

**Oppo Sonica SDAC-3 Digital to Analog Converter**

# A Bargain for Stellar Sound

By Rob Johnson

**B**ased in Menlo Park, California, Oppo has built a reputation for delivering excellent products at reasonable prices. After using with their BDP-83 Blu-Ray player for a few years, and then upgrading to the BDP-103, I count myself as one of the fans of their price-performance pieces.

With the release of the Sonica SDAC-3, Oppo joins a crowded field of combination DAC-Network Streamers. Putting it through its paces, the Oppo certainly stands out as another addition to their product portfolio living up to the claims made. With a \$799 price tag for purchase directly from Oppo's website or from an authorized dealer, the Sonica DAC proves itself easy on the wallet at the performance level it delivers.

## REVIEW



### Lookin' good

As with Oppo's other products, the fit and finish are at the top of their class, and you could easily mistake them for components costing considerably more. The black anodizing of our review sample complements a thick aluminum front faceplate. Controls on that panel include both source selector and volume knobs, plus an LCD screen between them. These controls also serve to access the Oppo's setup menu as an alternative to the remote's controls. The only other elements gracing the front are the standby button, and the blue LED accompanying it. While the default setting lights up the LED when the unit is powered up, the LED can also be turned off should the owner choose.

A heft of 10.4 lbs (4.7 kg) confirms substantial build quality and the large toroidal transformer within. With dimensions of 10" W x 3" H x 12.2" deep (254 x 76 x 360 mm), the Oppo is placement friendly and small enough to fit on a shelf or in a multimedia cabinet. *(continued)*

$$\sum \left( \begin{array}{l} \text{future proof +} \\ \text{benchmark performance +} \\ \text{superlative sound} \end{array} \right) = \text{Rossini}$$



### Future Proof

We are pioneers who are constantly developing new technologies to improve the quality of reproduced sound. Our unique approach to product design means that Rossini can anticipate and support new formats and innovations in audio.



### Benchmark Performance

Every dCS product must meet the extraordinarily exacting standards demanded by our military heritage. As a result Rossini delivers levels of consistency and reliability like no other.



### Superlative Sound

When you listen to Rossini our state of the art technology, manufacturing effort and rigorous testing combine to create a magical experience that perfectly recreates every last emotional nuance of whatever music you choose to listen to.

When you listen to Rossini from dCS you will believe that the world has stopped and there is...

ONLY THE MUSIC

dCS  
ONLY THE MUSIC

@ info@dcsLtd.co.uk | dCSOnlyTheMusic | www.dcsLtd.co.uk

Imported by Data Conversion Systems Americas Inc.  
T +1 617 314 9296

Manufactured in the UK by Data Conversion Systems Ltd  
Unit 1, Buckingham Business Park, Anderson Road, Swavesey, Cambridge, CB24 4AE



The rear panel offers many options for digital source inputs including optical, coaxial, and USB. Sending the Oppo's analog signal to an amplifier or preamplifier, the owner has the choice of RCA and XLR outputs. Internally, the Sonica DAC features a fully balanced architecture, so the XLR connectors should inherently offer a bit lower noise floor. Using the RCA outputs may defeat the balanced topology, but the single-ended connection option sounds mighty good to my ears. If you have balanced cables, use 'em. If not, the DAC is still very quiet.

