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PASSION FOR SOUND

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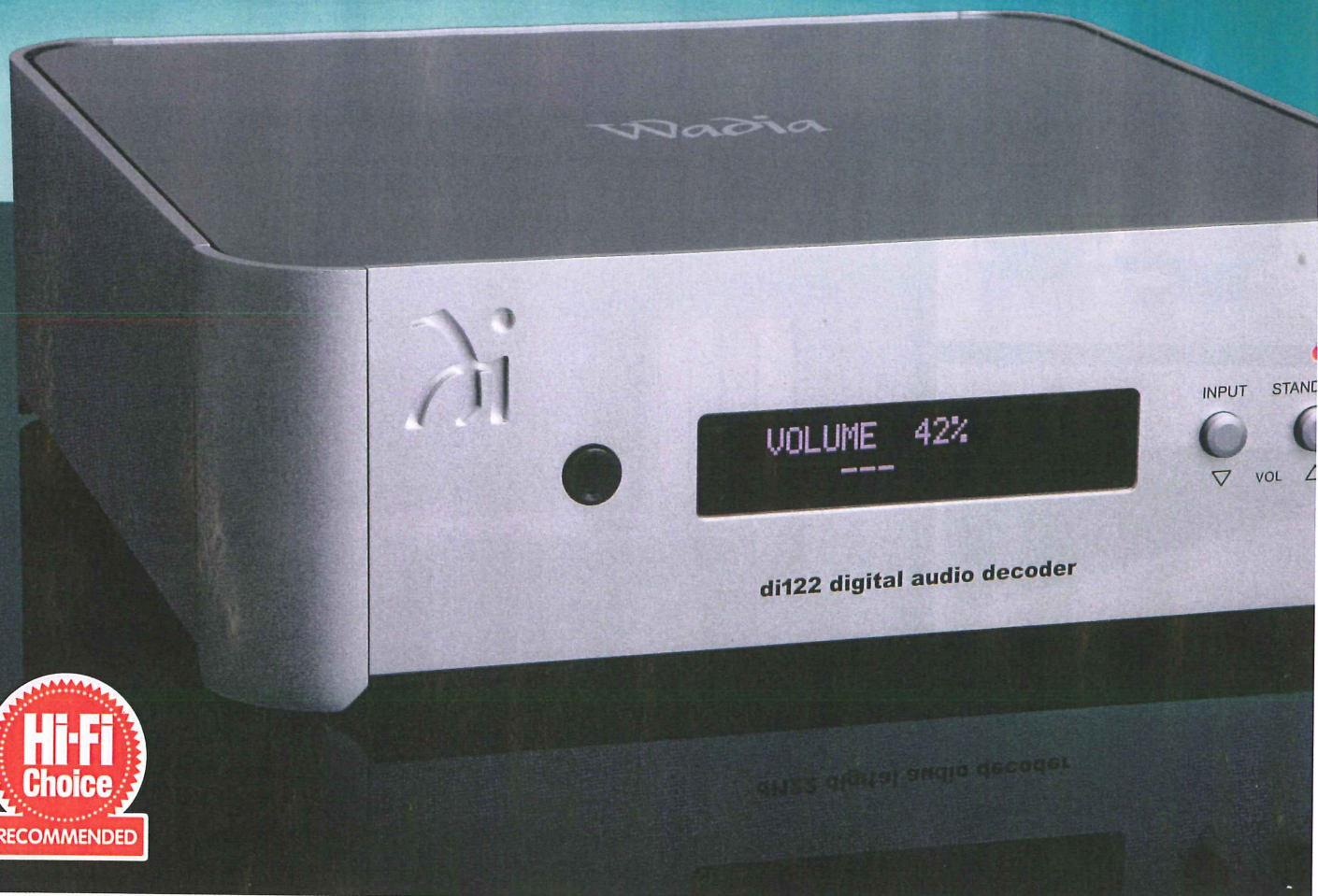
Moving magnet cartridges
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DAD rock

The latest offering from high-end stalwart Wadia is refreshingly affordable. **Ed Selley** finds out if the magic is still doing its stuff

As one of the original purveyors of high-end digital, Wadia has traditionally been associated with the rarefied end of the market. In recent years, however, the company has moved at least some of its products back into more affordable territory and dispensed with optical drive products. The range now comprises 'Decoding Computers' and 'Digital Audio Decoders', which act as both DACs and preamps that can be partnered with matching power amplifiers or used as standalone line-level products.

The di122 sits towards the lower end of Wadia's product lineup and is yours for £1,499. The good news is that this competitive asking price doesn't seem to undermine the spec.

The di122 is fitted with five digital inputs, two optical, two coaxial and a USB-B connection. The coaxial and optical sockets are both 24-bit/192kHz-capable, while the USB implementation is able to pass 24/384kHz as well as DSD and DXD. This ticks pretty much all the format boxes one might expect and should mean that the Wadia is pretty much futureproof. Some rivals offer an AES input or Bluetooth functionality at this level, but I'd personally not want to trade off a useful number of 'normal' inputs for either of them.

