

Radio Free Chip - Tweaks are Us

01-09-2017 | By Chip Stern | Issue 89

...Likewise, for some years I've been deriving considerable enjoyment from another piece of older technology I've grown accustomed to, in the form of my stalwart Alpha Design Labs/Furutech GT40 USB 2.0 DAC, a 24 Bit/96 KHz Audio Interface with which, via two sets of incoming and outgoing 7-meter interconnects, I can connect the music percolating on my hard drives to my Rogue Hera II preamplifier and thenceforth via Pony Express to my reference system in the adjacent room, all the while deploying Audacity's free online program to digitize LPs and cassettes on my hard drive; simple and effective—me happy.

So what do you do with a splendid Swiss Army Knife like the GT40, offering as it also does an excellent sounding, no-nonsense hook-up to sundry headphones?

These past few years, ADL/Furutech engineers busied themselves developing a *newer*, completely original digital platform, quite distinct from the GT40, in the form of their all-singing/all-dancing STRATOS, which offers access to all manner of high resolution DSD and PCM files, and a choice of sophisticated headphone loading options amongst a host of new functions that fans of the GT40 wish they'd had on the older unit. I must confess to being intrigued. Be strong, Chip, be strong.

All the while, unwilling to toss out the baby with the bathwater, and conscious of sustaining a high level of performance at a far more affordable price point, ADL/Furutech engineers saw fit to go back to the well and significantly enhance a proven, still-relevant USB DAC device with its re-introduction as the ADL GT40a.



And they did themselves proud for sure...smoother and sweeter, more extended and resolved, the GT40a represents a palpable upgrade over its initial iteration, such as how they enhanced their MC/MM Phono stage

from MC/47k ohms to MC/100 ohms—all the better accommodate a wider range of modern, low impedance, moving coil cartridges. I happily employ a dedicated Rogue Triton MM/MC Phono Preamplifier in my reference system, so I cannot comment on the GT40a's performance in this regard.

However, as to its level of performance as a DAC and dedicated headphone amplifier? Well, now...

By upgrading the USB, DAC and ADC ICs, ADL was able to step up the GT40a's sample rate to full 24-bit/192 kHz resolution and to support Asynchronous mode and ASIO as well. Likewise, a pair of better performing new OP AMPS have also contributed to the GT40a's enhanced sonic veracity; as a dedicated DAC—channeling streaming music to my main system—the GT40a has proven more detailed and dynamic, spacious and silvery.

Better still, in supplanting their older OP AMP for a dedicated MAX9722 Headphone AMP, the GT40a provides significantly greater levels of detail, and far better signal-to-noise performance when driving high-resolution headphones. The GT40a's headphone circuitry not only offers pinpoint definition and more believable acoustic cues, but I've really been impressed by how much quieter it is from top to bottom; how much smoother and more accurate the response of the volume potentiometer has proven to be...so much so, that I find myself more often motivated to strap on the cans, and for longer periods of listening—with far less fatigue.

To sum up, the GT40a has proven adept at delivering a greater sense of intimacy and immediacy—it is direct and to the point, an obliging and revealing acoustic portal. With each new visit I find myself less compelled to simply turn on the main reference system, as I apprehend more supple levels of acoustic detail and resolution in my headphones than I had previously perceived...but more anon of that breakthrough, with paeans to our reigning headphone champion and other adventures, in my next column. Happy New Year, pilgrims.

Read Chip Stern's full column here: http://positive-feedback.com/audio-discourse/radio-free-chip/