

APRIL 2017



AYAZI & 3R USB REΠΑΙΣΣΑΝΣΕ

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



Reviewer: Glen Wagenknecht

Financial interests: click [here](#)

Sources: Audio Space CDP 8A CD player, Wyred4Sound music server

DACs: Wyred4Sound DAC-2, Grant Fidelity Tube DAC 11

Preamplifier: Audio Space Reference 2S, Tortuga Audio LDR6 Passive

Amplifier: Bel Canto 200.4, Tapping TP22

AV Receiver: Pioneer Elite SC-25

Main Speakers: Apogee Duetta Signature, Paradigm Servo 15 subwoofer, Audio Space AS-3/5A, Mark Daniel Maximus Mini monitor

Rack: Codia Acoustic Design Stage 3000 BAB

Stands: Charisma Audio Function stands, Target stands

AV Speakers: JohnBlue M3s Axiom M22 v3s, VP160 & QS8s

AV Subwoofer: Paradigm PW-2200

Desktop Audio Speakers: Swans M200 MkIII

Desktop DAC/Pre Headphone Amp: DA&T U-2

Cables: Arkana Physical Research Loom, Audio Art SE and Classic cable looms, JPS Labs Ultraconductor 2 speaker cables, Madison Audio Lab E3 Extreme 1 Interconnects/Extreme 2 speaker cables, Signal Cable Silver Reference interconnects and speaker cables, digital optical and coax cable, Audio Sensibility Impact SE balanced interconnects, Statement S/PDIF and Impact USB digital cables, DH Lab Power Plus AC cable.

Resonance control: KAT Audio Terminator 1 Feet, Solid Tech Feet, EquaRack Footers, Weizhi Precision Gold Glory footers, Boston Audio TuneBlock2 footers, Audio Exklusiv Silent Plugs, Audio Exklusiv d.C.d. Base and d.C.d. Footers, Superspikes, CA Electronics Standard Cones, Feet, Cable Clamps, Isoacoustics L8R130, Aperta and L8R200 SUB speaker stands

Powerline conditioning: Exact Power EP15A, Noise Destroyer power filtration

Accessories: TrueHarmonix Black Magic CD Mat, Herbie's Super Black Hole CD Mat

Main Room size: 12' x 17'

Home Theatre: 10.5' x 16.5'

Review component retail: €990 DAC, €199 USB



Two versions, two prices. The reviewed version is on top.

From the land of the mighty Parthenon surrounded by the azure-coloured sea comes a fresh pair of digital offerings by newcomer Ideon Audio. The name derives from Ideon Andron, an ancient cave at an altitude of 1498 meters on Mount Ida in central Crete said to be the birthplace of Zeus. That portends very lofty ambitions for these products and a tough name to live up to. The company is comprised of "a team of audiophiles and music lovers with professional engineering know-how" who aim to squeeze the musical magic from the encoded bits of the digital medium. Their DAC promises serious performance and their USB conditioner optimization of the USB pipe for audiophile results, both aimed at real world pricing. Named after "a cool intense breeze out of the clear sky", the Ayazi concentrates exclusively on D/A conversion and eschews bells and whistles. There's no volume control, headphone output, XLR out or remote control. Inputs are just two: 24/192 coax and 32/384 class 2 USB. DSD must be converted to 24/352.8 PCM in player software. The backbone of the design rests on the workhorse ESS ES9023 which lends its proprietary Hyperstream conversion and Time Domain Jitter Eliminator to the process. USB reception is via C-Media CM6631A, trusty S/PDIF is managed by the Wolfson WM8804 with good reputation for jitter suppression. As implemented in the Ayazi, the Wolfs won't support 176.4kHz via S/PDIF but since this sample rate is supported by USB, it shouldn't be an issue. Timing goes to a Crystek CCHD-957 clock. Construction is Spartan. The basic cabinet is 1mm folded grey sheet metal with a 4mm brushed aluminium face plate measuring 29x17x8cm WxDxH which weighs in at a surprisingly substantial 6.6 lbs. The fascia with company and model logos fastened with recessed Allen bolts adds two toggle controls, a simple on/off power switch on the left and an input selector on the right. Both have lights. The two-tone selector LED changes from pink to blue to confirm signal lock. The rear panel is comprised of a female B USB input, a quality gold-plated RCA input, a pair of equivalent analog outputs and a recessed 3-pole power input. Different face and body colors are available. There are four 10mm high rubber isolation feet on the bottom. Depending on region the DAC will come pre-configured for 100-120V/60Hz or 200-240V/50Hz. Ideon include a basic power cord and instruction manual.



