

FIRST TESTS

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Chord Qutest | DAC | £1195 | whf.cm/Qutest

We like the Qutest's colourful buttons and compact rectangular aluminium casework

A superlative performer

FOR Clear, precise performer; good timing; stylish build

AGAINST No Bluetooth



To Chord's credit, a superlative suffix was really the only way it could have gone with naming a successor to the impressive 2Qute. But, with Chord claiming that its latest and most affordable powered DAC is the 'world's most advanced', the Qutest carries such lofty expectations it would almost be embarrassing for the company if it failed to meet them.

Still, if a DAC could ever be excused for such confident coolness, it is this one. After all, the Qutest is largely based on the Hugo 2 that received a five-star review and a *What Hi-Fi?* Award at the end of last year.

The Qutest uses the same DAC architecture, software coding and frequency-shaping filters as the Hugo 2, but ditches the headphone amplifier and rechargeable Li-on batteries that make the Hugo portable.

The sole purpose of the Qutest is to be the digital-to-analogue bridge between your digital source and amplifier - just like its predecessor the 2Qute, which the Qutest replaces in Chord's five-strong DAC range.

That lack of features reflects its lower price of £1195 - compared with the £1800 Hugo 2 - although the word 'lack' can be used only within the parameters of that particular comparison. The Qutest is no more lacking in either features or performance than a top of the range Swiss army knife.

Off the rack

It takes a few days of operation for the Qutest to lose its out-of-the-box midrange hardness. Once that's done, we swap out the Chord 2Qute between our reference Naim NDS/555 PS streamer and Gamut D3i

preamplifier, and put the Qutest in its place. We play Gregory Porter's *Holdin' On* and immediately hear the gains in clarity, precision and subtlety that have us gently pushing the Qutest's predecessor to the back of our rack.

The journey from the 2Qute to Qutest hasn't altered the character. In 2015, we complimented the 2Qute for its "almost-effortlessly cohesive and musical sound", and thankfully those qualities haven't been lost in the transition.

A soundstage full of crisp, clean and concise - not to mention explicitly detailed - instrumentation fills the space between our ATC SCM50 speakers, with the soul singer's lush, down-tempo jazz arrangement having equal parts sinew and sparkle thanks to the Chord DAC's familiar neutral tonal balance.

IN DETAIL...



FILTER

There are four different filter options to fine-tune the sound to your taste



INPUT

You have a choice of three inputs - USB, coaxial and optical



A multicolour display shows the sampling frequency of the file playing



Based on the Hugo 2, the Qutest has similar styling, coding and filters

HI-RES MUSIC ON YOUR iPhone

Turn to page 46 to discover how to turn your iPhone into a hi-res player, using a DAC...



"So satisfied are we with the improvements, we find ourselves wondering where Chord's 'budget' powered DAC line could possibly go from here"

But the Qutest offers more resolution here. Greater texture and nuance clings to the wheeling cymbal, double-bass plucks and Porter's honey-thick vocals, all of which have plenty of room on the Qutest's sprawling canvas. Indeed, its presentation is slightly bigger and more spacious, giving musical elements greater scope to swell and evolve without bumping into each other.

Dynamic maturity

We play Peter Broderick's *Eyes Closed And Traveling*, and there's a new dynamic maturity to our system. The piano piece is an exhibition of Broderick's ability to shift from delicate to devastating within a few strikes of the keys, and the Qutest shrewdly conveys the undulating dynamics, clocking the sudden surges as well as the subtler simmerings.

KEY FEATURES

32-bit/768kHz
PCM

DSD
DSD512



No Bluetooth

Notes have crisper, more distinct leading edges, carry warmth and texture in abundance, and never trail off prematurely – even when forthcoming notes tumble over the top.

Timing is that bit tighter too, which helps the Qutest sniff out a rhythmic structure when one comes its way. With Biffy Clyro's *My Recovery Injection*, it captures not only the dissonance of that stinging lead guitar but also how it coalesces with the walking bassline and slicing cymbals.

That rhythmic mastery is revealed as we play Spoon's *Pink Up*. The impressive drive, for which we've always rated the 2Qute, propels the disco-flavoured psychedelica through its unerring journey – as well as slick and natural responses to shifts in pace.

From the soundstage-filling shakers to the xylophone melody and glitchy vocal, everything moves around the track's solid metric beat. The Qutest is as happy rocking out to tumultuous tunes as it is rolling with classical compositions.

