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The Weiss DAC501 Review. Pristine Studio Sound.

By Steve Huff



As I stated in one of my videos recently, I feel that the front end of an audio system is where good money should be spent. The source. Especially if you are setting up a *serious* two channel system. The streamer and the DAC within a digital system is the heart of the system in today's world (after the speakers of course, which is the most important besides the room). Technology has grown by leaps and bounds in Digital to Analog Conversion over the last few years and today I have yet another DAC to talk about.

This one is in the "high end" realm for me as I consider any DAC over \$5k to be in the high end audio bracket. While there are DAC's that reach that \$100,000 threshold today, I am reviewing a DAC that comes in at around \$9,600 USD. Not chump change by any means but in today's world of climbing prices...well, here we are.

This cute little box with a touch screen display is also much more than a DAC. It is the first of its kind that I have ever used, tested and reviewed.



I want to thank The Music Room for sending this DAC out to me for review for a little while. I have bought a few items from the Music Room over the last year and it has become my favorite place to browse and drool over used (and even some new) high end used audio gear. The cool things about TMR is if you have been eyeballing a \$10k piece for a while, you may be able to find it there, used, with a nice discount from new.

They are a cool online shop and test, photograph, test and rate all the gear they take in to sell. I highly recommend TMR as they even have a return period and warranty on all USED gear they sell. They also buy gear and take in trades and do consignment. Amazing.

OH and they also are dealers for many brands in HiFi and they do sell this Weiss DAC 501 NEW (Link).

Be warned though, they get in 15-25 new pieces a day and it can get addicting just browsing the newest arrivals!

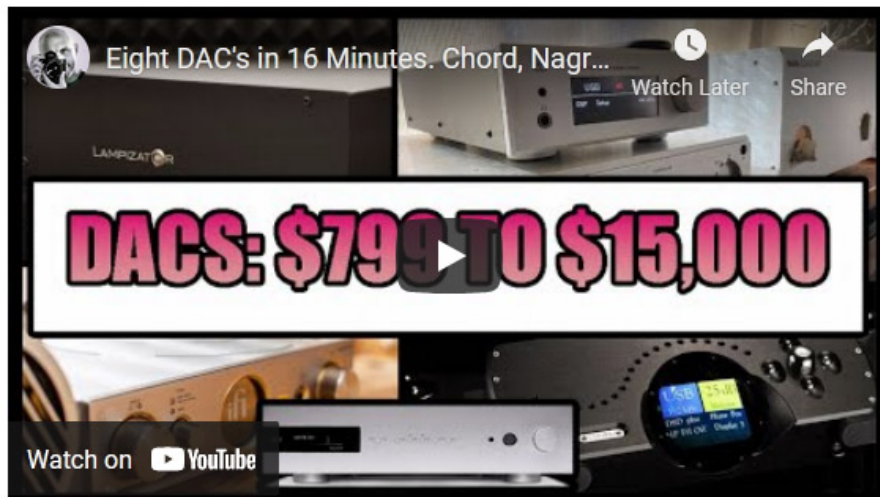
OK on to the review of this lovely piece of engineering.

Studio Quality. The Weiss 501 DAC

The Swiss made Weiss DAC is a much different DAC than any others I have had through here. *It's not just a DAC* but it's also a Roon ready **streamer**, **headphone amp** and **pre-amp**. It offers up several DSP modes that you can turn on and off via the touchscreen on the front panel.



The DSP modes allow you to do things such as remove the “SSSSSibalance” from some music with the DeEsser. Maybe you like the sound of vinyl? Turn on the Vinyl Emulation and the DAC brings a richer, beefier sound that they say sounds more like an album spinning on a table. It’s also customizable meaning you can alter the amount of that effect you want to dial in.



I talk about the Weiss 501 in this video along with seven other DACs I compared it to!

There are other DSP modes loaded and ready to enable. Room EQ’s to fix any speaker issues you may have such as bass nodes or even treble splashiness. The DSP modes can be enabled or bypassed and I tried them all. While at the end of the day *I did not have the need* for any of the DSP (Digital Signal Processing) modes I appreciate the fact that they are there for those who may need

them. I do feel it could be super beneficial to those who like to tweak and even correct the sound of their room and system.