Vasilis Tounas (Chief Engineer) George Ligerakis (Chief Operations Officer), Greg Mitsacopoulos (Marketing Director) and Angelos Gallis (Sales Director). Crete's mountain below them.



The tonal character in the early stages of the Ayazi was *very* warm, descending from the lower midband and upper bass and graduating to rotund in the lower bass. Luckily, this excess gradually lessened although ultimately remained a touch voluptuous. The Ayazi overall presented a tubular/vinyl style firmly centered in the mid and lower midrange, giving proper acoustic weight on vocals and instruments. Handoff into the midrange required a bit of delicacy in setup due to the predisposition to richness in the lower regions. Get it wrong and the midrange lost a bit of impact. Get it right and the midrange had wonderful density and inner illumination that gave it palpable presence. Highs were non-fatiguing with no overbite but also a little laid back and forgiving. In vinyl terms, the presentation was more moving magnet or moving iron in the top end than evincing the snap and sparkle of a moving coil. Interconnect choice made small changes in the presentation of the mid to upper frequencies. In all situations the Ayazi's comfort zone was firmly on the organic side of the ledger: big, bold and with high density throughout the spectrum. It honoured the acoustical over the recorded event. Handling of soundstage information and instrument placement was exemplary. Classic audiophile check marks of width, depth and specificity were done with precision and style. Depth information was uniformly handled to the far rear edges of the soundstage and projection was ample in near tubular fashion. The tonal balance-enhanced dimensionality gave images a palpable density and the DAC successfully separated individual instruments and vocalists in space, placing them (where appropriate) in a large well-defined venue with abundant ambient cues. The handling of space between instruments favoured density over transparency. Think of the atmosphere of a smoky jazz hall rather than an open air venue.

The perception of the Ayazi's dynamic behaviour could vary slightly with interconnect choices because they shifted emphasis on frequency. Overall, the DAC was capable of wide swings and also unraveled dense instrumental lines with nuance and sophistication. This was especially apparent in the mid and upper midband where it could achieve a strong sense of fluid liveliness. In the adjoining lower midband and upper bass as well as the upper frequencies, the Ayazi switched dynamic gears, showing a bit of restraint that emphasized refinement over full scale dynamic contrast. This did not translate as slow per se. In fact, the Ayazi produced toe-tapping bounce and good resolution of fine detail. It just pulled its punches a bit on larger swings in those ranges, trading some absolute breadth of dynamic palette for richer venue and instrument information. The handling of attack and decay followed suit. There was a slight softness in transient information that combined with the warm balance and slightly soft top, robbing the music of a bit of startle factor on rapid hard-edged material. The style was very much tubular/vinyl. Those used to a little more emphasis and speed in the upper octaves will find the presentation a touch refined. Those using live acoustic experience in a properly damped hall as reference point will prefer the Ayazi version. The 3R USB Renaissance enjoyed the majority of its time with the Wyred DAC-2, using the Dell as source. It proved the most successful match in house and constitutes the basis of my observations. Since this was my first stab at USB enhancements, comparison with competing product will not be possible. The experience here is just documentation of listening sessions with and without device to determine if the concept had real merit. The questions were simply "were there easily discernible differences and did they constitute legitimate improvements?" The answer was yes on both counts.