Ground control

The sonic upgrade served by the Qutest isn't surprising when you consider it implements the bespoke FPGA (Field Programmable Gate Array) digital-to-analogue conversion technology found in every other Chord DAC.

While most DACs use standard off-the-shelf chips, Chord designs its own from the ground up. By creating a digital circuit that's more complex and customisable, Chord has greater control over everything from the actual conversion to the filtering.

IN DETAIL...



1 The two coaxial inputs can also be used in dual-data mode. This allows the Qutest to handle (upsampled) 768kHz files from Chord's Blu Mk2 CD transport

2 The Qutest's analogue output is limited to stereo RCAs. It is possible to set three different levels 1V, 2V or 3V by pressing the filter and input buttons

3 The Qutest is powered from the mains, unlike its predecessor the Chord Hugo 2, which also featured rechargeable Li-on batteries that made it portable

The software in the Qutest shares its audio code with the Hugo 2, resulting in claims of 'identical' jitter performance and 'no' measurable noise-floor modulation (residual noise that occurs from changes in the music signal).

The four music filters are the same, and while they don't make the world of difference, it's worth experimenting with them. 'Incisive neutral', 'incisive neutral HF roll-off', 'warm' and 'warm HF roll-off' are selectable via the Qutest's filter roller button, which changes colour depending on the chosen filter.

The other roller button glows different colours to signify the chosen input. There's white for USB Type-B (capable of accepting 32-bit/768kHz PCM/DSD512); yellow for the first BNC coaxial, and red for the second (24-bit/384kHz); and green for the optical (24-bit/192kHz/DSD64).

Out of the blue

But there's no blue hue for Bluetooth. While wireless connectivity is a feature of the Hugo 2, which makes sense considering its portability, it's left off here. It's a shame perhaps, but far from a deal breaker.

The two coaxial inputs can also be used in dual-data mode too, allowing the Qutest to handle (upsampled) 768kHz files from Chord's Blu Mk2 CD transport.

Whichever input path you choose, the output is through a pair of RCAs. Chord anticipates pairing the Qutest with a wide range of preamplification, so has made the output stage variable. Hold down both the input and filter buttons just after the Qutest has powered up and you can select 1V (red), 2V (green) or 3V (blue).

Through the small circular window is another multicolour display, representing the sampling frequency of the file being

ALSO CONSIDER



DAC

Chord Hugo 2
£1800

This is an equally impressive DAC, but also comes with a headphone amplifier and rechargeable battery

played - red for 44.1kHz, green for 96kHz, dark blue for 192kHz, purple 384kHz and white for DSD.

Those without a photographic memory may have trouble remembering the purpose of each colour, but the rainbow display makes for a distinctive design.

While we like the Qutest's colourful buttons, and the compact rectangular aluminium casework, we prefer the more ornate, curved styling of the 2Qute. Still, the new, boxier chassis is well machined, with the metal Chord badge and 'Qutest' etching confirming its status above the portable Mojo DAC (£400).

Top drawer

It's worth mentioning the Qutest's packaging too. Fancy by any standards, it clearly wasn't designed to be ripped apart and thrown in the bin. The box comes complete with a silky drawstring bag for the cables, and a drawer (yes, a drawer) for the manual. It's very handy if, like us, you're looking for a place to store those screws you keep standing on.

So satisfied are we with the improvements brought by the Qutest that we find ourselves wondering - as we did with the 2Qute - where Chord's 'budget' powered DAC line could possibly go next. We don't know the answer, or even what such a successor would be called (though we know Qutester doesn't work). But, from experience, we reckon Chord might, in a year or two, find another way to raise the bar another notch. No pressure there then.

Until then, or until a superior DAC from another brand comes along, the Qutest occupies the gap in the pecking order between the Chord Mojo and Chord Hugo 2 as the DAC that lesser rivals look up to at this price mark.

SYSTEM BUILDER

The Qutest deserves top-notch partners



STEREO SPEAKERS

Dynaudio Special Forty ★★★★★ £2500
Classic in looks but cutting-edge in ability, these standmounters are superbly talented



MUSIC STREAMER

Moon Neo MiND ★★★★★ £1700
A masterful standalone streamer that relies on an external DAC, such as the Chord Qutest



INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Naim Supernait 2 ★★★★★ £2750
This is a top choice for those after a versatile, top-performing integrated amplifier

Total build £8145

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

SOUND ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

BUILD ★★★★★

VERDICT Chord has managed to do it again. As with its predecessor, the Qutest sets a new benchmark at this price