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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Merging+Player server

by Alan Sircom



Back in *Hi-Fi+* Issue 129, we came away highly impressed with the Pro-meets-Domestic Merging+NADAC digital converter. There were a few hiccups, but most of those were related to getting something so resolutely designed for the serious pro world into the more *laissez faire* system design of home audio. Those issues have been entirely resolved in the intervening couple of years, but perhaps more importantly the DAC now sports a built-in (and fully retrofittable) Roon end point player, making Merging less of a DAC, more a full and thorough digital solution.

To recap briefly, Merging is a Swiss professional audio company perhaps best known for its Pyramix Virtual Studio suite. The Merging+NADAC is a blending of the Horus and Hapi converter sections used in the studio with high-end Pyramix systems, and brought to the domestic market as a combination network, S/PDIF, and AES-EBU converter, and headphone amplifier, available in both two channel and eight-channel versions.

A few years into trying to sell an eight-channel DAC into a two-channel world, Merging have recognised that it's all but impossible to get someone to buy those extra six channels, despite the difference in price being comparatively negligible, as there is no performance uptick to be had by using the full eight-channel design. Merging has both two- and eight-channel demonstrators on tap, but the two channel was already in use, and as the difference is functionally zero, the eight-channel version was used for the purposes of this test.

One of the limitations to the Merging+NADAC of old was its reliance on RAVENNA Audio-over-IP networking protocols. This has not changed, but RAVENNA has. Where in the past it was a mandatory belt-and-braces approach to networking, requiring a managed switch and the kind of network infrastructure that's a far cry from the ad hoc wireless networks used in the home. That's still a best practice route, but RAVENNA has mellowed with age, and is not at all uncomfortable in talking to lesser mortals with unmanaged network switches. ▶

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► This has a dual advantage. First, it makes the Merging+NADAC far less complicated to install and use in the home. But, perhaps at once less obvious and more important, it allows a slightly more ad hoc approach to using file management programs to control your music. And it's this change that sees the Merging+NADAC able to morph into the Merging+Player.

This retrofittable upgrade is one of the least impressive looking from the outside. The Merging+NADAC and +Player look almost identical from the outside, and I'm using the word 'almost' advisedly. There is precisely no change to the external front panel, almost nothing changed on the rear panel, or even – for the most part – the display. There is also no great change in boot up or power down time. If you were faced with a Merging+NADAC and a Merging+Player side by side and you didn't have an iPad working in the system, you would struggle to tell them apart. Once you add in the iPad, things begin to change.

The Merging+Player with an iPad is suddenly transformed into a complete digital hub and all your music is hanging from that hub. This comes because the program Merging itself used to drive the original NADAC is replaced by Roon, and the big feather in the Merging+Player's cap is full Roon-ready capacity. Without the '+Player' part, this is a very fine DAC, but with it, it is a complete and extremely potent audio server. Although you could possibly use other programs at a pinch, the Merging+Player runs on RoonCore, and is therefore entirely driven by a Roon-based architecture.

The addition of the '+Player' module does challenge one of the Merging+NADAC's prime statements, however. The NADAC says audio on USB is evil, but the Player allows Roon to access USB drives from the rear panel. This is the only change to the physical aspect of the two from the outside. In a way, though, the Merging+Player challenges just as large a preconception in audio; the use of a computer in a 'computer audio' system! Granted what is running inside the Player is effectively a simple computer running RoonCore OS, but the idea is to take the multi-role computer out of the system.

With the computer out of the way, the Player takes on the role brilliantly. Like all good Roon-related products, it will run around your network (from a virtual perspective) to find music stores and shares, and will blend this with your TIDAL account seamlessly. How long it takes to populate this process depends on the size of your music library. If you add USB drives to the rear, they become temporarily populated on Roon, and will depopulate when removed. All of this is performed automatically, as well as finding your interests and tastes through playing with the format. So, far, so Roon.

