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POWER OF THREE...

MIZIK RE-WRITES THE DIGITAL RULEBOOK

- AUDIOQUEST
DRAGONFLY 1.2 DAC

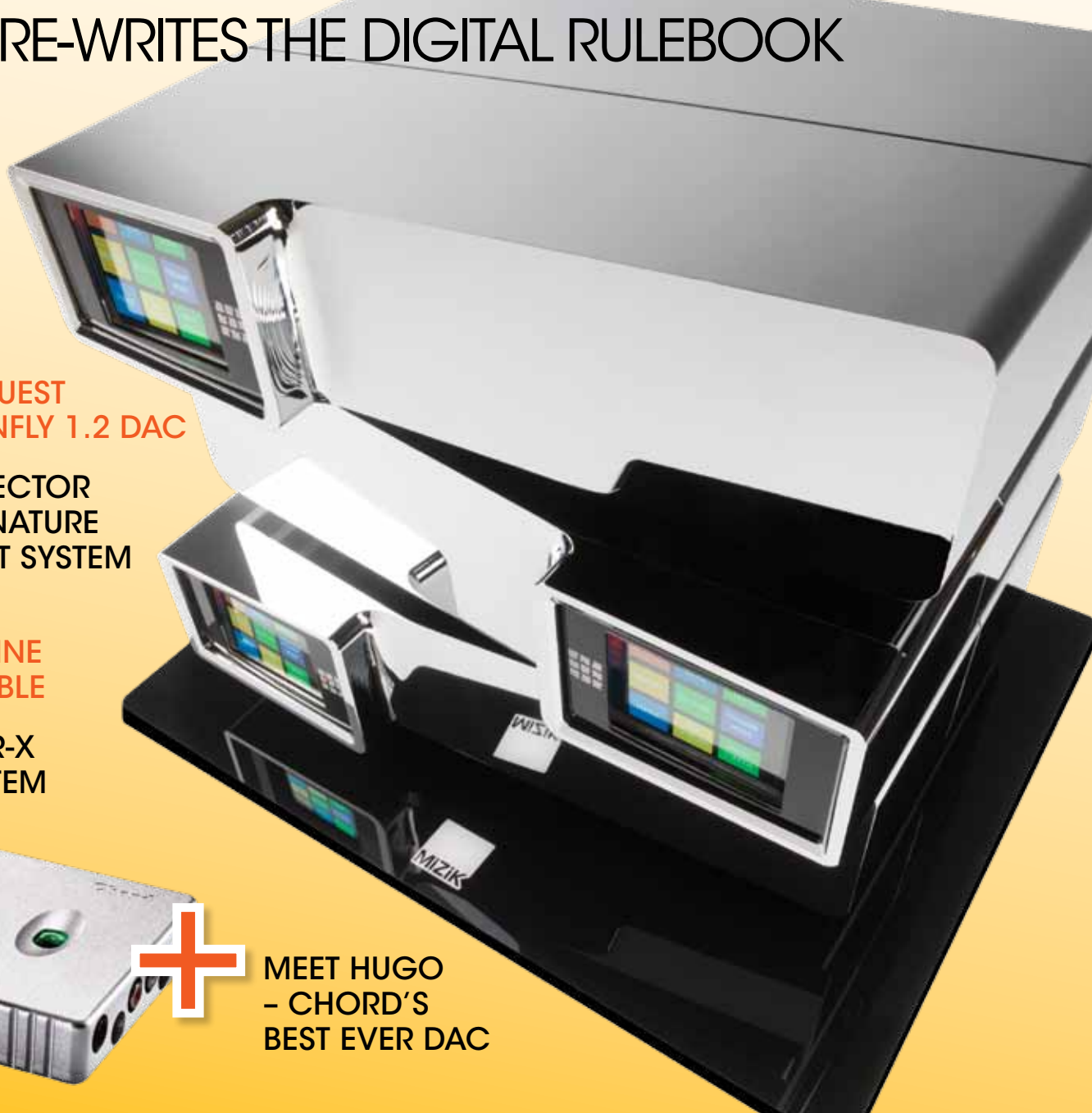
- AUDIOVECTOR
SI 3 SIGNATURE
DISCREET SYSTEM

- CRYSTAL
DREAMLINE
PLUS CABLE

- ELAC AIR-X
403 SYSTEM



MEET HUGO
- CHORD'S
BEST EVER DAC



MiZiK dVin phono stage and dPlay D/A preamp

by Alan Sircom.

