

# “Has the determination to dig deep and hit hard”

**FOR** Detailed and transparent presentation; excellent features

**AGAINST** Multiple colours for functions are confusing



The Hugo 2 sees the return of the colour-shifting spherical buttons

**Our infatuation with** Chord's remarkable Hugo DAC, which manifests itself in its multiple-Award winning status, is as strong as ever. We can overlook little foibles, such as its wilfully quirky design, the hard-to-access input and output sockets, like an indulgent parent forgives an infant's table-manners. We love its thrillingly detailed, effortlessly dynamic and neatly organised sound as much now as we did the first time we heard it. So for us, at least, Chord had no need to go fiddling.

But the Chord Hugo is no more. Instead, please welcome Hugo 2. A little smaller, a little sharper around the edges, significantly more expensive than the original, and - incredibly - slightly quirkiest than before.

## Multi-coloured spectrum

The casework is gratifyingly smooth and crisp-edged, the quality of construction is inarguable, and the laser-cut brand and model logos are particularly pleasing. There's no confusing Hugo 2 for a product from any other brand.

Measuring 10 x 13cm, and just 2cm high, Hugo 2 is a touch more compact than its predecessor. It's still a big box, though, and it's a struggle to get behind Chord's suggestion that Hugo 2 displays "obvious portability". Sure, it's portable in so much as you can pick it up (it's only 450g, thanks in

large part to its high-end aluminium construction), but don't imagine it'll sit comfortably in a pocket for on-the-go use.

Chord has tacitly acknowledged as much by including a remote control with this latest Hugo. It's a functional handset where the Hugo 2 itself is wildly individual, but it suggests Chord knows full well Hugo 2 is as likely to end up as a DAC/pre-amp in a static system as it is to get out and about.

Despite its reduced dimensions, Hugo 2 includes more of the colour-shifting spherical control buttons Chord originated in its Mojo DAC. There are four edge-mounted buttons: the power sphere is one of five different colours to indicate charging status, the filter sphere has four colours, the input selector six (including 'coaxial dual data mode', which is not user-selectable) and the crossfeed control four.

The top-mounted rolling volume control runs a multi-coloured spectrum depending on the output level, and finally one of no less than 11 colours is displayed through the

window into Hugo 2's interior to indicate sample frequency of an incoming digital signal.

All of this colour-based communication makes Hugo 2 a memorable looker, and it makes a change from letters and/or numbers. But it makes for an instruction manual that doesn't so much need reading as decoding. Surely no one is going to memorise sample rates, from 44.1kHz to DSD (-512 as a maximum) as a series of 11 colours. Especially as three are a variation on purple.

## Speaker effect

Hugo 2 features all the inputs and outputs you could require. Its digital optical input (a full-size TosLink) is good for digital audio up to 24-bit/192kHz, while the digital coaxial (a 3.5mm socket) functions up to 24-bit/384kHz. The final physical input is a mini-USB able to deal with information up to 32-bit/768kHz and DSD512. Music can also be fed to Hugo 2 via aptX Bluetooth.

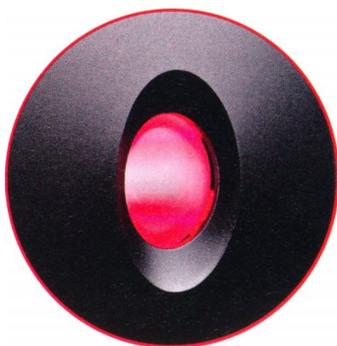
There are 3.5mm and 6.3mm headphone socket outputs, and a pair of stereo RCAs for connection to an amplifier. Despite being better spaced and more accessible than on the original Hugo, we still can't fit our reference Chord Company (no relation) Signature Tuned Array RCA cables to the slightly recessed RCA output at the end of

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## IN DETAIL...



The window displays 11 colours to indicate the sampling frequency



The control on the top of the unit changes colour along with volume



The Hugo 2 features both 3.5mm and 6.3mm headphone sockets



The coaxial input is a 3.5mm socket and works up to 24-bit/384kHz

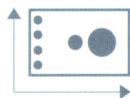


"There isn't another DAC at this sort of price able to communicate so effortlessly"

#### KEY FEATURES



aptX Bluetooth



Dimensions (hwd):  
2 x 10 x 13cm

Hi-res

(32-bit/768kHz)

Hugo 2 and have to settle for something a touch more prosaic.