So far, so Merging, too. Because the sound of the Merging+Player is the sound of the Merging+NADAC, but with added functionality. The NADAC impressed us for a reason, and that reason continues unabated in the Player, because it's the same architecture as before, just with a carefully shielded RoonCore-based music server built into the mix. Both DAC and server are extremely analytical devices meant to showcase what a good mix can do, especially when that ►

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- ▶ mix is DSD based (Merging – through the medium of Pyramix – being one of the champions of DSD in the studio). It doesn't suffer musical fools gladly, and if the engineer put too much reverb on a mix, you'll hear it. That said, it's not so analytical that music becomes a cold and unrelatable experience. But it has the musical focus and intensity of detail in the Player that existed in the NADAC. Not more so, or less so: the same so!

So, to recap on the review and not just the preamble, from issue 129, this is an authoritative, detailed, and transparent server, with already good sense of timing, but one that is possibly improved still further by the use of a clock input. It also has a very fine headphone amplifier in its own right (in fact, it could be the ultimate in headphone-driven servers) with two outputs; one for 3.5mm and one for full-sized jacks. Last time I tested the NADAC, I thought the menu-driven front display and volume control (and the browser control of the DAC) meant this might just be the best desktop computer DAC out there. Now, with the PC removed from the chain and the Player and Roon running the show, that still holds. There are strong contenders, though, but it's still an exceptionally good headphone amp.

Here, it shows its strengths in a direct way, rather than fed through power amp and speakers, but the same basic tonality holds. And Trentmøller's 'Chameleon' from *The Last Resort* on Poke Flat records (an old favourite) holds good. The level of detail in the treble lets those spooky, blowy sounds permeate the headphone sound, yet those deep bass tones are reproduced with both clarity and intensity. The experience is unnerving... which is exactly how it should be. The difference now is that the headphone output isn't the most direct way of accessing music through the Merging system, because you are no longer reliant on a webpage based music serving system. It now just works and works brilliantly.

In a way, Merging+Player is the poster child for Roon, although that is not to underplay what the Merging side of things brings to the party. The Merging+NADAC is a highly capable, very good sounding, studio mastering DAC for the home. Changes to RAVENNA have made it more accessible than ever before. And the moment you try the Merging+Player, the NADAC is forgotten like a middle-aged member of a teen band trying to stage a comeback. Roon transforms this from a hugely competent sounding DAC into a hugely competent

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Open-Standard Network Attached Server

Digital inputs: Ethernet (RAVENNA/AES67) on RJ45 connector, AES/EBU XLR, S/PDIF Toslink and RCA Phono, word clock input on BNC connector, 2x USB

Analogue outputs: 2/8 XLR outputs, 2/8 RCA outputs, ¼" and mini-jack headphone sockets

Precision: S/PDIF to 24 bit/96kHz PCM; AES/EBU to 24 bit/192 kHz PCM; Ethernet to 24 bit/384kHz PCM, DXD and DSD 256 maximum

Formats supported: PCM, DXD, DSD

Impedance: 40Ω (XLR and headphone output), 20Ω (RCA)

Max. output level: 6.1Vrms (XLR), 2.1Vrms (RCA), 4Vrms (headphones)

THD+N: 0.00022% (multichannel XLR and RCA), 0.00016% (stereo XLR), 0.0002% (stereo RCA), 0.00028% (headphones)

Dynamic range: 124dB(A) multichannel XLR, 130dB(A) stereo XLR, 120dB(A) stereo XLR, 123dB(A) stereo RCA and headphones

Dimensions (WxDxH): 43.5 × 43.5 × 9.5cm

Weight: 11kg

Price: £13,250 (2ch), £14,270 (8ch)

Manufactured by: Merging

URL: nadac.merging.com

Distributed in the UK by: Emerging

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sounding server that anyone can use. It not only shows what Roon can do, but lets the Merging design show what it can do in even sharper relief. Best of all, if you have a Merging+NADAC, you can upgrade to a Player. Who am I kidding, if you have a NADAC, you are about to get a Player. It's just a question of time. Very highly recommended. +