter (which is possibly a coloration), but in this case we were left in no doubt as to which version was right. The Tempo gave extra plausibility to all of the elements, including the piano and male chorists. "The words are clear," said Gerard, "but what's more important is that their *meaning* is clearer." We agreed: this converter can transmit emotion.

On the test bench we ran a 100 Hz square wave through the Tempo, with the result you can see above. A small amount of noise is visible, but the wave really is square (we can remember when they almost never were even on expensive players), and ringing is slight and well damped.

The Tempo 2.5 also did extremely well on the low level (-60 dB) 1 kHz sine wave, also shown above. The wave shape is very good, barely contaminated by noise.

As we had expected, the Tempo did very well on another key aspect

of reproduction: jitter. On our test we couldn't detect it. That may go a long way to explain the outstandingly sure rhythm of this converter.

Even if our test had ended there, the conclusion would have been clear nonetheless. This is a good...no, make it a *great* converter. Lots of converters cost more, but not many can match its preternatural realism, and especially not its musicality.

There is more to this, however. Remember the CD transport mentioned in the title to this review? Forgot it, did you? Read on.

Model: *Audiomat* Tempo 2.5

Warranty: 2 years, transferable

Dimensions: 44.5 x 31 x 9 cm

Most liked: Very strong rhythm, fine detail, natural sound

Least liked: A slightly bluish tonal color...but is it wrong?

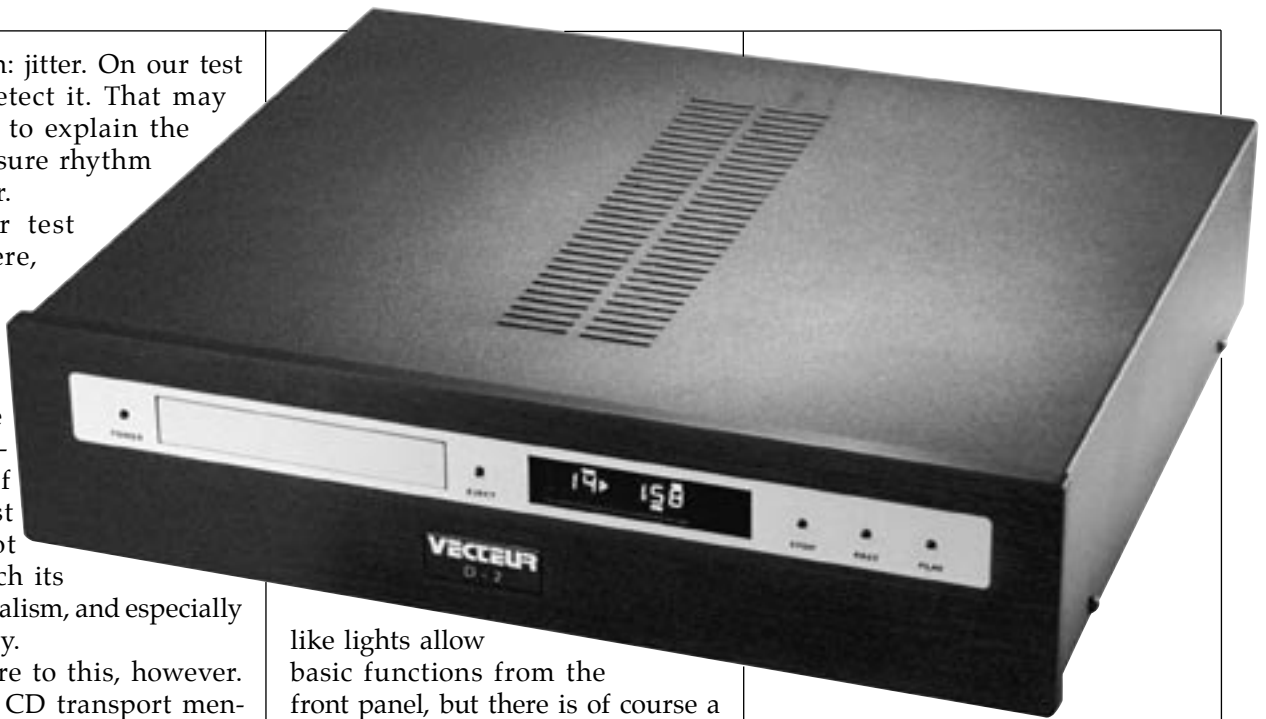
Verdict: Who said, "Don't bother me with detail"?

The Vecteur D-2 transport

The people at *Audiomat* and at *Vecteur* know each other. The first company hadn't finished its own transport, and so it asked the second to supply a transport that could match the quality of the Tempo.