I have not heard a DAC quite like this before. ***It brings a studio sound, or even a Reel to Reel master tape kind of sound to your Digital.*** It is incredible and probably the best I have had in here.

It doesn't have a *massively* wide soundstage, *though it is wide*. it doesn't do the holographic thing as well as others either (DAVE), but it does have some of that character when it is in the recording. I'd say it has just enough. Also, it is not analytical in my system but rather neutral and with a solid punch and sweetness to it to boot, but I am using warmer leaning speakers. It's also 3 dimensional in a way others are not. It brings a more natural and real 3D presentation which just sounds so beautiful.

I feel this DAC is more about delivering the music as it was recorded so we hear it in just that way. When music starts to flow from the speakers with the 501 decoding those bits you know you have something special within the system. It's instant. No golden ears needed.

“Artificial” Intelligence.

When we hear that crazy ultra wide soundstage or that eery crazy 3D imaging in some DAC's what we are hearing is that DAC's artificial alteration of the sound. Those things can bring magic and goosebumps but sometimes they are overdone and when this happens the sound can thin out or even sound flatter at times. Sometimes it can also sound a bit unnatural.

On the other hand, some DAC's do this so well that it can truly be a magical experience. The Chord DAVE does this very well but it's a different kind of sound from the Weiss.

The 501 does do imaging, soundstage and 3D very well but to a slightly lesser extent from some of the others that focus on such things. What it offers up instead is a natural, detailed YOU ARE IN THE STUDIO kind of sound. It's dense, it's real and the vocals...oh my. This DAC may be my all time favorite for vocals and midrange. It's pure magic and on another level from most that I have heard. It has detail, it does layering, it allows us to hear the texture in voices and instruments like any good high end DAC should.

THERE IS NO PERFECT DAC

There's no such thing as a perfect DAC due to the fact that we as music lovers all have different tastes and preferences when it comes to sound presentation. I will say though that each DAC at this kind of price level does bring a much more refined and pristine sound than those DAC's under \$5k.

I would rate DAC's up to \$3k as lower tier (not low quality, just under the quality threshold of the next level up)

From \$3-5k middle tier. These are usually amazing DACs that would make 98% of us happy.

DAC's above that would be in the high end realm and yes indeed they do get more refined and sweet as we go up the price ladder. That doesn't always mean we will get "better" as that depends on our speakers, ears and setup. I rate these by price in this way because it has been my recent experience over the last year.

Going up in price usually will get you more refinement and a bigger more beautiful kind of sound. You will hear a smooth presentation free of any digital glare, noise and compression. More of the magic and none of the bad stuff.

So how does this \$9600 box compare to what I have heard before it in sound quality alone? I will compare the sound to the Chord DAVE (\$12,500), the Nagra Classic DAC (\$15,000), Lampizator Amber 3 (\$4500), Denafrips Terminator II (\$4500) and even the iFi DSD Pro Signature (\$3500).



SPECS of the Weiss 501

The DAC501 uses a couple of 32-bit *oversampling, multi-bit, sigma-delta DAC chips*. These DAC chips allow for sampling rates of 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4, 192, 352.8, and of course 384kHz. Oh and yes, we also get DSD64 and DSD128 for fans of DSD. The 501 is also MQA compatible.

There is a high end and high quality pro non switching power supply here as well. All sensitive parts have their own regulators which are actually separated between left and right channels. This helps to eliminate noise and crosstalk and you can tell this is working as this is one of the most silent DAC's I have had the pleasure of hearing.

Finally, a low-jitter clock generator is installed for the clocking of the Weiss DAC 501. The input signals are converted to a 195kHz sampling frequency as well. This ensures the quality of the source going in. Pretty cool if I say so myself.

My review unit is in Silver and comes in a stainless-steel case though the faceplate is a smooth beautiful aluminum. It looks nice, understand and well..simple. As for weight, this guy comes in at under 7lbs which is far lighter than the 40lb Denafrips Terminator II ;)

We also get a 1/4 headphone jack right on the front face left for plugging in your headphones. Also on the front is a small touchscreen that looks fantastic and is simple to use with no lag issues to speak of.