Images by Simon Marsh

On the surface, all may be well in the land of audio. OK, prices of top-end equipment are now reaching the stratosphere, but the performance of good high-end equipment of 20 years ago can be achieved by less lofty products now. But scratch the surface and there's the distinct whiff of stagnation. A lot of products are variations on the same theme; improved versions, yes, but there comes a point where if you keep going over the same designs, 'improvement' becomes 'gilding the lily'. We can't keep rehashing 1985, 1964 or even 1958 over and over again, but there isn't much in the way of blue-sky thinking going on.

Which is where Javier Guadalajara comes in. The Madrid-based electronics engineer is young enough to have been caught up in the information revolution, but old enough to start his life on a firm audiophile footing. His first big audio project was Wadax. This may have flown under the radar for those without the titanic budget required, but the company's innovative combined phono/ADC/DAC/streamer Pre 1 preamplifier is commonly considered to be one of the best sounding, most advanced audio products ever built. It's expensive in part because of the number-crunching potential built into the chassis. The Pre 1 could happily spare enough processing cycles to take on the air traffic control over Europe while it's mapping your cartridge. Well, almost.

That processing is never going to be cheap. But if you cut back on the processing power you can deliver most of that Wadax performance, but without the upper-atmosphere price. In a nutshell, this is the MiZiK concept. MiZiK is not simply a test for a writer's shift key; it's potentially the start of a paradigm shift in the way audio handles its content.

Central to MiZiK is the idea of the MusiC Chip technology. It works by not assuming the analogue conversion, digital conversion, and current-to-voltage stages to be a constant, by examining and monitoring the signal error that is introduced by these circuit blocks, and then constructing a series of complex algorithms and non-linear modelling techniques to predict and compensate for their behaviour.

If you feed that last sentence into a digital audio engineer, it ends up being processed by their ESC (English to Swearing Converter) and the result is a stream of Tourettian invective

as they realise just how right that idea is, and (in the majority of cases) how far they are from even beginning to investigate that concept. They will then begin to fill in what this would do from first principles, and how the MusiC Chip is going to correct amplitude errors, problems in the time domain, and phase anomalies in the outputted signal. A few might then start mumbling about how they've spent all this time futzing about at the wrong end of the digital stick for no good reason, before sloping off to a nearby bar to get completely jittered.

In fact, MiZiK reaches out beyond the digital domain, because its potential to benefit the sound of audio components in general extends to analogue devices like turntables too. MiZiK puts any analogue source (line or phono) into a 24bit, 96kHz analogue to digital converter. This might send shivers of panic along the cartridge tags of any die-hard analoguista, but it's for the benefit of the LP sound quality. Equalisation is performed in the analogue domain (including the four-way gain switching for MM and MC, and the choice of RIAA, Decca or Columbia curves), but the A/D conversion happens soon after.

The MiZiK system itself divides into three sections; the dVin phono stage, the dPlay D/A preamplifier, and the dStream combination server/media renderer and 'system enhancer'. At the time of writing, the dVin and dPlay were signed off products, but there were some finishing touches required on the media renderer side of the dStream. However, the 'system enhancer' side of the dStream was completed and the improvement it brought made it worthy of inclusion. So, make it a two-and-a-half way test.

There's a sense that all roads lead to Rome here. Except it's Madrid. If you are using a turntable, the chances are you'll start with a dVin. Impressed by what it offers, you'll upgrade to the dStream. This is the beating heart of the concept, and the keeper of the MusiC Chip technology in the system. The benefits of the two products are so clear, you'll almost inevitably add a dPlay. On the other hand, if you have no intention of ever spinning a black vinyl disc, you might start with the dPlay, because of its preamp functions and its very good asynchronous USB input. Or you might start with the dStream, because of its Ethernet streaming, its ability to process DSD files, and capacity for storing direct to an optional 2.5" drive bay. Either way, you'll likely add the other product in the chain. ▶



MIZIK



So when it came to listening, I performed the test in precisely the same steps as described above, starting with the dVin, adding the dStream (purely for its MusiC Chip functionality) and then going for the complete trio. The sources throughout were an SME 10 turntable/arm combination with the excellent Benz-Micro Gullwing SLR moving coil cartridge, and by way of complete contrast, an Analogue Works Turntable One with a Wand unipivot arm and Goldring Legacy moving coil cartridge that will be the subject of a test in the next issue of *Hi-Fi+*. I chose these because although they both sound good, they both sound very different to one another and I wanted to see how that turned out in the mix.

The dVin evened the score between the two decks. Not by smoothing out the sound or by adding unneeded layers to make it sound 'samey'. It just made the differences unimportant. Meanwhile, it highlighted the difference between vinyl pressings. You were more aware than usual of those back-of-the-cabinet 'oil crisis' cuts stamped out on anorexic vinyl and how much more 180g pressings bring to the table. And it showed up 'house sound', to the point where you began to notice the different microphone placement techniques used by different recording teams. But, this wasn't some dour analysis of meta-content; it did all this while conveying the intent and 'shape' of the music on the platter.

