

# Chord 2Qute USB DAC

*Too Cute To Handle?*



# Chord 2Qute USB DAC

*Last autumn, I wrote very enthusiastically about the sonic performance of the Chord Electronics Hugo headphone amplifier en da-converter. But still - though I decided not to mention that at the time - there was something nagging me that somewhat tempered my enthusiasm. Because while I was convinced that it was a fantastic sounding converter, there was absolutely no doubt in my mind that I would hardly ever use the headphone amplifier that makes up the other major half of the device. And no matter how you look at it; that does change your view on it's retail price.*

*That's what Chord must have thought as well, because during this year's CES they introduced two new converters that wil effectively solve this 'problem'. The dearer Hugo TT is the superlative of the Hugo, but it was the cheaper 2Qute that immediately caught my attention. It was supposed to become a hybrid of the Hugo (minus the battery and the headphone amp) and the Qute EX DAC, that was designed specifically for desktop use and integration into larger hifi systems. As soon as one was available, we planned a listening session to subject this new gem to a musically demanding obstacle course.*



# 2Qute $\approx$ Hugo $\neq$ Qute EX

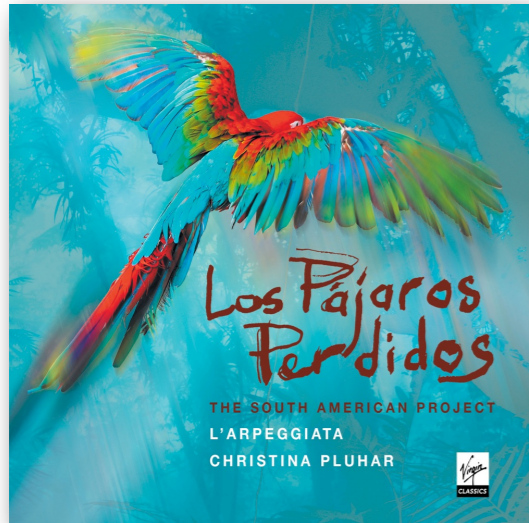
For those who didn't study mathematics: the above equation means that the Chord 2Qute is virtually identical to the Hugo (the aforementioned differences aside), but not to the Qute EX. On paper, the EX can do the same as the 2Qute (and the Hugo) but it has an older chipset. The chipset in the 2Qute and Hugo are identical. But there is another major difference: the Qute EX will choose its input automatically, based on the applied digital signal. But it will always give priority to the USB input. That means that as long as there is a data stream running to the USB input, the Qute EX will not switch to the coaxial or optical input. You need to terminate the USB data stream first, for instance by stopping playback in iTunes, which is not always convenient. However, the 2Qute now has a small button that allows you to manually switch between inputs. Much better!

## The Listening Setup

The set I used for this evaluation consisted of a Mac mini (late 2012, 4GB RAM, 2,5MHz Intel dual-core) setup exclusively for streaming, AudioQuest Yukon interconnects and a Linn Klimax set driving Wilson Benesch Trinity loudspeakers. For the first part of the review, I used an AudioQuest Cinnamon USB cable (more on that later...) to connect the Mac mini to the 2Qute. The three tracks I chose as musical ammunition covered a broad sound palette and were from very different genres. As usual, you will find links to Spotify and Tidal at the bottom of this review.



# Music!



The first tones that came out of the 2Qute (well, not the first per se, we gave it 48 hours of forced burn-in before this review, using the excellent IsoTek Full System Enhancer CD...) were from the beautiful album *Los Pájaros Perdidos* (The Lost Birds) by Christina Pluhar and her ensemble L'Arpeggiata. The contemporary Latin American folk music she plays on this album gets a very authentic twist by using a mix of modern instruments and their authentic counter-

parts from the 16th and 17th century. And it sounded absolutely delicious! The interplay between harp and guitar sounded distinctly analog through the 2Qute, and the low tones of the big drum, that subtly indicate the rhythm, were very deep and well measured. Almost immediately I noticed the incredible 'flow' that I also liked in the Hugo. The timing was catchy and spatial details were wrapped around their instruments in perfect proportion, which only added to the 'analog' experience. The image and soundstage that I got from the 2Qute were large and deep, and they extended well beyond the loudspeakers. On a first listen, the 2Qute really sounded like a

worthy substitute for those who don't need the portable functionality of the Hugo.



Next up was the album *Liberetto II* by Lars Danielsson, in high resolution (24/96). The song *Passacaglia* contains a lot of intensity due to the withheld but very strong percussion work, with fiercely played brushes. The sound of Daniels-sons contrabass was deep and colorful, deliciously 'woody' and didn't sound lumpy at all. The quality of the recording is impeccable and showcased the irresistible timing of the 2Qute. Around 3'32 there's a break in which

subtly swelling strings almost brought a tear to my eye by the sheer wealth of their tone. The musical communication appeared to be on the highest level, or this shortcut between the brain and the heart wouldn't have worked as well as it did...

To wrap up the first listening session, I cued up the track *Antropofagia* by Guy Buratto, from his album *Abaporu*. The widely-spaced percussion effects in the intro were whirling from left to right, and when the super tight beat started I could clearly hear a deeply hidden hi-hat behind the right loudspeaker, that has a tendency to get lost when played on lesser sets. Like with the Lars Danielsson track, there's a break in this song that tells a lot about the quality of the musical delivery. It starts at 3'04 as a synthesizer arpeggio, with rapidly played keystrokes in very short succession. While the underlying bass line was growling deep, I could easily make out every single note of the arpeggio, which told me two things: the 2Qute is very quick and VERY good at unraveling complex musical passages.