Internally, the di122 is built around the popular and increasingly ubiquitous ESS Sabre chip, in this case an ES9016S. This allows for the Wadia to act as a preamp, which while all the rage at the moment is

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Wadia di122

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
DAC/preamp

WEIGHT
3.2kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
254 x 80 x 356mm

FEATURES

- 2x coaxial; 2x optical; 1x USB-B inputs
- RCA/XLR; 1/4in headphone outputs
- Digital inputs support: 44.1kHz-24/192kHz PCM
- USB supports: 44.1kHz to 384kHz, 32-bit (PCM), DSD64, DSD128, DXD352.8kHz, DXD384kHz

DISTRIBUTOR
Absolute Sounds

TELEPHONE
0208 9713909

WEBSITE
wadia.com

actually something that it has been doing with products for some time. The volume adjustment is performed by upsampling the incoming signal and then shedding superfluous information rather than via the cruder bit reduction method, which augers well for use as a preamp. The decoded output is available via RCA and XLR and a front headphone socket. In use, the volume adjustment does mean that if you set the volume to 100 percent, the output is a little high compared with a conventional line-level component and I find that backing the volume off improves the performance considerably.

This is an impressive amount of functionality, but fitting it into a relatively small and elegant chassis has resulted in some operational quirks. There are only two buttons on the fascia, which as a primary function perform input selection and standby. They also double as the volume up and down controls, but only after they have been placed in volume mode. Wadia supplies a nicely assembled remote control that gives each function its own button, but this combined with the linear way that button-operated volumes function means that the di122 doesn't feel as

pleasant as the NAD C510 (HFC 395) when used as a preamp. A final quirk of the design is that the rear panel outputs don't mute on connecting a pair of headphones, which isn't the end of the world, but is a little weird.

The rest of the news is rather better, though. As well as the remote looking and feeling rather smart, the di122 is a very nice piece of industrial design. The casework is attractive and little details like the Wadia emblem engraved into the front panel make it feel a cut above many rivals. The design is really set off by the use of a glass top to the chassis that gives a sense of visual definition. A small but perfectly legible display shows volume, incoming sample rate and selected input. Everything feels extremely well assembled and thought out and while some Wadia calling cards like the curious locking optical connectors have been dispensed with, the result is a product with plenty of shelf appeal and nothing that is likely to put people off.

Set up is simplicity itself. Wadia has put the USB driver at the bottom of the di122 web page and barring the obligatory stop from my antivirus, it installs straightaway on my laptop. The USB input also works without a driver when connected to the fearsomely clever Linux-based output of the Melco N1A NAS (HFC 397), which serves as one of the test inputs. Beyond the slightly congested control interface, Wadia has done a fine job of ensuring that the di122 is no more demanding to use than its competitors.

Sound quality

This user friendliness is balanced with a sound that is somewhat different to rivals at the price point. Where many recent digital products have an almost analogue warmth to the way that they make music, the Wadia is something altogether more forensic and focussed. There is a huge amount

of information that's extracted from material and it displays all of it in an exceptionally vivid and lively way.

The most noticeable aspect of this is when you listen to something with a bit of drive to it. Where some components seem almost content to let the music happen, the Wadia is committed to delivering every last facet of the performance in a manner that is startlingly vivid. Neither is this the preserve of faster, more aggressive material. With Jon Allen's lovely and languid *Deep River*, it is still determined to nail every note and nuance to the picosecond they happen.

If all of this sounds a little aggressive, the clever part of the presentation is that it manages to

Hi-res material reveals a step up in the sheer vividness of the performance

balance this impressive sense of get up and go with a refinement that makes it a very satisfying long-term listen. With both a Naim Supernait 2 and Musical Fidelity M6si, the Wadia is a very civilised partner. It can't be provoked with anything but the poorest and most compressed material and even then, the volume has to be up at the firmly antisocial side of things. I am sure that really careless system matching might serve to exacerbate this, but a cursory demonstration beforehand should be sufficient to avoid it.

Switch to high-resolution material and the di122 doesn't change the overall presentation, but it does reveal a further step up in the sheer vividness of the performance. A 24/96kHz version of Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* is exceptionally lifelike. There is a real sense of the

performers, their relationship to one another and the space they inhabit. This is matched by believable tonality and an impressive sense of decay to notes all underpinned by bass that is deep, fast and tonally detailed. My DSD material remains limited, but the Wadia has no issue playing any of it and save for a slightly long pause when changing sample rate or format, it makes for a compelling high-resolution companion.

Using it as a preamp and headphone amplifier does not alter the basics of the performance too significantly. The slight lack of fine adjustment to the volume still favours rival products with a rotary dial, but there is no real sense that it is anything other than a very linear performer at every increment.

The news is rather better using the di122 as a headphone amp. Not only is there plenty of power on tap – using Oppo's PM-3 headphone (HFC 399) only requires a whisker over 50 percent on the display to listen loud – but the comprehensive detail retrieval combined with the general refinement of the design makes the headphone socket far more than just a convenience feature.

Conclusion

And it is this balance of convenience and capability that makes the di122 a very impressive proposition at the price. If we accept that a rotary volume dial-equipped challenger will make the best device for use as a preamp, the Wadia hits back thanks to a genuinely useful set of real-world inputs and outputs, a full house of supported formats and a sound that is consistently and genuinely exciting. There are a few operational niggles and careless system matching might not show it at its best, but the di122 is a seriously accomplished performer that needs to be on anyone's shortlist at the price point ●

The glass top lends the Wadia a real sense of visual definition

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Coaxial digital inputs
- 2 Balanced XLR outputs
- 3 Unbalanced RCA outputs
- 4 Optical digital inputs
- 5 USB-B port

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Lively and powerful sound; build; features and facilities

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Slightly clunky interface; requires a little care when system matching

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: A very clever and highly capable arrival from a long-time digital master

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★