The D-2 doesn't look much like the *Vecteur* Club 10 amplifier that was on the cover of *UHF* No. 56, but it does have the current *Vecteur* look. We were split on its looks, some of us liking it, others having reservations, but we agreed that the stylists of the two companies probably don't drink together. But possibly their designers do, as we shall see.

The transport is in a large black and brushed chrome box. Like the Tempo, it is heavier than you would guess. Tiny buttons that look

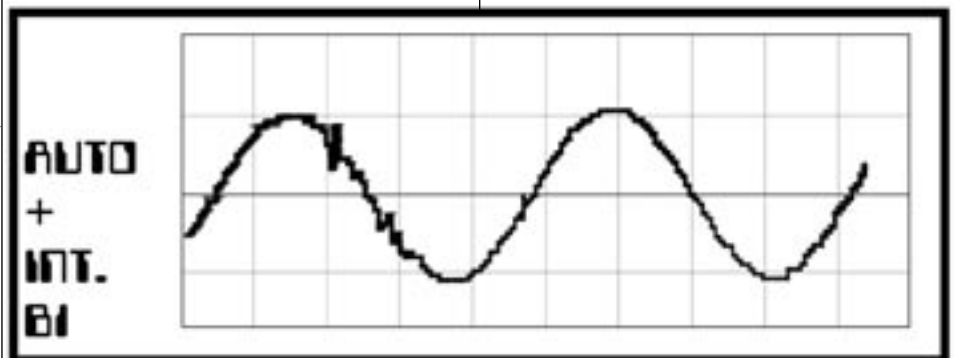


like lights allow basic functions from the front panel, but there is of course a remote control. The rear is disarmingly simple. There is a single coaxial digital output, and that's all. Rubber caps cover the holes for the analog outputs of *Vecteur* players, which share the same box. A rare detail: the D-2 comes with a premium power cord fitted with a *Hubbell* plug!

Having completed the evaluation

entirely for the better.

Take *The Four Seasons* as an example. Albert, who had found the disc too forward with both our reference and the Tempo converter now found himself nearly reconciled to it. The overall tonal balance was nearly unchanged, but each of the instruments was more natural, without



of the Tempo 2.5, we substituted the D-2 for our own *Parasound* C/BD-2000 transport. The "BD" in the model name stands for "belt drive," and it is actually made by *CEC*, which is well-known for the excellence of its drives. It is, in short, tough to beat.

But beaten it can be, and the D-2 did it handily. Was it specifically designed to work with the Tempo? When we made the substitution the sound changed dramatically, and

seeming forced. The strings were smoother, and for that reason they no longer hid the harpsichord. There was now a delightful sense of space among and about the instruments of the orchestra. Despite that, there was no hiding of detail or rounding off of...well, anything. It was all there, but more like the real thing.

What was going on? Albert smiled. "After all," he said, "the CD transport is the *real* source."

On the *Farinelli* excerpt, the bit of

emotional sensitivity of this remarkable aria. "This is no longer just a recording," said Reine. "He's right here."

This French duo had little difficulty with our Swedish chorale on *Now the Green Blade Riseth*. The flute was slightly more distant, though without loss of detail. Male voices were richer and fuller than without the D-2. Counterpoint was exquisite, letting us admire the chorale's great discipline. There was a satisfying transparency to the sound. "I give them a gold medal," said Reine.

Our last two recordings would reveal an even greater improvement.

Needed Time was even more moving in its emotional lyricism. "You can hear he's *pleading* for Jesus to come back," said Reine. The warmth and richness of his voice owed nothing to artifice, everything to the natural restitution of timbres. The guitars sounded even better, never running together. And we heard something we had never noticed before: at one point Bibb turns and asks his chorists to "sing it!" Did we mention the image and the depth?

As for *Killing Me Softly*, we knew even before Lori Lieberman began singing that it too would be better than ever. It was hardly necessary for us to take notes, because we knew we were hearing the truth. The guitar was perfect, the piano just right, Lori's voice clear and gorgeous. It doesn't get much better than this...not on CD at least.

So what did it mean? Is the D-2 that much superior to one of CEC's vaunted belt-driven transports? If so, how much could the same D-2 improve the sound of our *Counterpoint* reference converter? There was a quick way to find out. We removed the Tempo and brought back our own DAC.

Well, surprise! With our converter, the D-2 sounded much like our own transport. This isn't too shabby, to be sure, because matching our world class transport for C\$1000 less is a *tour de force*, no doubt about it.

warmth that the Tempo converter had seemed to take away had returned. In other respects the piece sounded the same. And yet...