### Under the hood

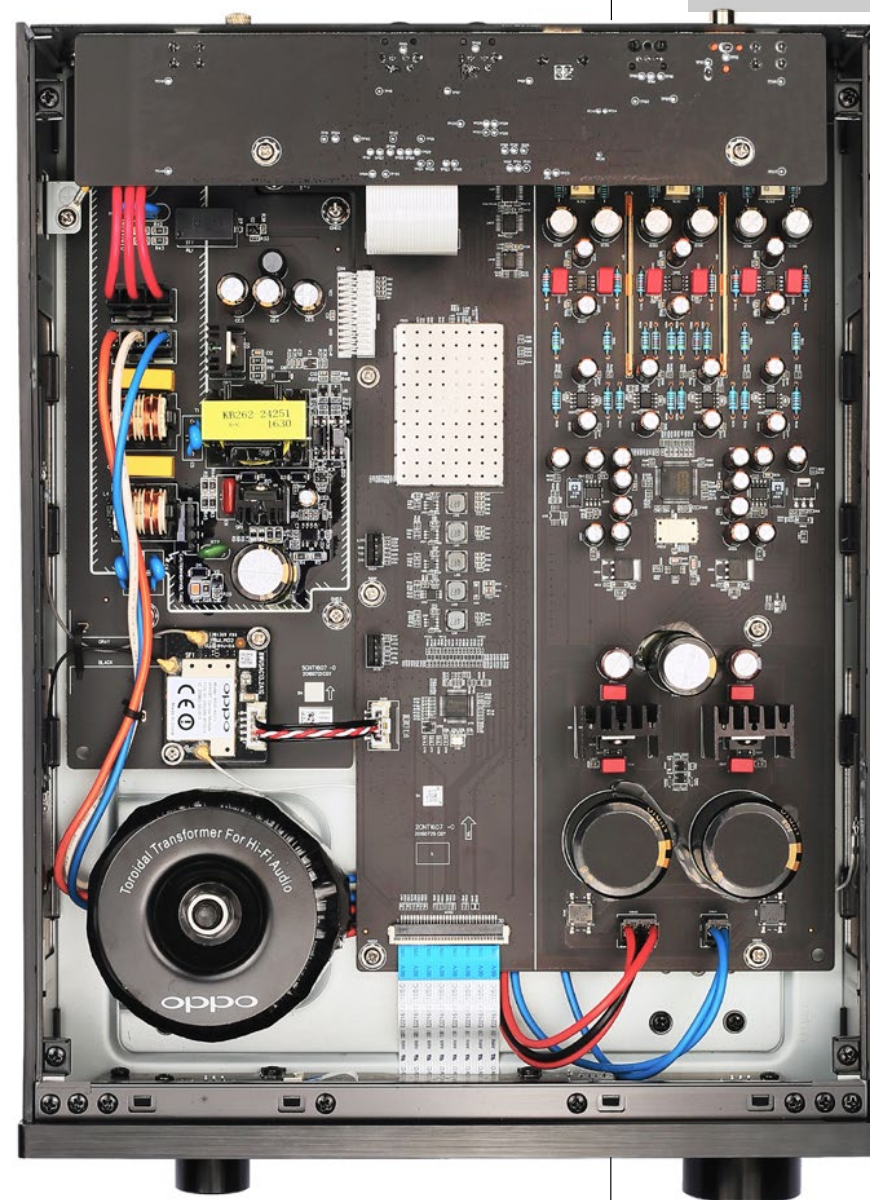
Under the hood, Oppo takes advantage of the latest ES9038PRO 32-bit HyperStream DAC chip. Depending on the source material, the DAC offers different levels of maximum resolution. When receiving music from a computer into its USB 2.0 input, the DAC shines with support for 768 kHz/32-bit PCM content, and DSD decoding up to 22.5792 MHz (DSD512). Considering how little music is available today with that level of resolution, the Oppo offers quite a bit of futureproofing.

When using the optical or coaxial input, or when streaming music via an Ethernet or WiFi connection, bandwidth for large music files becomes the bottleneck, and maximum resolution takes a hit as one would expect. However, the SABRE chip is certainly no slouch with streamed sources, capping out at 24-bit/192 kHz PCM and DSD 64.

### A preamp too?

With a variable output, meaning the Oppo has a volume control, those with a digital-only system can use it as a preamplifier connected directly to their favorite amplifier. For testing, we used the DAC in this configuration to give the DAC the greatest opportunity to sing and minimize the number of components, which might contribute their sonic footprint between source and speakers.

Those seeking maximum audio flexibility, with the fewest possible wires, will also appreciate Oppo DAC's ability to integrate with Oppo's wireless Sonica speakers. This makes multi-room speaker capability along with the stereo pair in the main listening area a welcome feature. *(continued)*





As budget permits, speakers can be added anywhere in the home, all controlled by the Sonica.

### Yes, there's an app for that

Another nice benefit is Oppo's *Sonica* phone app, making music browsing simple. After a few menu clicks on the DAC to facilitate setup, the app recognizes its musical partner quickly. From there, virtually any song in your music library reveals itself. Like many new DACs that embrace multiple digital sources, the Oppo is internet-ready. Connecting it to your home network with WiFi or an Ethernet cable, it searches for all available music sources already connected to the network. In my case, the Oppo found all music located on the Synology 415 Play, and also identified the music on the iPhone7 after accepting the app's permission request. For those who desire to connect a Bluetooth music source to the DAC, that option is also made easy through the SDAC-3. "Bluetooth" is among the sources listed on the DAC's menu screen, and connecting is a breeze as expected. Apple AirPlay capability offers another option. Tidal or Spotify accounts also enjoy easy integration through the Sonica app. After entering the username and password for those accounts, Sonica connects immediately. The app truly represents a sofa-surfer's dream. With all of one's favorite tunes at your fingertips – literally – long listening sessions are a sure bet.

### Listening

Regardless of the music source, the Oppo renders the digital bits in a beguiling way, making the most of the content at its native bitrate. Even CD quality files sound mighty good through the Oppo, but higher resolution formats offer the greatest sonic rewards.

Without native DSD512 files on hand, a workaround shows what the Sonica can deliver with its best foot forward, at maximum resolution. Roon's latest software update makes possible the ability to upsample digital music to the highest resolution limits of the Sonica DAC. I respect there are many audiophiles who prefer to hear music only in its native format, claiming that the up-sampling process imparts an unnatural sonic quality. I offer only this: give it a shot before casting the option aside!