This touchscreen allows one to configure the DAC to their preferences. It allows enabling of the DSP modes as well. To the right of the screen sits a nice dial, which acts as a volume dial if you use this as a pre-amp. It has a nice feel that is worthy of the price tag.

All in all it's a beautiful understated DAC in looks and for those who do not like blingy flashy pieces. The small size allows for easy placement as well. There is also a remote that comes with the DAC but let's get to the sound.



SMOOTH SAILING

As I have hinted at earlier, this DAC provides a level of refinement that is absolutely spectacular and *may be the most refined DAC I have ever laid ears on*. It sounds “professional” if that is a thing but after it burned in for 100 hours it opened up further, became a bit more detailed and refined still.

It really does remind me of reel to reel tape playing a master recording. Maybe something I would hear if I were in a recording studio listening back to an artist's recording.

I have read some reviews of this piece that state it is hyper detailed, and others that say it is warm. I did not know what to expect when I sat down to listen but was very pleased as it is somewhere in between those descriptions in my system. If I had to describe it, I would say It's "*neutral with balls*".

It's clean as a whistle but it also has a nice body and density to the sound along with what almost sounds like a slow down of the music.

What?

IT IS NOT doing that of course, but when you listen to a very high quality piece the music flows better, is more correct and seems to be laid out with a focus on just being "right". When this happens the music flows in a way that really does sound fantastic and gives the illusion of a slow down so you can hear everything in a pleasing non hyper way. Nothing is missed here.

This comes from a lack of noise or grit of which there is NONE to be found here at all. This DAC is even *more silent* than a mouse and lays the foundation for a grain free, smooth sailing, BIG FAT FULL YET DETAILED sound.

If you have heard "dry" sounding DAC's before this one is the opposite. It sounds almost "juicy" if you know what I mean.

While this DAC does detail very well, it's in not an all out detail hound like the Chord Dave.

The 501 is rich and fluid sounding and it is much larger in sound, more quiet and more beautiful in the way it brings forth the tunes than the Lampizator Amber 3. The 501 is more refined, clean and has a richer tonality than the iFi Pro DSD Signature.

My Nagra Classic DAC does the ethereal thing so well and it has a wide 3D soundstage with gorgeous warm vocals and just the right amount of detail. Even so, it doesn't have the density, presence, body or punch of the Weiss. This shows up with drums and piano, where everything sounds a bit light.

The Denafrips TII is big, heavy and means business. It brings refinement and smoothness as well as detail but is a shade darker in sound in my system than the Weiss, and much larger in size and weight.

All of the DAC's above I mentioned are amazing music makers. Not a bad one in the bunch. They are just "different" and any one of them could work within your system better than the other.

This Weiss DAC is very different from others I have heard. It has a full, smooth, big, detailed, layered, deep liquid "wet" sound. It's the opposite of dry ;) It's also quite addicting. It also offers up the many DSP modes (with more promised later via updates).

Time to get this show on the road!



Components on hand for this review:

1. Fleetwood Deville Speakers ([review](#))
2. Nagra Classic Pre-Amp ([review](#))
3. Nagra Classic DAC ([review](#))
4. Chord Dave DAC ([review](#))
5. Denafrips TII DAC ([review](#))
6. Nagra Classic AMP ([review](#))
7. Pass Labs XA60.8 Amps ([review](#))
8. Lumin U1 Mini Streamer
9. Cardas Clear Reflection Cables ([review](#))

When I installed the 501 I let it run in for a few days, leaving it on 24/7.

When I sat down to listen seriously for the first time with the Pass Labs XA60.8's installed I was really blown away by the sound and just how true to the recording it sounded. I mean, this is what you may hear in that recording studio (I have been in studio before and have a couple of friends who are well known music artists).

It's a different sound from any other DAC I have heard yet.