# 2Qute versus Qute EX versus Hugo



It's only logical that I compared the 2Qute to the EX and the Hugo, but for this review I don't want to get too deep into that. However, a few notable things should not be left unmentioned. When listening to the Qute EX, it was easy to hear why he has won several awards in its price range. There was speed, depth and tone. The family resemblance was clear, but in direct comparison with the newer 2Qute it fell slightly behind. The main difference lies in the greater analog flow and soft-

ness of the 2Qute. The Qute EX still had the tiniest trace of digital character in it's sound, which was reflected especially in it's (very well hidden, I must add) struggle to achieve that final shred of pure analog effortless and roundness that the 2Qute does so well.



When compared to the Hugo, the 2Qute had another surprise up it's sleeve. Because the circuit itself (save for the headphone amplifier) is identical to that in the Hugo, I expected them to sound exactly the same. But of course they didn't. There was a very slight difference. In hindsight, my best guess is that the battery in the Hugo, that actually works as a power supply buffer, plays a small but significant role. Which one you like best comes down to personal preference. Both are wonderfully fluent in character, but the Hugo tended to deliver an even larger, tube-like refinement in the middle and high registers, but with a less tight low end, while the 2Qute's reproduction of the midrange and high frequencies was smore exciting, with a distinctly larger projection and a not necessarily deeper, but noticeably tighter bass. My preference shifted with the choice of music, so I can't announce a clear winner here. Moreover, the differences were VERY subtle and I really think they will be much harder to hear on a hifi-set that has a lower resolution than the one I used for this review.

# The Effects Of USB Cabling

USB cables can make a substantial difference in the sound quality of Computer Audio, as I have recently written in another review on these pages. Chord Electronics have stated that, since the USB input on the 2Qute is galvanically isolated, there is no need to use better (i.e. more expensive) USB cables. From a reviewer's point of view, I beg to differ. Their impact may be less clear than in a system without galvanic isolation, but when I replaced the AudioQuest Cinnamon with an AudioQuest Carbon, there was a significant increase in the reproduction of details, and the sonic image seemed to stretch out even further to all sides, especially forward. The analog-like 'flow' of the 2Qute stayed intact, but the low-end got even tighter than it already was. The biggest change however, was the palpability of the sound. There was more pressure and more texture, and therefore (in plain English) the music became more lifelike. There was simply more music to enjoy, so I consider the AQ Carbon a considerable step up. The AudioQuest Coffee does the same, but to an even larger extent. On top of that, the DBS System on this cable gave the music a certain 'quietness', that allowed for even greater low-level detail and spatial imaging. So the Coffee is the clear winner in my book, and I think its higher price is still justifiable. The AudioQuest Diamond on the other hand, is probably too far out-of-balance on this relatively small DAC. Not sonically though, it is a superb cable, but at half the price of the 2Qute I find it a bit 'out there'. The same (but the other way around)



applies to the Pearl and the Forest on the low side of the monetary spectrum. They will still give you a considerable step-up from a stock USB cable, but the 2Qute has so much more to give than these two cables are able to reveal.



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# The Bottom Line

So, is the Chord Electronics 2Qute 'too cute to handle'? Absolutely not. It has a delightful, tube-like flow and a powerful and passionate enthusiasm, that give it a very analog-sounding character, no matter what you play on it. The tonal differences between the 2Qute and the more expensive Hugo are quite small and do not unequivocally favor either one of them. If you don't need the portable functionality of the Hugo, or want more ease of use in a desktop system or a large hifi-set, the Chord Electronics 2Qute is, as far as I'm concerned (and without reservation), the one to beat in this price range.



# Extra information

For more information about the Chord 2Qute da-converter, visit our art's excellence webstore:

Chord 2Qute USB DAC (not available anymore)

Spotify

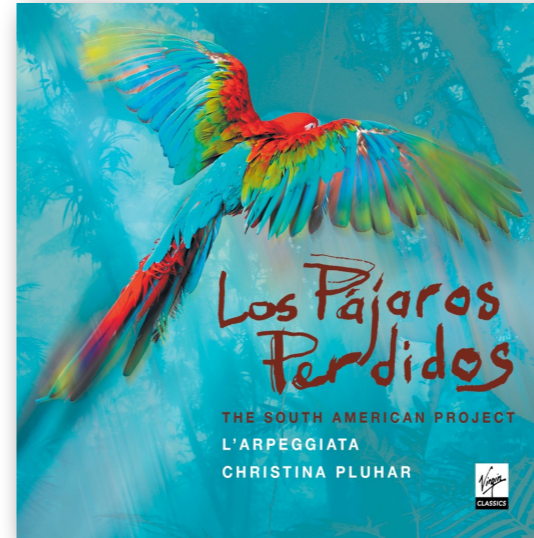


Christina Pluhar - Pájaros Perdidos  
Lars Danielsson - Liberetto II  
Gui Boratto - Abaporu

Tidal



Christina Pluhar - Pájaros Perdidos  
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