



# The look of love

**David Price** dallies with one of Chord's most affordable converters and discovers it's so much more than just a pretty face

It's all getting rather complicated. Chord Electronics' range of digital-to-analogue converters is growing faster than Tribbles on the Starship Enterprise (*Star Trek* fans will get the allusion). Indeed, the comparison bears scrutiny, because like the aforementioned small objects that seemed to increase in number every time you looked, the company's DACs are quite cute. So much so that Chord itself rather immodestly called its last

standalone entry-level DAC the 2Qute, which itself was the replacement to the Qute EX, and before that the Qute... So, if you've managed to keep up, you'd probably like to know that the 2Qute (HFC 402) was closely related the Hugo DAC, in the company's distinct Chordette casing, sans rechargeable battery and variable output of course. The new Qutest you see here is the same relation to the Hugo 2 (HFC 428), inasmuch as it's a simplified, pared-down version

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Chord Electronics Qutest

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
DAC

**WEIGHT**  
770g

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
160 x 41 x 72mm

**FEATURES**  
• 32-bit/768kHz PCM and DSD512-capable DAC  
• Inputs: 1x optical; 1x USB-B; 2x BNC coaxial  
• Output: RCA phonos

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
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without the portability and a few other non-essential odds and ends. It also loses the Chordette casework, looking a lot more like the Hugo 2. So, your £1,195 buys you Chord's latest and most advanced FPGA chip, four different user-selectable filters, and the same wide range of file compatibility. There are also some interesting new features that you don't get from its portable brother. Before we get into specifics, it's useful to point out that – unlike the vast majority of digital-to-analogue converters on sale – Chord uses its own custom-made digital conversion hardware. The Rob Watts-designed Field Programmable Gate Array at the heart of the Qutest is not simply repurposing other peoples' ideas of DACs and digital filtering – it is exclusive to the brand, not bought off-the-shelf. The Watts Transient Aligned digital filter uses clever mathematics, implemented on a huge Xilinx Artix 7 FPGA to give a far higher tap-length than that seen in stock DAC chips. There are 49,152 taps, compared with 26,000 in its predecessor and approximately 150 in standard DACs, says Watts. This, he

claims, translates to better time domain performance, among other things. The Qutest features a USB Type-B input that runs up to 32-bit/768kHz resolution. Two BNC coaxial digital inputs are fitted offering the same specs, and the Toslink optical input goes up to 24-bit/192kHz. In addition to PCM it supports up to DSD512 (so-called octa-DSD). The dual BNCs flag up the prospect of dual data

communications with a possible future Chord Electronics transport and/or upsampler. Unlike the Hugo 2, these inputs are galvanically isolated, which eliminates the transmission of digital noise via the digital outputs of lesser ancillaries. One pair of RCA phono outputs is fitted, and runs at a fixed level, but variable between 3V, 2V and 1V (changeable by pressing both Filter and Input buttons on startup). This is a clever feature, because you can tune it for the sort of preamp you use – be it passive, solid-state, tube or whatever.

## The Qutest DAC is able to impart every last inflection of the singer's vocals

The John Franks-designed casework is new, and a dramatic improvement over what came before in my view. It brings a beautifully surfaced modern look, and is significantly heavier. Precision machined from solid aircraft-grade aluminium billet, the PCB sits in a smallish cavity inside the case. In addition to the trademark glass window – which is a great feature because it adds a bit of eye-catching drama that everyone in the household will love, as well as providing some practical visual indication of the sampling frequency by means of colour – there are two acrylic buttons that control the frequency-shaping filters, and input selection; again these change colour depending on the option selected. Like Henry Ford's Model T car, it's available in any colour you like as long as it's black; which is a bit of a shame because I feel I would opt for a silver version if one became available. Finally, power comes into the unit via a 5V, 2A micro USB supply.

Chord Electronics' DACs seem able to communicate particularly well at an emotional level, in a way that most others cannot. The Qutest is no exception – it's the cheapest serious digital converter that the company produces, yet you wouldn't be able to tell by listening to it. It's rather like its DAVE bigger brother – doing what all Chords do, albeit on not quite such a grand scale.

## Sound quality

Take ABC's *Date Stamp* for example. This is a sugary piece of classic eighties pop and not to everyone's taste, yet the Qutest captures the song's deep groove and from then on in you're hooked. It's as if it has got some magic means of propulsion, that pushes the song along in a bubbly, effervescent way. Most rivals give you a strong and detailed presentation, but make the musicians sound like they're going through the motions. Bass guitar, for example, is really bouncy, but more than that it is delivered in perfect time relative to the rest of the mix; everything seems snappy and nicely syncopated and the Chord's great sense of timing is hard not to fall in love with. In other respects, it's also highly accomplished. For example, it conjures up a deep and wide recorded acoustic. It's not spectacularly good, but of particular interest is the pinpoint precision with which instruments are located. In certainly makes the ABC track snap into focus, as if the auto-focus on your camera smartphone finally gets a lock on to what you want to photograph. It's truly impressive on classical music, though, where things are done on a larger scale altogether. The way it hones in on different instrumental sections in the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra's rendition of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, for example, is a

