



# The Benchmark DAC1 PRE

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By Jeff Dorgay



There are a lot of Benchmark DAC1's out there living very happy lives. When the original Benchmark DAC1 hit the scene a few years ago, it was a compact miracle that offered great digital performance with a great headphone amplifier built in. Computer based audio playback started to get more commonplace, making a USB input mandatory for a state of the art DAC and Benchmark responded with the DAC1 USB. The sound was very similar to the original and Benchmark's USB implementation was splendid for a \$1275 DAC.

Many audiophiles kept a DAC1 around even after they moved on to more expensive gear, because the built in level control on the front panel made the DAC1 invaluable as a troubleshooting tool or backup lineage if your main preamp went down. While waiting for service on your five-figure lineage, you still could listen to

music from digital sources with the Benchmark.

Whenever I would use the DAC1 in this capacity I always thought, "Why don't they just add an analog input to this little jewel, so that you could plug a phono preamp into it?"

The crew at Benchmark has done it again and raised the bar even further with the DAC1 Pre. Priced at \$1575, it includes an analog input to go along with the five digital inputs, so it makes a perfect entry-level preamplifier. We used the DAC-1 Pre in a number of systems with great luck. For those of you not familiar with it's sound, the DAC-1 Pre (as does the other models) is as close to not having much of its own sound as you can get at this price point. Some have criticized it for being a bit on the dry side, but I've always found them quite neutral. *(continued)*

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### Easy Setup

Just plug your favorite power cord in, hook up your digital sources via USB, Toslink or RCA and you are ready to go! Don't forget a good phono preamp and turntable while you are at it. While the DAC-1 Pre spent a little bit of time in my reference system, to make the comparison more realistic, I moved it to my desktop system powering a Croft Polestar 1 power amplifier.

For digital sources, I used my Sooloos server and a Mac Mini that I run iTunes from the Mac side of the fence and Windows Media Player to play high-resolution digital files from Music Giants. To give that new analog input a whirl, I hooked up my trusty Rega P3-24 with their Apheta cartridge and their new IOS phono stage.

There's just something fun about holding a linestage and DAC in one hand, especially when you lug around as much massive gear

as I do, but the DAC-1 pre is not lightweight on sound quality.

The DAC-1 PRE offers five digital inputs in addition to that pair of RCA jacks for the analog input.

### Easy to Use

What really makes the day for me with the DAC-1 Pre is that it makes for a very high performance little system. The Croft amplifier is equally small, and when I mated the pair with the phono preamp from Lehman, the Dynavector P-75 or the new Millett Phono Stage from Todd The Vinyl Junkie (review in progress), the whole system barely took up a full shelf.

Just like the past versions of the DAC-1, I did notice a bit more natural sound from the balanced outputs, so I would suggest using them if you have the option.

Doing a head to head comparison with the DAC1 USB that I own, I could swear

that the new Pre version was a bit more open, neutral and dimensional than the older model, but you know how these things can fool you.

A quick call to Benchmark product manager Rory Rall revealed that there is indeed, something new lurking under the hood. "We've updated all of the op amps in the analog section," he said. "And no, you can't update the older versions..." So before you call or email Benchmark, they are not offering this service. It's an evolutionary change, so if you are a happy DAC1 user that doesn't need an analog input, I wouldn't rush out to sell the one you have now.

I tried the DAC1 Pre with about ten different power amplifiers; tube, solid state and Class-T and had great luck with all and experienced no compatibility issues. My favorite combinations were with the Croft and my McIntosh MC275, adding just a drop or two of tubey warmth to the DAC1's presentation. *(continued)*

## True to the Music

The DAC1 Pre did a great job with all the music I played and I never felt like it was overly warm or dry sounding either; contributing very little of its own sonic signature to the music. When compared to some of the more expensive digital players we have heard, the only criticism I can give it is that it is just a bit reserved sounding. However when comparing it to CD players in the \$1-2000 category, it holds its own quite well.

I also found the DAC1 Pre not terribly sensitive to interconnects or digital cables either, adding to its ease of use. I ended up settling in with Cardas Neutral Reference when using solid-state amplifiers and DH Labs Revelation when using tubes. Swapping from the stock power cord to the DH Labs Redwave was a bit overkill, seeing that

the power cord costs half again as much as the DAC1, I settled on the new cord from Audio Art Cable, which is quite a value at \$145. This added a bit more weight to the lower end of the presentation.

## Very Versatile

Thanks to all those inputs, the DAC1 Pre is a digital source lover's dream come true. The analog input and headphone outputs really sweeten the picture considerably and make this a true full function linestage that you can build a great system around.

Because the DAC1 Pre gives you a great DAC, headphone amplifier and linestage with balanced outputs all in one small package for \$1575, it is also a tremendous value and a product that you should be able to live with for quite some time. ●



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**The Benchmark DAC1 PRE**  
**MSRP: \$1575**

## MANUFACTURER

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## PERIPHERALS

**Power Amplifiers:** Croft Polestar 1, McIntosh MC275, Red Wine Audio 30.2 signature, Classe CA-2100

**Digital Sources:** Sooloos music server, McIntosh MS300 music server, Wadia 170iTransport, Mac Mini, Pioneer 563

**Analog Sources:** Rega P3-24 turntable w/RB301 arm and Apheta cartridge. Rega IOS phono stage and Dynavector P75 phono stage

**Speakers:** Harbeth Compact 7ES-3, Sound Anchor stands

**Cables:** Cardas Golden Reference speaker cable and interconnect, Audience AU24 digital interconnect, Shunyata Venom power cords

**Power Conditioning:** Shunyata Hydra VRay