

Perfect Sound for the Time Being

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EMM LABS DAC6e EMM Labs Modified Philips SACD 1000

The EMM Labs DAC6e (and its companion highly modified Philips SACD 1000 transport) is the latest version of the SACD playback system that HP raved about several issues past. Depending on your listening biases, it is either going to seem markedly superior to every other SACD player currently on the market, or it is going to seem a touch analytical. To me, it seems both, but far more the former than the latter.

Where the DAC6e shines is clarity. It is an astonishingly detailed device – perhaps the most detailed source component I’ve heard. I’m uncertain why this thing is clearer and cleaner than anything else digital on Earth – whether it’s the speed and precision of its processing circuitry, or the low distortion of its analog output stage, or the overall absence of any jitter, fuzz or electronic grain – but, whatever the reason, on all the recordings I sampled, the DAC6e retrieved more information of a certain kind than the Krell did, than the near \$70k Goldmund CD player did, or, frankly, than my state-of-the-art record player does. That kind would be, primarily, transient-related. The EMM Labs is better at both the starting transients of notes and their decays than anything I’ve ever heard in any playback medium.

Transients are essential to our sense of where an instrument is located, how it makes sound, and how it is being played. And the EMM Labs reproduces all of these things with unparalleled clarity. For instance, on *Mark Levinson Live Recordings at Red Rose Music* {Red Rose Music RRM01}, the best-recorded SACD I’ve auditioned, you won’t need liner notes to hear that Jerry Willard’s classical guitar on the Bach Allemande (Track 4) has nylon strings and that it is being strummed rather than plucked. Nor will you be left in any doubt that the bowed E string of Adele V. Anthony’s extraordinarily well-recorded Guarnerius on the Kreisler Recitativo (Track 5) is metal not other strings gut. Or that a tom-tom with a bright tone and a long sustain is part of Jim Arnold’s drum kit on Mighty Sam McClain’s rendition of “No one Can Take Your Place” from *Blues for the Soul* {Telarc 83487}.

At the same time that it reproduces starting transients with astonishing realism, this thing latches on to the decay of notes like nothing I've heard—ever. I mentioned the cymbal strikes on the Luqman Hamza disc, which, despite the admixture of noise, are extraordinary. But on any instrument, from the gong and bells on the Red Rose sampler to Yo-Yo Ma's cello on Solo [Sony 7464641146], you will hear decays sustained to an extent that is almost unbelievable (and, given the occasional superaddition of DSD noise, occasionally unnatural, like ringing).

Starting transients (and finishing ones) tend to live in the midrange and treble. And, not surprisingly, the DAC6e is very slightly weighted toward these middle-to-top octaves, which may be part of the reason why it has such a remarkably clear, lively, immediate sound. On the other hand, the EMM Labs's bass is also exceptional—more powerful and detailed, and better defined than the bass octaves on CD or vinyl, though also a bit too tight, a bit "digital."

Lest you think that the DAC6e is all about dynamics and durations, it is not. Its tone colors are quite rich and beautiful, though not as delicate or variegated as those of analog. (If the EMM Labs's sound were a painting it would be dark oils, with no pastel or water-color hues.) Consider the Paavo Järvi/Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra recording of Stravinsky's Scherzo a la Russe [Telarc]. Though the orchestra sounds nothing like I've heard it sound in Music Hall (not the EMM Labs's fault, of course), the DAC6e reproduces the first and second violins with a silken beauty reminiscent of analog tape, and cellos and doublebasses with tremendous weight and clarity of line.

As a soundstager, the EMM Labs is quite good, though not the equal of vinyl in stage width. (All the SACD and CD players I've heard tend to have less breadth than vinyl does, even though the channel separation numbers would suggest exactly the opposite.) Still, lateral spread on the aforementioned Stravinsky disc (and other orchestral recordings) is impressive, and depth is good. As an imager, the EMM Labs is excellent, reproducing large instruments like Patricia Barber's piano on "Bye Bye Blackbird" (from *Nightclub* [Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs 2004]) with lifelike "size." However, the DAC6e, like most digital sources, also tends to focus instruments more tightly and flatly than they sound in real life or on analog, with what in video would be called sharper edge-definition, and with far less three dimensional body and bloom than vinyl.

The EMM Labs is in a class of its own, quite literally. It simply doesn't sound like anything else, and what it does well, it does unparalleledly well. While it doesn't beat out analog disc or tape in musical realism, it is competitive on its own terms. I just wish more SACD software was worthy of it.

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