

REVIEWS

The Brinkmann Audio Nyquist DAC

Settling the Digital vs. Analog Debate

By Jeff Dorgay



HiFi reviewers and enthusiasts often talk about “analog magic,” but that term is seldom if ever used when discussing digital gear. Considering the progress made in the digital arena, it’s somewhat puzzling. I submit the Brinkmann Nyquist has magic, in spades.

Joni Mitchell’s voice (and self-backing vocals) in her classic “Car on a Hill” are smooth and scrumptious. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear I was listening to vinyl – and that’s the point.

Some of us have been arguing about the validity of digital versus analog for about 35 years now. Granted, those first compact disc players sounded pretty harsh, but things have come a long way since then. Despite the sniping of analog aficionados, digital designers keep improving the breed, and though often fashionable to bash digital, it’s pretty damn good.

On one level, who better to make an incredible digital to analog converter than a man who makes great turntables? Helmut Brinkmann is that man. I’ve been using his Bardo turntable (with optional RoNT power supply) for over a year now and couldn’t be happier with it – deciding to purchase the review sample took all of about 30 seconds worth of listening.

Mr. Brinkmann’s DAC is equally engaging and impressive, even more, when the tubes stabilize thermally – usually about 30 minutes. Prepare to be impressed. Really impressed. The Beatle’s “Penny Lane” begins this magical mystery tour, as it’s a well-worn demo favorite. McCartney’s bass line comes through with an unmistakable strength – the pace is fantastic. The sonic picture presented is so natural, it reminds me of the Bardo/Koetsu Jade Platinum combination, which offers an equally organic experience. The music escapes the speakers with a level of depth, texture and ease not reached by the other digital hardware in my three listening rooms.

Say What?

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THE
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Say What?

I've been intrigued with mega-digital playback for over a decade now, and as much progress continues to be made in the analog world, I'm equally stunned at what the world's finest audio engineering minds continue to extract from the 16/44.1 files that we've all been told are unacceptable. DSD and high res PCM files are certainly intriguing when the content lives up to the hype, but really, how many albums in DSD format do you own? 50? 100? 3? Me too. The few hundred albums in high-resolution format reside on my NAS, still compete with about 12 thousand CDs ripped over decades, and thousands more streaming from TIDAL.

The Nyquist unfolds MQA files and is a ROON endpoint, so there is no digital scenario you are unprepared for. There's nothing worse than a five-figure component requiring excuses. None are necessary with the

Brinkmann Nyquist.

The Nyquist does a fantastic job decoding high resolution, audiophile files. If that is your quest, you will not be disappointed in the least, but if you are a music fan wanting maximum musicality out of your legacy digital collection, I suspect you'll value the Nyquist even more.



The ins and outs

The Nyquist offers inputs for every digital source imaginable: Toslink optical, RCA/SPDIF, XLR-AES/EBU, USB, and Ethernet. With a combination of a Mac Book Pro, OPPO 205, dCS Rossini and even a Sony PlayStation, rest assured the Nyquist works well with anything you can throw at it. After auditioning a number of transport options, the bulk of my listening was done via the Ethernet connection and a 12TB QNAP NAS.

Again, thanks to the Nyquist being Roon compatible, it makes combining the digital files in your library, with anything you'd like to seek out via TIDAL (or whatever music streaming service you happen to use) a seamless experience. Thanks to the Nyquist being a single box solution, a plethora of extra cables aren't required. Balanced XLR and single-ended RCA outputs are also available and have no issues driving 30 feet of interconnects so that you can place the Nyquist on a rack with the rest of your gear, or in a remote location with ease.

A wide range of inputs and outputs is one thing, but there's more. The Nyquist is a modular DAC so that it can be easily upgraded as technologies change, and in essence, future proof. This is an excellent thing when you are spending \$18,000 on a DAC. For my money, there are too many expensive DACs built around a fixed architecture. The Nyquist's modular design is field-upgradable, making it a much safer bet as a long term digital investment.

Finally, the Nyquist has a level control to help match its gain to your other sources, and it acts as a full volume control for the built-in headphone amplifier. More on that later.

The MQA issue

Some will (and have) argue that the Nyquist lacks the final few molecules of resolution that the top dogs from dCS, Gryphon, and MSB offer. That may be true, and again this is a complete matter of personal taste. None of these other DACs are rubbish in any sense, yet the Nyquist has a way of pulling you in just a little bit further, allowing your fussy audiophile gland to shut off that much quicker. It's almost hard to describe this complete lack of fatigue that the Nyquist offers.

