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CHORD DOES IT AGAIN WITH THE EXCELLENT HUGO2!

Brinkmann Audio Nyquist DAC

by Alan Sircom

Many reviews are harder to write than this one. The Brinkmann Nyquist DAC is the most inviting-sounding DAC I have heard, or at least the most inviting-sounding converter this side of the Nagra HD DAC. You plug the Nyquist in, listen to some music, and time dissolves. Before you even register what happened, a whole evening of listening just swept by, and you are eager to repeat the experience over and over again. The only thing wrong with it is it has to go back to the distributor. Damn it! Now for the more meaty bits.

Brinkmann is not known for producing the cutting edge of digital audio performance. In fact, it's not really known as a maker of digital audio at all, although the company did produce a high-end DAC called the Zenith 30 years ago. Since then, Brinkmann has been the go-to brand for top-notch turntables, tonearms, cartridges, preamplifiers, power amplifiers, integrated amplifiers, phono stages, and power supplies. All of which are superbly built, many of which sound wonderful, and a number of which feature valves. None of which smacks of a company in line to make the one of the best, most high-tech MQA-ready digital converters around.

From an industrial design perspective, the Nyquist doesn't just share some common aspects with the rest of the range, the product looks functionally identical to the Marconi preamp and the Edison phono stage from the brand. They all have a central blue two-deck LED screen flanked by a pair of dials and four push-buttons (three and a headphone socket in the Nyquist), with a quartet of valves built into the side heatsinks, a smoked glass top plate showing the minimalist red PCB, and an identically sized external power supply. All three come supplied with a large granite base. Headphone socket and rear panel aside, you actually have to look at the circuit to see which model you are using. That gives the Brinkmann equipment a commonality of design to which few other brands could ever aspire, and it allows the company to focus on the audio circuit instead of fancy casing. Of course, the audio world is full of 'glass half empty' types who will undoubtedly see this as lazy product design. These people are known professionally as 'idiots'.

Brinkmann set out its store for the Nyquist in its white paper, describing three main goals the product had to achieve: quality, longevity, and ease of use (quality in this case means ►





▶ both sound and build quality). It effectively nails build quality from first principles, by following the design brief set in the Brinkmann catalogue. This is a product that is built solid, even set in amongst an audio industry that tends to over-engineer its products. Brinkmann has been making timeless designs for decades, many of which are not only still in service, but still in the catalogue, so there's no way the Nyquist will be on the market for just a few short years.

Of course, that kind of longevity doesn't quite work with high-end digital audio because technology changes over the years. A DAC designed today might be quaintly out of date tomorrow, and incompatible with the digital world the day after that. Brinkmann took care of that, too, by making the DAC section of the converter modular and replaceable. So when the Next Big Thing happens in digital audio, or simply that the two pairs of ESS Sabre ES9018S that form the PCM converter or components in the discrete DSD converter are discontinued or become unavailable, the Nyquist will simply adopt a different module, and if that module offers more for the end user, it will also be made available as a retrofit. Alongside this, the usual slew of firmware and software updates can be applied through the course of the Nyquist's life.

As it stands, the Nyquist is incredibly flexible, more so than many converters at this time. It can support DXD and DSD up to DSD 256 native (DSD 64 and DSD 128 through DoP), but more importantly it supports PCM files and MQA files to 384kHz sampling rates. It can stream PCM to 192kHz and MQA to 384kHz. Both DSD and PCM have their own digital pathway, with some extra processing in place for MQA.

Although we've categorised the Nyquist as a DAC, Brinkmann's classification as an 'Analogue D/A converter' fits the device better. It's an analogue audio player with a DAC module. The amplifier section uses valves in the output stage, but the valves themselves are not the kind you would expect. The Nyquist uses two pairs of new old stock Telefunken PCF803 valves, which were developed in the 1960s for colour TV. You won't be tube rolling here, and this isn't a set of ECC82s. The valves are designed for longevity in a more hostile environment than a DAC, however, so you are unlikely to need replacements any year soon, but when you do, buy them from Brinkmann itself. The circuit outputs to a set of Lundahl transformers, designed to help filter high frequencies. There is also a headphone socket that follows the whole output stage (except the transformers), switching the gain control to 10dB maximum and running through a chip for the headphone socket volume.

