



Home alone

David Price is wowed by the stay-at-home version of Chord Electronics' superb Hugo DAC portable. It's time to meet the 2Qute

Two years ago, Chord Electronics announced the Hugo portable DAC (HFC 386). This sector was – and still is – bristling with such products – with everyone getting in on the act. Let's not forget, practically every new DAC that comes out is effectively an amalgam of bought-in parts, put in a box by the manufacturer. Chord, however, doesn't do this, it is one of a select few that makes its own silicon. The DAC chip inside all of its converters is bespoke and designed by its digital whiz-kid, Rob Watts.

The interesting thing about the Hugo was that, although 'just a portable', it sported the latest-generation Chord digital-to-analogue converter and digital filter. Newer even than the company's full-size, domestic hi-fi designs at the time, it was an extremely advanced offering. Many were pleasantly surprised by how it sounded via headphones, but yours truly was most beguiled by how

well it compared to 'proper' full-size designs when feeding a hi-fi system at home. When set to give a fixed-line output and run off its internal battery, the Hugo could be made to perform brilliantly as a conventional DAC.

The Chord 2Qute replaces the Qute EX, and has the Hugo's insides. It supports up to 32-bit/384kHz audio via coaxial and USB digital inputs, and 24-bit/192kHz over optical. It plays PCM and DSD (with DSD64 via all inputs and DSD128 via coaxial or USB, all via DoP). The Class 2 USB input has been galvanically isolated, and the switch to toggle between inputs is easier to use. Chord says that the circuit board has been completely redesigned from the Hugo, to take advantage of its new casework and the lack of a need to provide mobile features such as volume control, Bluetooth and batteries.

Like its predecessors and all of the Chordette series, the 2Qute comes in a beautiful, small, brushed aluminium

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Chord Electronics
Chordette 2Qute

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Digital-to-analogue
converter

WEIGHT
0.4kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
160 x 70 x 40mm

FEATURES
• 16-32-bit/32-384kHz; DXD; DSD64; DSD128
• Inputs: optical; coaxial; galvanically isolated USB
• Outputs: RCA phono
• Ground connector

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case. As well as being innovatively styled, it's extremely strong – one German hi-fi journalist decided to drive a tank over it (you can find this on Youtube). The downside is that it's not as intuitive to use as rivals such as Musical Fidelity's MX-DAC (HFC 401) or Audiolab's M-DAC (HFC 368), which have simple displays and/or LEDs telling you what's going on – you'll need to read the instructions to understand the meaning of the various coloured lights. Some might think this is a little gimmicky, but the system works well and is fun. Chord fans will also love the fact that it looks a bit like the original, iconic DAC64 that's shrunk in the wash.

Sound quality

In a nutshell, this is one of the best sounding DACs at or anywhere near its price – and will instantly give all other DAC makers under around £3,000 something to worry about. It is very similar to the Hugo, offering a near-identical sound, one that's better in some ways and not quite as good in others. Like its portable progenitor, essentially the 2Qute is highly musical, with a great sense of timing and dynamics. Yet it doesn't achieve this by sounding tonally forward or aggressive; actually it's quite the opposite. Just like the DAC64 a decade ago, this is both warm and smooth, yet highly lithe and bouncy – a seemingly ideal combination.

You'll need to study the instruction manual to make sense of the colour-coded lens

The 2Qute sounds superb across all digital sources, at whatever resolution you care to feed it. Interestingly though, whereas some rival DACs do decently with 16/44 but appear to 'come alive' with hi-res, like its Hugo sibling the subjective difference between standard and high-resolution digital files is less with this. That's not because it can't play hi-res as well, but that it seems to play CD far better than one would expect. It has an almost magical ability to make standard silver discs sound animated, energetic and expressive. Whatever lowly recording you feed it, it appears able to strip out the detritus and present you with a pristine and polished sound.

I cue up a Cyrus CD Xt Signature CD transport (HFC 386) via the coaxial

It has a lovely, subtly rich tonality to it that makes it a real pleasure to listen to

digital input with a classic track from The Association. *Along Comes Mary* is a breezy, Mamas and Papas type of song that sounds very average on Compact Disc through most modern digital converters. Though it might appear clean and detailed, there's an underlying feeling of sterility and flatness. At a stroke, the 2Qute seems able to transcend this and turn in a performance that's emotionally intense, musically immersive and also really impressive in a hi-fi sense. I find myself marvelling at just how good the recording was in its day, rather than lamenting the fact that it was recorded around the time of *Sgt. Pepper*. It's a rare digital-to-analogue converter that can do this; the top Chords and dCS machines perform this trick with ease, but there are very few others that can do so.



The 2Qute is another Rob Watts triumph

Feed the 2Qute a more modern and indeed highly polished production – in the shape of Kraftwerk's *Techno Pop*, from 1986's *Electric Cafe* – and I'm left aghast, wondering precisely why anyone could possibly want more than standard CD. The power of this little digital converter takes my breath away; it seems to have a punchier and more gutsy bass (one of the Hugo's few weak points) than most and yet the beautiful articulation in the low frequencies is a joy. Tuneful, expressive and dynamic, it pile-drives the song along. Further up, the midband has a translucent quality and bristles with detail. Like the Hugo it doesn't have the world's widest soundstage, but you can peer deep into it and almost walk around. Treble is superb, way better than you would expect from Compact Disc and indeed from a DAC of this price; it's silky, natural and beautifully resolved – just like we hoped digital audio would sound in the eighties, but never did.

Moving to the USB input via a MacBook Pro running the latest Audirvana Plus software and even via the supplied, cheap-and-cheerful Chinese-sourced 2m USB cable, the 2Qute turns a 24/96 PCM file of Wings' *Band On The Run* into an epic musical journey. It's amazing to hear a song that once sounded so great on LP be brought to life again via hi-res digital. Although not an obvious 'hi-fi' test track, this recording just keeps on getting better, the more you

improve your playback system. Paul McCartney's voice is full bodied and rich in its tone, the guitars have real warmth and the drum kit shimmers with harmonics off the snare and hi-hat cymbal. Again, what really impresses is the timing; the music has a natural ebb and flow, which makes many rival designs seem frigid and overly processed. There's a sense suddenly that the musicians aren't nervous, rather they're chilled out and in the groove and brilliantly syncopated with one another. This DAC's ability to capture tiny dynamic inflections – for example the way the hi-hat is hit in different parts of each musical phrase – is unrivalled at the price in my experience.

Conclusion

You can run the gamut of formats – CD or high-resolution, PCM or DSD – and the result is the same. The 2Qute is unerringly musical yet has a lovely, subtly rich tonality to it that makes it a real pleasure to listen to, hour after hour, day in, day out. It is a worthy alternative to the Hugo; I feel it doesn't quite have the last one percent or so of its sibling's midband detail (via battery), but it certainly more than compensates with usefully more power down below. If you're not interested in the Hugo's portability, then this is an absolutely essential recommendation. Hear one if you get the chance and discover for yourself just how great this little digital-to-analogue converter really is ●

CONNECTIONS



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Translucent yet stirringly musical sound; impressive design and build

DISLIKE: BNC adaptor required for coaxial input; no Bluetooth

WE SAY: Superb domestic version of Chord's brilliant Hugo portable

OVERALL
★★★★★