It did this universally, but two records in particular highlighted just what the dVin was doing right. I've played *Music for Drumlanrig* [CRD] for years, in part because it was one of those legacy albums from my Flat Earth days. It's an album of baroque 'hits' by the Scottish Baroque Orchestra from 1978 and it sounds awful. OK, so it has the bounce and pace so beloved of Linn demonstrators from the mid-1980s, but it's also thin, unnecessarily weedy and reedy, and has almost no soundstage to speak of. It would be skip-fodder were it not for its ability to show hidden depths on a handful of really top class wax-spinners. It came to life through Mizik dVin, which gives the disc the kind of spatial properties that make you realise why the recording is so 'cold'; it sounds bloody cold in that church in East Lothian.

▶ Because this is a complete break with tradition, so the modes of connection are not like previous devices you might have used. Staying with the vinyl pathway for now, you link the devices via MiZiK Link, which is designed to run along HDMI connections. This provides both a bi-directional data channel, but also sends system controls to all three boxes. Alongside the finishing touches to the dStream, the last link in the chain at this time is the iPad app. This is still in beta at the time of writing.

I'm not entirely sold on the looks, but there's no denying they are bold. The chrome cases feature asymmetrical shapes and sticky-out, brightly coloured touch screens, which give the MiZiK concept a touch of the Frank Gehry or Richard Rogers about the design. On the other hand, they also look like scaled down ticket barriers when stacked vertically, and look like a prop from 1970s Jerry Anderson sci-fi show *Space: 1999* when laid on their side.

▶ The second showed just what dStream, and subsequently dPlay bring to the mix. We've all done our DJ moments, and most of those 12" singles from that time are unplayable and unlistenable, but one from the time survived: 'Aqua Boogie (A Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadooloop)', by Parliament. It's a one-sided 45rpm single (presumably they ran out of letters to make a B-Side), pulled and extended from the funk band's *Motor Booty Affair* album [A&M], and one of the last P-Funk tracks ever written by the 'dream team' of George Clinton, Bootsy Collins and Bernie Worrell. It is badly worn with some track damage, so the interplay between Clinton's proto-rap and Collins' bass line was severed. But with dVin, dStream, and dPlay in the mix, Clinton was still teaching people how to dance underwater and not get wet, while Bootsy was laying down some quality phatness. It was clear there are timing and phase errors in the signal path that the MiZiK equipment strives to resolve, and succeeds.

Moving to digital, a similar level of authority over the music holds sway. The USB input in the dPlay is astonishingly good, and as a result lossless files take on a sense of harmonic structure and dimensionality normally attributed to LP or really well-massaged SACD. I'm resisting the temptation to discuss the warmth of the overall sound, but there was something extremely pleasing and intrinsically 'right' about the sound of MiZiK (wherever the tracks came from) that gives the music natural vibrancy and energy, not commonly found elsewhere.

MiZiK is a game-changing digital concept.

It is a true paradigm shift in audio (Wadax too, but that's a paradigm shift for the fabulously well-heeled). But I'm worried this might not get through, because it will get pigeonholed as a glorified phono stage. This is fundamentally wrong: if you only use the dPlay and dStream, you are buying into a digital audio improvement plan that makes a hell of a lot of sense. And the inverse is true, too; there may be digiphobes who refuse point blank to explore the MiZiK concept, because it puts analogue music into the digital domain. But, MiZiK demands that for once you take off the blindfold and listen.

Are you ready? +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

dVin - Phono-stage & A to D Converter

Analogue Inputs: 2x RCA (LP), 2x RCA (line)
Phono Gain: MM: 34dB / 44dB, MC: 66dB / 72dB
Phono Loading: MM: 47K / 100pF, MC: 100 ohms / 100pF
Phono EQ Curves: RIAA, Decca, Columbia
Digital Outputs: USB type B: to connect to a computer (PC or MAC). Asynchronous. Rips at 96KHz / 24bits
Analogue Output: 1 pair of RCA for line level

dPlay - DA Preamp

Digital Inputs: 1 SPDIF (RCA): up to 192KHz / 24 bits
 1 USB Asynchronous: supported formats – PCM up to 192KHz / 24 bits, DSD, DSD2X. MacOS and Windows supported.
Analogue Outputs: 1 pair of RCA. 1 pair of XLR Balanced.
Dimensions (WxDxH): 29 x 22.3 x 8.1cm
Weight of one MiZiK Module: 5.5kg
Price per module: €1995 including sales tax

Manufacturer: Wadax Labs

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