This is the kind of sound one would want if you are searching for a DAC that just delivers the music as it was intended to be heard. *Smooth, grain free, an effortless liquid flow, and warmth/punch with just enough detail to make it beautiful.*

Again, vocals are rich, big and project a bit into the room. The Bass is incredible. It's as if the artist is there with you, but it never sounds hollow or thin, not at all. Every instrument has a density about it that makes the sound full and rich. Then add that hint of air, 3D, world class imaging and you have a DAC that truly sounds like real flesh and blood music.

World Class? Yes indeed, and then some.



The guy who designed this DAC, Daniel Weiss, has a background fitting for his work with this DAC and previous DAC's he has designed. *He has built digital gear for recording studios for years.*

Weiss Engineering starting in the 1970's. Based in Switzerland he started up his home audio endeavor around 2000. The 501, here in 2022 is said to be one of his finest achievements. There is also the 502 which is the same DAC but in a full size enclosure (and a balanced headphone jack on the back). I prefer the smaller size personally but you can get the same sound in the larger chassis. There is no difference in sound between the two.

The 501 is small and feels solid. Its look, style and build is simple and without flash or sizzle. So many DAC's today try to impress with looks. Others impress with tubes. Some go by name recognition alone to sell their DAC's and some just make a solid product that sounds sublime, as it should be.

There is no shortage of DAC's on the market. We all have our faves and I have been auditioning DAC's like mad trying to find my personal Holy Grail under \$10k. I thought the Chord DAVE was it, and it's a gorgeous DAC. Then the Nagra Classic came along (found used for a good buy) and in my system it beat the DAVE for all out musicality but only *when used with the Nagra Pre and amp.*

The Denafrips is still hanging out and I install that sometimes and am always pleased with that one as well. All bring different flavors of sound.

As for the flavor I love? For me it's usually the ethereal 3D magical sound I go after. I do have to admit that after listening to the 501 for a while I have sort of become addicted to its sound. It's reference level without question and is just beautiful no matter what music I feed it. My tastes have changed after living with this DAC for a while as it has a special way of making music.

I can not stress enough how “right” it sounds with all of the music I throw at it. Piano is just right as the density and weight is there to flesh out the tonality. Guitars have a life like snap and crispness about them. The midrange with this DAC is also just about perfect with that weight and fullness in the vocals.

It brings a thickness to each instrument with a little air that adds to that expansive quality, and we hear the reverb in the studio rather than artificial reverb which can thin out the sound sometimes. We hear each sound clearly but also *the texture* of instruments. It’s a very sweet sound that beefs up the bass as well in my system.

While the Nagra sounds a little thinner and separates instruments more, the Weiss 501 brings more body and meat to the table all while doing the imaging and separation thing very well. Maybe more naturally.

The DAVE jets out details and dynamics like mad, with startling accuracy. It’s an exciting and eery listen and also has body but not as much as the Weiss 501. Where the Dave excels at dynamics, the Weiss is a touch more laid back in comparison (but its not laid back). This gives it a really natural and 100% fatigue free sound.

Each of the DAC’s listed here have a house sound and something they excel at. The Nagra at 3D and soundstage width, height and musicality. The DAVE for 3D, Detail, Dynamics and holographic imaging. The Weiss for smoothness, layered details, a studio sound, a plump sweetness and a 100% silent background. The TII for detail, warmth and imaging. The Lampizator for a touch of tube humanity yet with rich details that never offend. The iFi brings power, punch and that spaciousness some of us love.

The question we have as music lovers trying to build a system should be “what are we looking to accomplish in regards to sound”. Then go from there and pick your poison.



MODES MODES AND MORE MODES

The many ways you can use this DAC is impressive. On the back you will find inputs for USB, XLR, RCA, TOS, UPnP, and Roon Ready.

I first tested via USB and the sound was detailed, rich, crisp and yet strangely enough, warm at the same time with a mid bass body and heft that delivered a much bigger sound in my room than I was used to. While it did this it never did get congested. I heard the natural sound of the studio reverb. The decays and the true timbre of each instrument.

Then I used an XLR digital cable and the sound was pretty much the same, though a touch warmer still. My audioquest diamond USB was preferred to the XLR.

