

HRT Music Streamer and Music Streamer +

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HRT Music Streamer, \$250. Music Streamer +, \$650

Life was simple a few years ago. You had a CD player, an amplifier and a pair of speakers. But then many music lovers started using their computers to store music, driven by the rapidly decreasing cost of hard drive storage and the increasingly polished computer programs for organizing and playing music. And seemingly, all of a sudden, audiophiles were using music servers.

But, how to transport your high quality music from your computer to the hi-fi? That's where High Resolution Technologies come in.



HRT Music Streamer

The founders of **HRT** (Kevin Halverson from electronics firm Muse and Classic Records' Mike Hobson) saw an opportunity and grabbed it. They saw the opportunity for affordable, high quality digital to analog converters that do one thing only – convert from usb-sourced digital to analog. Plug a Music Streamer into the usb port in any computer and improve sound quality.

The two **Music Streamer** DACs are closely related. Both utilise the same hexagonal casing (the MS+ with a longer extrusion). Both feature a usb port at one end and RCA sockets at the other. And both use the same usb circuitry. The Streamer + incorporates a higher quality digital chip and more power supply regulation.

Both units are powered by the usb bus. Much to my delight, this means no wall warts!

All plugged in

My time with the two Music Streamer models involved my eight year old Macintosh iBook (a 700MHz G3 model) running iTunes 8 and a not-quite-as-old Denon 2801 AV receiver. For most of the time a Plinius 8150 acted as a power amp from the Denon's pre-outs. A one terabyte hard drive holds some 1200 albums in Apple Lossless format.

I've always acknowledged that that headphone output of the iBook (my iBook has no other line output) could be improved. But using the smaller Music Streamer made a huge difference.

The tonal balance smoothed out, with a reduction in the forwardness of the headphone output and the addition of more body and weight. Music through the Music Streamer simply became more pleasant to listen to because of this change. I found that I could (and did) listen longer than previously, as my ears were no longer subtly becoming fatigued.

Tonally, the Music Streamer was a little rolled off in the treble and a touch warm in sound. This should help ameliorate some of the damage of lower bitrate audio signals and cheaper (and often a little hashy) audio gear.

Adding a plus

It was with some anticipation that I plugged in the more expensive Music Streamer +. And I was nonplussed at first. There was a lot more musical detail coming through but the overall sound was leaner and meaner. However, I soon realized that even usb-powered equipment benefits from a warm up.

After a couple of hours I was very impressed with the Music Streamer +. That positive impression grew the longer I used it. The MS+ brought out tones of musical detail, combined with warmth and a sense of ease that encouraged listening.



HRT Music Streamer +

And listen is what I did. I've barely played a CD through my Meridian 508 since, as the sound quality of the Music Streamer + is very high. It's not quite as good as my Meridian, in particular lacking the visceral bass impact that this player supplies – but that's something lacking in most CD players too. That the Music Streamer + can be discussed alongside the Meridian indicates that this DAC is an over-performer.

The problems found in many digital audio products were absent. There was no subtle electronic glare. More importantly to this music listener, the musical flow remained – many CD players seem to interfere with this.

The obvious competitor to the Music Streamer + is the \$799 Cambridge Audio DacMagic. The DacMagic is more flexible than the one-trick-pony Music Streamer, with multiple digital inputs, digital upsampling and looks like a more finished product. Unfortunately, I did not have a DacMagic at hand to directly compare to the Music Streamer +.

Positive vibrations

These are two excellent products. The standard Music Streamer makes a big improvement over the typical analog output of a computer. For lower-end hi-fi systems it makes a big difference for a small amount of money. Highly recommended.

The Music Streamer + takes sound to another level. It competes – successfully – with the sound quality of CD players costing many times its \$650 price tag. Very highly recommended for people serious about music server sound.