That ticks the boxes for longevity and build quality, what about ease of use? The DAC is designed to work as a converter in its own right, with AES/EBU, S/PDIF coaxial, TOSlink, and USB inputs. These are accessed as usual from the front panel or the remote. Then there's the Ethernet connection, which Brinkmann recommends using with the popular and easy to use third-party MConnect app, and navigating a UPnP network with MControl. This also unlocks vTuner internet radio and Deezer. Or you can use the Nyquist as a Roon endpoint and unlock TIDAL, at which point you hand over a lot of control to Roon and the Nyquist's integration makes this easy to navigate. Ease of use... tick! ▶

“A sense of music breathing, ebbing, and flowing in the way it does in a concert hall.”

► Last comes that other aspect of quality – sound quality. And it’s here the Nyquist stands or falls. It stands. The performance of this device is so effortless, so natural, and so bloody enjoyable sounding, you are drawn ever deeper into your music, almost regardless of source or genre. This is especially true of DSD, a format I tend to pay lip service to because I have relatively few recordings that I truly enjoy. That said, I have some early Led Zeppelin DSD cuts of extraordinarily ‘iffy’ provenance, and through the Nyquist they took on a richness and full-bodied, full-throated sound that would be hard to hear anywhere else (I also have a set of Japanese CD pressings that get close). You get the feeling of John Bonham’s playing as barely-contained thunder unleashed on the unsuspecting tape machine, which is immensely satisfying. Unless you are the machine.

I was so captivated by its PCM and DSD sound that I almost forgot the Nyquist was an MQA-supporting device in its own right. The Unamas Fugue Quintet playing JS Bach, Contrapunctus 01 from The Art of Fugue (BWV-1080), recorded by 2L, had a sense of music breathing, ebbing, and flowing in the way it does in a concert hall, rather than in the recording studio. This made a powerful case for MQA, as powerful as any I’ve heard.

Perhaps the big and consistent sonic positive about the Brinkmann Nyquist is the complete absence of a mechanical or artificial sound. Some digital devices strive to recreate the digital signal in its absolute finery, others try to mask the sound of digital by imposing their own signature on the performance. The Nyquist is one of the few that does both at the same time (notable others include the Kalista in this issue, and the Nagra HD DAC, both of which make the Nyquist seem cheap).

There’s another interesting comparison to make from below, in the guise of the Chord DAVE. This one is tougher because the two products go in very different directions sonically. The Chord is the more accurate reproducer of digital sounds. You get the feeling that you are listening to a direct feed from the mixing desk when listening through the DAVE. The Nyquist doesn’t do that, instead preferring to summon up the musicians and conductors in front of you, in a kind of holographic simulation of the live event. The comparison is one of head vs. heart if you like, with the Nyquist taking the ‘heart’ route all the way. That is not to say it’s lacking in

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: USB 2.0, SPDIF, AES-EBU, TOSLINK, RJ45 ETHERNET for Streaming op on

Formats: MQA and PCM up to 384 kHz (DXD), DSD 64 and 128 via DoP (DSD over PCM), DSD 256 natively

Digital module upgradable

THD/IM distortion: <0.01%

S/N ratio: >100 dBA

Gain adjustment: –20 to +10 dB

Output voltage: maximum ± 12 V symmetrical

Output impedance: +/-10 ohms symmetrical

Headphone output: 30-600 ohms

Dimensions (WxHxD): 420 × 95 × 310 mm (with granite base); power supply 120 × 80 × 160 mm

Weight: 12 kg; granite base 12 kg; power supply 3.2 kg

Price: £12,995

Manufacturer: Brinkmann Audio Engineering

URL: brinkmann-audio.com

UK Distribution: Symmetry

URL: symmetrysystems.co.uk

Tel.: +44(0)1727 865488

cerebral qualities, that it’s an euphonic digital warmer-upper, or that it is somehow engineering music to sound ‘nice’, but the fact remains I found listening to the Nyquist a hugely enjoyable event each and every time I listened to it. Accurate? Accurate to what? The Nyquist is musically and temporally correct and it shows. Others might be more pitch perfect across the frequency domain, but if the Nyquist rings your bell, you probably won’t care one jot.

The only slight blot on the copybook was on the headphone socket, and even here there’s a lot of good to say. Headphones sound great on the Nyquist, but it lacks some dynamic drive. Not simply heavy lifting for difficult headphone loads, but across the board. It has the micro-dynamics, but not all the macro-dynamics, of its line outputs.

Looking at my notepad, words that don’t normally appear spring out when discussing the Brinkmann Nyquist. Words like ‘debonair’, ‘poised’, and ‘elegant’ as if I were describing Fred Astaire. That seems to fit in a way, because the way the Nyquist handles music is with a dancer’s touch rather than an engineer’s. This is particularly true of MQA, but it applies universally to everything the Nyquist processes. Lovely! +