With Roon's up-sampling algorithm activated, there's a resulting smoothness and ease to the sound. The resulting soundstage through the Oppo appears endless, and it exceeds the speaker bodies in all directions. Sound fills the room floor-to-ceiling, left-to-right, and front-to-back.

With the aid of a few frequency sweeping test tracks, the sonic profile appears neutral across the audible spectrum. There does not appear any added emphasis in low, mid or upper frequencies. In parallel, the overall music por-

trayal is neither warm nor stark. It simply decodes and delivers the recording in an honest way. Those preferring a warmer sound may benefit from an amp leaning in that direction. Those seeking every detail from the music will find the Oppo capable of delivering it.

Electronic-based music like Madonna's *Ray of Light* proves stunning with audible cues dancing all around the soundstage, layered so that each element is clearly discernable. Regardless of music genre, Sonica does a convincing job of delivering the goods. Jazz, classical, reggae, punk, and others all pour forth with an engaging pace and punch as the music dictates. Low bass notes are tight. Highs resulting from a triangle or cymbal crash are crystal-clear with lasting decay. Men's and women's vocal performances render naturally, with a very engaging quality. With great musicality, the DAC beckons late-night listening, planting in the listener's mind, "okay, just one more song!"

All the Sonica DAC's audio capabilities make it extremely difficult to pick apart the performance any perceived shortcomings. Instead, the ears to simply fall into listening mode, enjoying favorite albums one after another. The DAC performs as well as several I have experienced which cost multiple times the Oppo's price tag. (continued)



## REVIEW



### Summing strengths

At an audiophile-friendly price of \$799, it is easy to recommend the Oppo Sonica DAC. Even when mated with an amplifier and speakers many times the Oppo's price, the Sonica holds its own.

If you need another justification for taking the purchase-plunge, there are a few things to keep in mind. First, those who only listen to digital music for all the conveniences it offers, the Sonica's ability as a preamp proves a valuable asset. You can sell your preamplifier, and drop the Oppo DAC in its place. I suspect you may come

out ahead on the deal. Secondly, the Oppo's ability to handle very high-resolution audio files gives it a high degree of futureproofing. As greater resolution native files come available, you can take advantage of the Oppo's decoding prowess immediately. Yes, the Oppo sets a very high bar.

Oppo offers a 30-day return policy should a prospective owner purchase the DAC and not like it for some reason. If this DAC resides within your audio budget, take the plunge and give the Oppo Sonica DAC a try. You are likely to find it very difficult to let go. *(continued)*



## A MASTERPIECE OF DESIGN AND ENGINEERING



**Renaissance ESL 15A** represents a major evolution in electrostatic design. A 15-inch Curvilinear Line Source (CLS™) XStat™ vacuum-bonded electrostatic transducer with advanced MicroPerf™ stator technology and ultra-rigid AirFrame™ Blade construction provide the heart of this exceptional loudspeaker.

A powerfully dynamic low-frequency experience is rendered with unflinching accuracy and authority courtesy of dual 12-inch low-distortion aluminum cone woofers, each independently powered by a 500-watt Class-D amplifier, and controlled by a 24-Bit Vojtko™ DSP Engine featuring Anthem Room Correction (ARC™) technology. Hear it today at your local dealer.

[martinlogan.com](http://martinlogan.com)



## Additional Listening – Jeff Dorgay

The only thing I can add to the hefty amount of praise that Rob has heaped on the Oppo Sonica DAC is that as a digital “old timer,” I’m absolutely floored at how much digital performance is here for just under 800 bucks. Five years ago, this level of performance would have set you back \$5,000 *without* streaming capabilities. It’s a great time to be a music lover on a budget.

While this may not impress everyone, I love the way that Oppo packages their stuff. This level of attention to even this final detail underscores the amount of care and respect that goes into the product. In a day where companies still send me \$20,000 components packed in hand cut strips of Styrofoam, Oppo’s approach is highly comprehensive. These guys make impressive stuff and we’re buying the SDAC-3 for our fleet of reference components. And, I am happy to award it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2017.



Oppo Sonica SDAC-3  
Digital to Analog Converter  
MSRP: \$799

**MANUFACTURER**  
OPPO Digital

**CONTACT**  
[www.oppodigital.com](http://www.oppodigital.com)

### PERIPHERALS

#### Digital Sources

Mac Mini, iPhone 7, Oppo BDP-103, Roon Music Service, Tidal, dCS Debussy

#### Amplification

Burmester 911 mk3

#### Speakers

GamuT RS3i

#### Cables

Jena Labs

#### Power

Torus AVR 15 Plus, RSA Mongoose power cords

#### Accessories

ASC tube traps, Mapleshade Samson audio racks, Coffman Labs Equipment Footers, AudioQuest Jitterbug, Atomic Audio Labs Mac Mini stand