Filter-switching is available, allowing the user a degree of control over Hugo 2's sound. Filter 1 (a white light) is described by the manual as 'neutral incisive'; filter 2 (green) incorporates some high-frequency roll-off; filter 3 (orange) is 'warm'; filter 4 adds some high-frequency roll-off to filter 3. It's worth experimenting to find your favourite, as the differences in sound reproduction - while subtle - are definite.

The crossfeed control (marked as X-PHD on the casework) is retained from the original Hugo and here, as there, is designed to duplicate the effect of listening to speakers. Some hefty binaural research has gone into this, so it's worth investigating the settings: off (unlit), min (red), med (green) or max (blue).

#### Emotion laid bare

Chord's great differentiator, its bespoke Field Programmable Gate Array, is back in supercharged form in Hugo 2. Virtually every rival brand users off-the-shelf OEM chips to deal with digital-to-analogue conversion, filtering and other processing. Chord's proprietary software (loaded into the FPGA) is bespoke, highly developed and, as evidenced by Chord's unwavering competitiveness, highly effective.

Battery life has improved a little - around seven hours is achievable - but it is difficult to find meaningful fault with the way Hugo 2 converts and delivers your digital audio files. And while it's obviously preferable to feed in a file of reasonable size in order to hear Hugo 2 at its best, this DAC doesn't

have unkind observations to make if you lower yourself to Bluetoothing a 320kbps Spotify file. Hugo 2 simply gets on with the job and makes the best of it.

Broadly speaking, there's no change in Hugo 2's character whether its handling a Spotify-derived stream of Big Boi's *All Night* or a Qobuz Sublime+ 24-bit/96kHz file of Michael Jackson's *Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough*. The bigger the file and the more information Hugo 2 has to play with, the greater the detail and fidelity, but in all circumstances Hugo 2 serves up a detailed, dynamic and punchy performance.

Timing is perhaps Hugo 2's strongest suit of all - it brings absolutely believable unity to ensemble music. That Michael Jackson tune features both brass and strings sections in addition to the more standard rock 'n' roll line-up, but there's never any suggestion the musicians aren't interacting in the most natural way. There's crispness and clarity to Hugo 2's sound, admirable management of tempos and an unequivocal layout to the soundstage.

Pare down the sound to the piano and voice of Joni Mitchell's *River* (24-bit/192kHz) and the Hugo 2 demonstrates its mastery of timbre, as well as its supernatural way with the attack and decay of individual notes. Each hit of each piano key is packed with information, and the sound of the instrument (as well as the environment in which it's being played) is revealed.

There's nothing overly analytical about the way Hugo 2 passes on this information, but you're left in no doubt that every available detail, no matter how minor, has been incorporated into the performance and laid bare for your ears.

The same is true of voices. The purity and vulnerability of Mitchell's voice (as well as the harmonies she sings with herself) are transmitted explicitly, her aching regret heavy with real and tangible emotion.

#### A convincing whole

From one extreme of the frequency range to the other, the Chord is a smoothly neutral listen - it doesn't overstate, it doesn't underplay. It simply arranges the pieces into a convincing whole where bass is balanced against treble in the most unforced and crystal-clear manner.

With Hugo 2 incorporated into our Naim/Gamut/ATC reference system as both DAC and pre-amplifier, it's the same story. Our system is intended to make a product's shortcomings obvious, but the Chord simply gets on with the job in the same clear and casually spectacular manner it does when driving a pair of headphones.

It's near impossible to wrong-foot Hugo 2. It has the determination to dig deep and hit hard, driving A Tribe Called Quest's *We The People* (24-bit/88.2kHz) forward unstoppably. It has the deft lightness of touch to make The Costello Show's *Sleep Of The Just* (24-bit/192kHz) glide over its own defeatedness. And it makes Nina Simone's typically characterful reading of *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood* (24-bit/96kHz) sound like a malevolent music-box.

There isn't another DAC around at this sort of price able to communicate so torrentially, so unambiguously or so effortlessly. Safe to say, we like it a lot.

#### WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

SOUND ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

BUILD ★★★★★

The Hugo 2 builds on the terrific original and, despite a price rise, continues to set the standard for DACs at this level