I then attached my ethernet cable and selected Roon Ready and fired up Roon on my MacBook Pro. The sound was slightly less warm, and slightly more open. It was AMAZING. As a streamer for ROON this little DAC truly shines and outperformed my Lumin U1 Mini for streaming. That's a \$2k streamer, and the Weiss when used as the streamer bested it.

The sound was different indeed. More jump and jive...and sometimes a wail when using the Roon Ready mode.

As for DSP when I **activated the vinyl simulation mode** the sound changed drastically.

It did resemble **some** of what I dig about vinyl. *Warmer, richer, less detailed* but I almost always preferred the sound **without** this feature activated. However... I did like it with some old thin recordings that normally sound thin and very grating. It smoothed them out, added body and made them sound much better. With that said, I do not feel it achieves a true vinyl sound but does add some of that character. Some will probably really enjoy this mode.

It lessens the stereo separation a bit as well. With all of the DSP filters the option is there to tweak each setting to min or max and anywhere in between. It's a very versatile DAC.

I did not need the EQ's and could not find improvement in my room by enabling and tweaking them but I find this feature to be fantastic. I could have used this tech a couple years back when my listening room was 12X13 and I had some bass issues going on. This could have fixed those issues so it's a powerful feature for those who can use it.

As is, without the DSP enabled the DAC sounded as good as the best I have ever heard, if not better.

LISTENING AS I WRITE

Anytime I review a piece of audio gear I sit in my sweet spot and listen to the piece I am writing about. I am doing this right now and have been hearing the sounds of the Weiss DAC 501 for a few hours now. I have grown accustomed to it's big, thick, clean, spacious and detailed studio quality kind of sound and I like it.

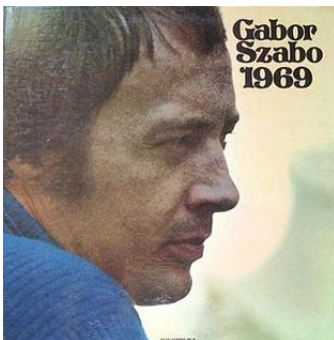
Let me get up and swap back to the Nagra Classic DAC which comes in at 1.5X the retail of the Weiss.



OK, now that the Nagra is in the differences are quite striking and instantly noticeable between the two. Both make gorgeous music, and I could live happily ever after with either but there are big changes to the sound.

For starters, the Nagra Classic is a touch more open, airy and has a taller soundstage. But it's thinner sounding and I am now missing that body that the Weiss was giving me.

The Weiss adds more weight and punch to each instrument and sound vs the Nagra. The Classic is all about clarity, transparency and space. The Weiss is...and I hate to say this, but 100% more analog sounding *if that is your goal*. Sweet, big, bold and beautiful.



Listening to Dear Prudence from Gabor Szabo's "1969" the Nagra brings out the upper details in this guitar instrumental into the room more. More air and a with a livelier sound compared to the Weiss. That thickness is gone and instruments are more separated bringing a more 3D presentation. While it's beautiful I am missing that all out studio sound of the Weiss now! Crazy!

The Weiss has a correctness about it that sounds just right. My brain keeps saying "this sounds like it is supposed to"!

The Nagra is not better than the Weiss, it's just that difference I talk about. The Nagra is more spacious and airy, the Weiss more bold and dense but also with some air and space going on. A perfect mix but when I go back to other DAC's I miss the weight of weight of the music. The Drums. The big vocals. The uber clean presentation. The way the Piano sounds like a real Piano.

OK, let me grab the Chord DAVE...

With the DAVE I hear more excitement, detail and even more 3D through the Deville speakers. It's lighter footed than the Nagra and the Weiss but what the DAVE brings is *ultimate transparency* and dynamics.

Now it's time for the Denafrips TII, which is a bang for the buck tour de force kind of DAC that brings an awful lot for the money. If this was made in the USA, Switzerland or the UK I believe it would be around \$7500. It also brings a smooth, refined sound much like the Weiss but not as beefy, juicy or BIG. It's also a little bit darker in tone vs the Weiss. This means if you have speakers

that lean neutral to bright the TII could do better for you. Remember it is about synergy. Finding the right piece for your audio puzzle!