## CONNECTIONS



- 1 Micro USB power supply input
- 2 Fixed-level RCA phono outputs
- 3 24-bit/192kHz Toslink optical digital input
- 4 32-bit/768kHz BNC coaxial digital inputs
- 5 32-bit/768kHz Type-B USB input

## Q&A

**Dan George**  
Chord Electronics PR



**DP: Who is the Qutest aimed at?**

**DG:** Any music lover who wants to hear their favourite music exactly as it should sound. It's not Chord's cheapest non-portable hi-fi DAC – that's now the Mojo, which offers our proprietary DAC technology and UK manufacturing for just £399. The pricier Qutest has the Hugo 2 DNA, but without the portability, headphone outputs, crossfeed option and volume control.

**The styling is different to its 2Qute predecessor, why is that?**

Following the popularity of the newer casework designs developed for the TToby stereo power amp, HugoTT DAC/headphone amp/digital preamp and most recently, Hugo 2, our transportable headphone amp/DAC, we also wanted to update the Qutest.

**What are the differences between the Qutest and flagship DAVE DAC?**

An enormous amount! It would probably take more room than we have here to explain the differences between our flagship DAC and our entry-level system DAC in detail. However, a good Chord Electronics retailer will be able to explain and demonstrate the differences. We have a new dealer locator on our website ([chordelectronics.co.uk/locate-dealer](http://chordelectronics.co.uk/locate-dealer)) to help people audition our products.

**Will there be an optional uprated power supply?**

No, it's simply not necessary: like its predecessor, the 2Qute, our digital consultant Rob Watts spent a long time designing the internal power filtering and regulation so that the external power supply could not influence the sound.

**Can we expect a matching disc transport in the future?**

There are no plans for this. We will, however, have all the latest Chord Electronics products, including a few interesting new ones, at the High End Show in Munich in May. Those interested can check for these new products on our social media channels, where they will be announced first.



**Like previous Chord designs, colour is used to provide a variety of info on the DAC's status**

revelation. The Qutest doesn't quite match the vast, panoramic scale of its DAVE bigger brother, but the recorded acoustic is still impressively wide; within this there's a fabulous sense of focus that makes things sound bold and highly defined.

You get this with jazz, too. My well-played Japanese BlueNote CD copy of Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage* is a joy to hear. There is a great sense of being transported back – TARDIS-like – to the time and place of the recording. The soundstage is beautifully etched with the piano sounding so solid it could have been bricked into my listening room wall. What really strikes me here, though, is the sweet, smooth tonality of the Qutest. It sounds more natural than anything else at or near the price; it's smooth, even and is able to communicate the natural tonal patina of acoustic instruments surprisingly well. Some of its price rivals can strip the colour out of warm recordings, almost as if you've brought the saturation setting right down to zero on your photo editing software. Whether it is strings or brass, the performance just sounds so much more natural and organic here.

Dynamically, the baby Chord is great. The real test of a DAC's mettle, however, is slow, soft soul, which can sound like wallpaper music through the wrong system. Rose Royce's beautiful *Wishing On A Star* sounds like anything but, transfixing me from the start. The way the Qutest carries the expressive emotion of the vocals is a delight. Not only is the timbre of the singer's voice a pleasure to hear, but the DAC is able to impart every

last inflection. With out-and-out dynamic crescendos, there's just a hint of compression, but you'll have to spend a lot more money than this to find a DAC that does any better here. Allied to the Chord's lovely, beguiling rhythms, it makes for a superb listen – giving a spookily natural quality to the sound that is very impressive at the price.

## Conclusion

Regardless of file format, sampling rate or input, I find that this is a great sounding digital converter – indeed spectacular at the price. You can run the gamut of your digital music collection – from classical to country, folk to electronic – and hear things presented in a detailed, intricate and incisive way, yet one that absolutely nails the basic emotion of the track. Even disregarding its superlative styling and build quality, the stellar sound quality alone warrants enthusiastic recommendation. Meet the new class of the field ●

**HOW IT COMPARES**

Once again, we see Audiolab's £799 M-DAC+ (HFC 410) as the class of the field at or near the price of the Qutest. It sounds way better than it has a right to for the money, and is more versatile than practically anything else nearby. The Chord's feature count pales by comparison; it has no preamp functionality or headphone connectivity and nice as those coloured lights are, the Audiolab's display is far more informative. Sonically the M-DAC+ puts up a brave fight, but is outclassed in terms of overall listenability and sounds curiously vague and diffuse and somewhat tonally coarse compared with the brilliant Qutest.

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★  
**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★  
**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★  
**FEATURES** ★★★★★

**OVERALL** ★★★★★

**LIKE:** Beautifully etched, liquid sound; styling; build  
**DISLIKE:** Colour-based user interface can be hard to learn  
**WE SAY:** Superlative sound per pound; the one to beat