After some break-in, the most obvious contribution of the 3R/PC/USB configuration was a subtle change in tonal balance. It shifted mental focus very slightly further into the upper mids. This increased transparency and air around instruments as well as injected somewhat more leading-edge definition on instruments like cymbals. The entire spectrum gained a subtle extension in contrast but in the process lost a small amount of the Wyred's regular density in the lower mids and upper bass against the stock PC/DAC-2 connection. Extreme low bass lost a tiny bit of definition but didn't change level. Fundamentally the direct USB connection was slightly warmer and more laid back. The 3R addition gained a little more sparkle and dynamic mojo as well as an increase in forward projection without compromising depth, thus adding more complex front-to-back information. The most telling improvement was a sonic comparison against the Wyred's own I²S connection which plays the jitter immunity card. Here it became interesting. The Renaissance/DAC 2 combination off the PC, especially with the MusiCHI sourced files, showed very similar character to the Wyred Server/DAC I²S combo. It was not identical, with the Wyred still the cleaner source which could dig out a bit more information but the PC now was so similar in character and close enough in resolution and dynamic ability as to garner serious merit. Theory states that any clean signal from different sources and methodologies, properly executed, *should* yield this result. Since that proved to be the case, it validated the capability of the 3R to optimize USB.



The comparison stage is upon us now so let's look at the Renaissance first. As stated, this was the first of its breed to enter the premises so no direct comments were possible. By reputation, Wyred4Sound go parallel at a similar price with their highly regarded Recovery so there is competition. Basically all I can tell you is that the Ideon 3R was absolutely stunning given a successful pairing. I just can't tell you how it differs from its competitors. On to the Ayazi. I chose a variety of DACs to emphasize very real design differences and sonic priorities. For an apples to apples choice, the DAC that immediately came to mind was the Auralic ARK MX+, a stunningly adept musical machine that graced my household circa 2013. It could handle 32/192 files and similarly opted for S/PDIF and USB. This model has since been superseded but the veteran Auralic and feisty Ideon newcomer still remain cut from very similar cloth. They both go for density over transparency, achieving more human voicing than competing designs that push for a more sterile by-the-numbers approach. Based on recollection, the Auralic at double the price featured more upscale case work plus XLR outputs. To a small extent it carved out somewhat better dimensionality and was a little more controlled in the bass but otherwise demonstrated extremely similar virtues and vices. The Ayazi contends where it absolutely counts - in the critical midrange. Here it was very convincing and near equal. In terms of functionality it bettered the veteran Auralic in its ability to switch quickly between different file resolutions. At its much lower cost, the Ayazi presents a very attractive alternative for those who adore the sonic style of the upscale Auralic but either don't need the extra features and bling or are subject to the dictates of a tighter wallet.



The resident DAC to live up to was the Wyred DAC-2, a US army knife of inputs and outputs, able to assume full digital preamplifier duty in both single-ended and balanced modes. Properly treated, it reigned to this point as the warmest implementation of the ESS chip that has been in house; and it has remained the most dynamically adept. Against the Ayazi, the Wyred had more pronounced transient ability with better dynamics and bass definition. It went slightly wider and showed greater transparency in its handling of space between objects. In turn the Ideon DAC went for superior density and slightly more dimensionality, with a touch more pronounced centre fill: two different sets of design priorities from two talented designers. The current versions of the Wyred DAC are spread in price from slightly more expensive for the DAC-1 (which will match format ability) to more than twice the Ayazi's cost for the DAC-2- This makes the choice between these a blend of budget considerations, functional requirements and ultimately sonic style. If organic presentation is on your absolute short list, the Ayazi is the one.

