



## MOON 100D CONVERTER

Standalone digital-to-analog converters are making a comeback, and for good reason. The CD transport is only one of two or more digital music sources, and even for many audiophiles a CD is now something they put into a computer disc drive. The standalone player is an endangered species.

As a result of these technological shifts, digital-to-analog converters have been getting better and better. Our own reference DAC, the Moon 300D, has a price tag of \$1699, but it can outperform DACs costing \$5000 or more designed not all that long ago.

But how low can you go? How low *should* you go?

We've heard lots of low-cost DACs, and they've largely left us wanting more, usually a *lot* more. So how well can Simaudio do for \$600, the price of the new 100D? The spec sheet looks promising, because Simaudio has used the same chipsets as in the more expensive unit. The analog circuits have been simplified — there are, for instance, no balanced outputs. The power supply has been simplified even more. It is now an 18 volt DC wall wart.

It's important to note what is unchanged, however. The 100D still has a full range of inputs: USB, optical and coaxial. It can still handle very high definition signals, up to 24 bits with sampling rates of as much as 192 kHz,

and such “in-between” rates as 88.2 and 176.4 kHz. The USB input has even been improved. It is now asynchronous, for reduced jitter. Even so, Simaudio recommends selecting one of the other inputs if you have the option, and we do too.

In this review, we put the 100D against the 300D that is our reference. Our source was a distant Mac Pro computer, with the signal funnelled through an Airport Extreme over the 5 GHz Wi-Fi band to an Airport Express. We used our own optical cable to connect the Airport Express to our own Moon 300D converter (which is part of our reference system), and the 100D which is the subject of this review.

We began with Normal Dello Joio's *Fantasies on a Theme by Haydn* (Klavier K11138), which opens with a percussive passage of immense energy. At least it

### SUMMING IT UP...

**Brand/model:** Moon 100D

**Price:** C\$600

**Size (WDH):** 12.8 x 16 x 7 cm

**Inputs:** USB, TOSLINK, coaxial

**Most liked:** Outstanding performance

**Least liked:** Limited bandwidth on USB connection

**Verdict:** The last barrier to the computer as audio source tumbles

was that way with our own DAC. With the 100D...

In fact the impact was every bit as impressive, with plenty of well-controlled bass energy. This exceptional recording has busy brass and woodwind sections too, and we were pleased with what we heard. The differences? They were there, to be sure. Steve found the music a little more distant, with less definition. The orchestra seemed a little smaller. Still, the differences didn't leap out at us, and we agreed that the 100D was off to a great start.

The 100D also did well on a potentially difficult recording of soprano and piano. We played Pauline Viardot-Garcia's *Hai Luli* (Analekta AN 2 9903), with Isabel Barakdarian singing the song by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century composer. Once again there were differences, but we had to listen for them. “I'm still waiting for a difference worth mentioning,” said Albert.

Was the 100D *too* good?

Oh, we did note differences, the sort of thing you become aware of with prolonged listening. Though Barakdarian's voice was as beautiful as ever, some of the lyrics were a little more difficult to grasp. There was somewhat less body and low-end definition, and Serouj Kradjian's piano had a somewhat hollow sound, at least by comparison. Pacing was very good, with no problems showing up on the faster passage part way through the song. So far, the 100D was doing well.

We then selected another female voice, in a vastly different style, that of Barbra Streisand. We listened to her version of Jacques Brel's *If You Go Away*, from the jazz disc of the two-CD set titled *Love is the Answer*. Here the differences between the two converters were more evident, but just as important was what was *not* different.

Streisand's voice, in this second half of her seventh decade, is smoother and more expressive than ever. She has always known how to communicate the emotion of a song, and her instincts have not let her down. The song sounds gorgeous on our Linn Unidisk 1.1 player with the original CD, it is about as good with our 300D converter, and the 100D by no means shamed itself. Streisand knows how to use pacing and pauses

to establish the message of a song, and the playback system must not muck it up. The 100D didn't.