And yet in musical terms it was vastly improved. The voice inflections were so clear and natural that they heightened the lyricism and the

Would the D-2's strengths show up on our technical tests? Not really. The square wave was so close to the previous one that we're not bothering to repeat it. The low-level sine wave (previous page) was also excellent, with a touch more noise than with our own transport, but *only* a touch. As before, jitter was not detectable.

We ran our *Pierre Verany* test disc: the one with test tracks interrupted by laser cuts. It took a 0.5 mm cut

before we could detect an increase in jitter, and the *Vecteur* didn't exhibit mistracking until it was confronted with a 2 mm cut.

How has this synergy been achieved? This is a very good transport and a very good converter. You can adopt either without the other. But put them together, and you've got something more like...more like... Well, we're short of adjectives just now, but we'll work on them while

we pull out a few more records and hear them again for the first time.

Model: *Vecteur D-2*

Warranty: 2 years, transferable

Dimensions: 43 x 37 x 11.2 cm

Most liked: Stellar performance, especially with the right converter

Least liked: No choice of outputs

Verdict: A dramatic reworking of hardware anyone can buy

CROSSTALK

Of these two units, it is the D-2 transport that surprises me the most. It *shouldn't* be this good. It uses the same *Philips* mechanism that anyone with a license can order, and the little bits of fine tuning that *Vecteur* uses to get the most from its amplifiers shouldn't work the same way on a purely digital product. Should it?

And even if we accept that the D-2 somehow does something (but what?) better than other transports, why does it work so *particularly* well with this converter from a different manufacturer? This is more than just "voicing" the pair, as you might do with a grand piano or an organ. The difference is not in tonal balance, but in sheer musicality, and particularly in emotional impact. But how? Why?

Yet don't let me suggest that the Tempo 2.5 is any less amazing. Hook it up to any decent transport, and I think you'll want to pull out your CD collection. It's exciting to listen to, at least when the music itself is supposed to be exciting, and it can handle lots of other moods too.

Amazing, isn't it, how much we can still wring from 16 bits? Wait till these same designers get their hands and their ears on the new media!

—Gerard Rejskind

You know how it feels when you remove your sunglasses and look around at familiar surroundings? There seems to be a different color in the air, and your first impression is of less color but

more details.

That sums up my first impression with the *Audiomat* Tempo DAC, yet it wasn't clear at first that things were better on all counts.

Strings were silkier and better separated but the music was farther away in space, and lacked the feeling of authority I have come to expect from the reference. Slowly, however, this feeling of natural and effortless reproduction reached me and washed my doubts away. I then realized how less electronic every voice and every instrument sounded, as the music flowed and surrounded the speakers.

Just when I thought everything was right, in walked the *Vecteur* transport and I laughed. I must have been wearing still another pair of sunglasses! How else could I explain this added transparency, this immediate presence of the performers, firmly locked in space? What I thought was so good was now great. Images snapped into sharp focus and countless details appeared during quiet moments, enhancing still again the overall impression of transparency.

There is no substitute for a great source.

—Albert Simon

Comparing the Tempo to our reference converter, it has its own sound, and as a result a totally different personality. Is different the same as better? It took a while before I could answer yes, it is better than our reference, which as you know isn't exactly mediocre.

Let's say that I was impressed by cer-

tain qualities that flatter the audiophile ear. There's a spacious stereo image, from which details emerge with remarkable clarity. The result: much detail, words that are perfectly audible, and an ample dynamic palette. The rhythm varies, depending on the recording, from soothing to wild, but always involving. Timbres of both the human voice and musical instruments are attractive and natural. Voices are expressive, chorales magnificent. This converter reproduces faithfully all the sensitivity of the artists, and — hardly a negligible detail — it has an attractive bottom end.

It was a fine experience, but it was written that I should be in for even more. With the D-2 in charge, I was high. Dazzling! The marriage of these two units is one of true love. I could sense new and exceptional qualities. Add some more to what I've already said about space and image, and you'll get the idea. It was as though I could sense the air about the musicians and the singers. The vivid clarity yielded a richness of detail, leaving no inflection, no effect, no modulation to the imagination. Sounds soared with rare freedom. The effect is fluid and exquisite. Drums and cymbals hit you in the abdomen. Add to this a lyricism that can charm the hardest of hearts.

For connoisseurs and epicureans, here's my recommendation: don't hesitate, go and hear this golden couple. What genius has united, let no one tear asunder.

—Reine Lessard