There is a fairly high amount of vitriol in the discussions surrounding MQA these days, so I tip my hat to Mr. Brinkmann for including MQA capability on the Nyquist. Grooving on David Byrne's latest, (In MQA) *American Utopia* sounds inviting, though I have no non – MQA file to compare it to. Unlike a few DACs I've tried that make audible clicks, or pause when switching between resolutions, the Nyquist fluidly skates between formats effortlessly, with no audible glitches. Personally, I fear that the MQA format is misunderstood, (and that's all the further I'll go down this rabbit hole) so as a big TIDAL/Roon user, I'm glad I can stream MQA on the Nyquist. All of the MQA files played sounded fantastic.

Awesome 16/44.1 performance

Thanks to what amounts to a separate DSD decoding section, DSD files are

not converted to PCM in the Nyquist. DSD and high-resolution PCM files are handled separately and with equally high fidelity, as you would expect with an \$18,000 DAC. But again, cool as that is, the Nyquist does such an incredible job with standard CD-quality digital files, this is what will keep you in the listening chair for days on end.

CD quality files played through the Nyquist offer the same analog-like ease and presence that high-resolution files do. So much so, that it was tough to tell at times what I was listening to. I can't think of higher praise for a DAC. Taking this approach a step further, streaming performance of low-quality 320kb/sec files sound better than they have a right to. The lack of air, dynamics, and tonal richness inherent in these files is well managed in the Nyquist.



Finishing touches

The Nyquist would stand on its own, even if it were just a premium DAC for \$18k, but it's streaming capabilities make it an incredible value proposition. Mr. Brinkmann takes this further, including a massive granite base to place under the Nyquist as well as a high-quality power cord – the

kind you'd probably pay a third-party vendor at least a thousand dollars for. Brinkmann suggests plugging the Nyquist directly into the AC line, eschewing power conditioning. He's never steered me wrong in the past, so that's how we played it for this review; directly into the AC line with zero regrets.

Personal audio fans will appreciate that the Nyquist includes a top-notch headphone amplifier as part of the package. We've been reviewing a number of top headphone amplifiers; and feel the one built into the Nyquist delivers such a high level of performance you will never need an outboard headphone amplifier.

Finally, this all comes wrapped in a single box solution (other than the outboard power supply) which doesn't require a loom of cables to go about its business. If you have room for a two-four box design that a few other manufacturers offer, no worries, however, if you want high performance only requiring a single rack space, the efficiency of the Nyquist cannot be ignored. Oh yeah, it has a transparent glass top too, so those of you that appreciate the sheer beauty of the internal design can bask in it, daily.

Keep in mind for your reference; my own bias is for overall system balance to be ever so slightly on the warm/natural/neutral side of straight-up neutral. I like as much detail as I can get without the overall presentation getting harsh, yet I crave as much warmth as possible before things become slow, or sloppy. Tracking through the original *Chicago Transit Authority*, the enormous sonic landscape painted is tremendous, with a smoothness to the layers of drums and percussion incredible.

So it goes with Brinkmann's Nyquist; named after the famous digital engineer Harry Nyquist. This elegantly built DAC has a sound, unlike any other DAC I've heard – it's more analog. Using a pair of new old stock Telefunken PCF803 tubes for the output stage, which Brinkmann claims "were built to last ten years in color TV applications," should last even longer in the Nyquist. A quick search on eBay reveals these tubes to be very inexpensive, so I'd suggest buying a matched set from your Brinkmann dealer so that you are prepared. Long life be damned, we both know you're

going to lose a tube on Friday night, just when you planned on a weekend's worth of listening. Be a good Eagle Scout, buy a spare set and rest prepared.

If after all these years, digital has still left you slightly cold, I assure you the Brinkmann Nyquist will not. It offers top digital performance for about what you'd pay for one of Mr. Brinkmann's Bardo turntables with a top phono cartridge. But you never know, a few days listening to the Nyquist and you might not even want to be bothered spinning those black discs! It's that engaging.



The Brinkmann Audio Nyquist DAC

MSRP:\$18,000

www.brinkmann-usa.com

Peripherals

Preamplifier Pass Labs XS Pre

Power Amplifier Pass Labs XA200.8 monoblocks

Speakers Focal Sopra no.3 w/(2)REL 212SE Subwoofers

Cable

Cardas Clear and Tellurium Q Black Diamond

Vibration

Grand Prix Audio Monaco Racks