The color of the music was changed somewhat, however, with the accompanying guitar sounding more hollow and therefore less natural. "Her voice has less presence," said Steve. "With the 300D I could see her lips pronounce the words."

We returned to a complex orchestral recording, the *Scherzo* from Bruckner's *Symphony No. 9* (Reference Recordings RR-81CD). This was, of course, the original HDCD version, not the high-definition version included on the *Tutti* SACD. We should add that neither Moon converter includes the HDCD decoding chip.

This amazing recording is a handful, and not surprisingly the 100D did less well than its senior brandmate. It was impossible not to notice the reduction in body and weight. This is a large orchestra, but now it wasn't as large anymore. The percussive impact, however, remained very good, as it had in



the Dello Joio recording. There was still plenty of detail in the quieter woodwind passages, and the timbres of the individual instruments were well rendered.

It was evident that the 100D came out second best in the comparison, but we wondered how many supposedly high end CD players could do that well.

We ended the session with a live recording, *Tears in Heaven* from Eric Clapton's *Unplugged* album. Like Streisand, Clapton uses strategic pauses for effect, and a surprising number of CD players (not to mention speakers and electronics) muck that up. Not this one.

Oh, there was a difference, but it

seemed secondary: the bass accompaniment behind Clapton's acoustic guitar was less defined, and — as we had noted in some of the other recordings — it had less weight. In the main, however, we enjoyed what had *not* changed. There was a very good sense of the hall, and above all the song was touching. Albert left his page blank.

You may already know that Simaudio is pushing sales of the 100D by a unique exchange offer: trade up to the 300D within a year and get all of your money back (or 75% in the second year).

We had added the 100D to our Audiophile Store after a first listening session had confirmed that it was at least good enough that we could recommend it. It took a lot more run-in time and this extended session to reveal the truth: the 100D is almost *too* good.

We're keeping our 300D, though. The differences between the two DACs are real enough, even if this remarkable product gets all the fundamentals right.



## CROSSTALK

Simaudio has brought a DAC to market that is a strong, clear, decisive performer, and it deserves to live in an audiophile's dreams. It makes very high quality sound, and sells for an extremely low price.

Besides some subtle lightness in bass and body, there was hardly any difference between the 100D and its much more expensive brother, the 300D. They sounded as though they were almost identical twins, so similar was their style of presentation. And to *really* sweeten the musical pot, Simaudio offers a very generous upgrade deal. This DAC is a bona fide bargain. Go for it.

Seriously.

—Steve Bourke

The reason I was so surprised by the sound of this new DAC is that I thought the 300D was already something of a bargain. Not very long ago you would have spent

many thousands of dollars to get the 300D's performance...and probably have come up short anyway. Such is the pace of technological progress.

So, what to think of the 100D, which, at a fraction of the price, sounds so much like it?

Not that the two converters sound by any means, but the key to making a good economy audio product is balance. An economy system needs enough of the good, and no excessive amount of the bad. The 100D has that balance. You can hear what's right, but you'll have trouble pinning down what's not so good.

What more could you ask?

—Gerard Rejskind

Amazing how often new components are far better than expected after their top-of-the-line siblings have established themselves.

I don't know why you should look for a more expensive DAC if you are planning a substantial upgrade in your system. Sure, it doesn't have a hefty power supply but don't be fooled by its light weight; this unit surprised me with its authority and power. Audiences in the 50's and 60's were similarly stunned when tiny, black-clad Edith Piaf stood alone on a huge stage and started singing.

You might need to raise the volume a bit to appreciate that power — while the reference conveys it effortlessly at any level — but you'll discover music you didn't really know you had, sounding in ways you didn't know it could.

And later, after a year or two of that nice warm up, when you'll be regarded by all as the super fussy audiophile type, you'll be ready to trade it in for the best. But you might not want to.

—Albert Simon