



There really isn't another DAC anywhere near this price that can do the job as well

smoothly neutral listen - it doesn't overstate or underplay - it simply arranges the pieces into a convincing whole where bass is balanced against treble in the most unforced manner.

There isn't another DAC around at anywhere near this price able to communicate so torrentially, so unambiguously or so effortlessly. Our affection for it in the past 12 months hasn't wavered one bit.

■ Chord Hugo 2 £1799

The Hugo 2 may have had to relinquish its Product of the Year status, but it's only fallen so far. Continuing its line's remarkable success, it serves both as an improvement over the Mojo and as a more portable version of the Qwest.

Sure, it is portable in that it has a battery (providing around seven hours from a single charge) and you can pick it up (it's only 450g), but it won't sit comfortably in a pocket for on-the-go use like its Mojo sibling. Chord acknowledges its desktop likelihood by the inclusion of a remote, knowing the 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.

The Hugo 2 features all the inputs and outputs you could realistically require for either occasion. Its digital optical input (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 amp.

As well as input selection and volume, the Hugo 2 features inscrutable colour-dependent controls for cross-feed and filtering. Chord's great differentiator, its bespoke, highly developed Field Programmable Gate Array, is back in supercharged form.

Where sound is concerned, it is difficult to find meaningful fault with the way the Hugo 2 converts and delivers your digital audio files. The bigger the file and the more information it has to play with, the greater the detail and fidelity of its performance. But in all circumstances it serves up a detailed, dynamic and punchy performance.

A powerful show of unity

Timing is perhaps the Hugo 2's strongest suit of all - it brings absolutely believable unity to ensemble music. There's crispness and clarity to its sound, admirable management of tempos and an unequivocal layout of the soundstage.

From one extreme of the frequency range to the other, the Chord is a