The Grant Fidelity tube DAC-11 was my wild-card contender. It features more inputs and outputs than the Ideon although DXD and DSD sources are not accommodated. The DAC-11 has the virtues of low cost and disproportionate sonics. It has been at the heart of many 'best of show' awards and at half the price of the Ayazi, it throws actual tube performance as opposed to tube-like similarities into the frame. The Grant Fidelity will push out even more midrange dimensionality than the Ideon and kicks with slightly wider dynamic range particularly in the midband plus musters somewhat better bass definition. The Ayazi earns its price with different strong suits like clear superiority in soundstage width, instrument specificity and definition of space between instruments. The Grant Fidelity delivered the performance but the Ideon was the vastly cleaner window on the *context* of that performance. The DAC-11 remains a feisty budget benchmark but overall the Ayazi struck much further upwards on almost all parameters, making it the stronger relative bargain.



And now we reach the end of another audio adventure. Like the classic Greek tales of old, there were moments of storm and triumph. The Ayazi DAC and 3R USB Renaissance became voyages of discovery fulfilled and still undiscovered lands to be explored. The trials and tribulations came down to software/hardware compatibility issues which are endemic to the computer field in general and sadly, represent the vagaries of the current state of computer hifi. Anyone who has downloaded the latest OS update only to see their favorite app rendered problematic can testify to the fact that the ghost of plug'n'pray still haunts the circuit boards. My problems constituted field testing for our talented designers. They're a fresh young startup and should be smart enough to learn from these data. As with anything computer, be prepared for a version 2 firmware fix. Always check with the manufacturer (and local dealer) for successful pairings before committing to any mail-order bride.

On purely sonic merit, the Ideon products achieved high results. The 3R USB Renaissance demonstrated the ability to push USB to near I²S quality, making it an extremely worthwhile addition and at its inexpensive cost, an easy recommendation for those who want to hear better USB sound. The Ayazi DAC aims at the analog audiophile with solidly executed organic attributes that approach much pricier fare. It's warm, musical and plays with the enticement of a summer day overlooking the rich Aegean Sea. It puts meat and sinew into the energy of the performance. Those switching between vinyl and digital sources will find the Ayazi a comfortable transition. For the modest price and when firing on all cylinders, it delivers disproportionate sonic virtues that make it an easy recommendation for those who pursue beauty and involvement over the opposing paradigms of resolution and transparency. Zeus is looking down on his modern protégé and is pleased, me thinks. And just to prove that the laurel leaf does not rest long on the heads of the ambitious, news came at the conclusion of the review that the new Ayazi II has just entered the arena. Those contemplating purchase of the Ayazi under review need not worry that the review just became obsolete. Current owners of the original need not fear that their recent investment has already been tanked. The II comes not to replace but to join, upping the ante to €1'400. It adds a new faceplate, aluminium feet and more Allen bolts, a second clock along with a plethora of wiring and connector upgrades. For a limited 3 months, Ideon offer the full upgrade to existing Ayazi owners for €350 including installation. So the first offspring from the cave of Zeus already has a brother [from another mother if we consider the historical tales of Zeus' cavorting antics - *Ed.*]

Glen Wagenknecht

Quality of packing: The product arrived in a standard cardboard s container. Internal protection was provided by Styrofoam end caps and plastic bag for the DAC. The 3R USB Renaissance came in the package within its own cardboard retail box.

Reusability of packing: Will survive shipping.

Condition of components received: Perfect.

Delivery: Delivered by courier.

Website comments: Site is a work in progress. Some sections are in English, some Greek. There is extensive information on company history, design philosophy and products plus the ability to e-purchase as well as download the driver where required.

Human interactions: Intelligent and helpful.

Warranty: 2-year transferable on 3R USB Renaissance and Ayazi DAC covering circuit and electronics. Not covered are external or internal damage by hand. Warranty is void if unauthorized personnel tamper with the device or change original components. Also excluded is damage caused by the owner using more voltage than suggested or changing the transformer themselves. Ideon pay for any shipping they do. The owner pays to send the devices they have damaged or which require service.

Final comments & suggestions: The 3R USB Renaissance unlocked both the potential and my enthusiasm for USB . The Ayazi DAC, with full recognition in my setup, would be an alternate reference choice against my Wyred DAC-2. It offers a very different but equally convincing perspective on the recording.