CHANGING THE AMPS

I disconnected the Pass Labs XA60.8 mono blocks and connected the Nagra Classic Amp.

The Nagra Classic is more on the airy and detailed yet warm side of the spectrum vs the Pass which is warmer still.

When listening with the Nagra amp the Weiss no longer sounded as warm. In fact I started to hear that detail and crispness I read about. It retained the studio sound, but with a little more life, air and transparency. Well, now things are getting interesting. It's that synergy thing.



CONCLUSION

The Weiss DAC was something that impressed me greatly for what it offers for the price. Yes, \$9600 is a lot of cash for a DAC but a DAC can truly transform your system (if you have a system that is set up correctly) in so many ways. I see some out there building systems in the \$30-\$70k range and the Weiss would fit right in a system like that. It's a top tier studio quality reference kind of DAC.

Some say they would never spend a lot on a DAC because the tech is changing all the time. I look at it differently. If you find "The One" and it's the sound you are after and love then there will be nothing better that comes down the line. A DAC like the Weiss could last me a long long time. Instead of chasing the sound I am after, I would have it. This is better than always going down the rabbit hole is it not?

The Weiss DAC is different from the rest of the competition and *harnesses 50 years of experience of the man who designed it*. It sounds pristine and musical but doesn't try to wow us with the exaggerated audiophile tricks that some of the others do.

The Weiss sits among the top two I have heard, regardless of cost and is one I would own if I had a system that needed body and warmth while still keeping detail and midrange purity. *This DAC made my system sound like a reel to reel tape system was playing and sounded closer to analog than anything I have heard from digital. EVER.*

I would say that this is one of the best DAC's in the world, even if you do not use any of the useful DSP functions. But they are there if you need them. I also prefer it to the DCS Bartok I had here for a bit. It's that good.

The noise floor with the 501 is non-existent and this allowed the DAC to have a flow and liquid sound that truly was impressive to hear. No, it is not the most holographic or airy of the DAC's I have heard but that's not what it is all about. If you want your system to sound more like you are sitting in a studio listening to master tapes, then you really need to hear this DAC.

The build is high end all the way, and the touch screen is simple to use and nice to look at as well. It screams of quality and even the packaging is the best I have ever seen for a DAC. All should be packaged like this one. Not only to avoid damage in shipping but for presentation and pride of ownership. **This is a Swiss made DAC and appears that it could last a lifetime.**

The DSP options open up a whole new world to us as well. We can now fix issues with our sound and room, all with the DAC. We can EQ, remove sibilance (it works) and this future proofs the device in a way. If you change speakers, you can EQ it to your room. If you change amps, again, the EQ can come into play to get the sound to where YOU want it.

Weiss is said to be working on updates for the DAC as well, adding even more DSP features.

You can also plug in your headphones (did not test as I am not a headphone guy) and it's fully ready for ROON. Just plug in your ethernet cable and go. It sounded better this way than using my Lumin U1 mini streamer into the 501 DAC.

It's a solid World Class DAC and well worth the cost in today's HiFi market for what it brings to the table. In fact, as I spent the days writing this review I have grown quite fond of the 501. So much so I can proclaim it as the most well rounded, best sounding and even most addictive DAC I have ever heard.

It just may be "The One". We will see.

UPDATE April 2022: This is now my reference DAC and I am thrilled to have added it to my main system. It will sit with my forever speakers, the Fleetwood Deville SQ. This may not be the newest DAC or one with a cult following, but it should have one simply due to the sound quality! This DAC makes sweet music and that's all that matters. I have sold all other DAC's and my search is over after listening to numerous high end models up to the \$15k price point. I did purchase the Weiss from The Music Room.

Bottom line? EVERYTHING sounds wonderful through the Weiss 501. It's a master of all.

Thanks to the Music Room for sending it to me to check out. If you are looking for used audio gear from low to high end and do not want to pay crazy prices, you must check out TMR. They are the best source of used HiFi gear I have ever found and also sell NEW gear as well, like this Weiss 501.

Check out their site and find out why I am checking the site almost daily ;)