



Merging Technology Player + Power
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network DAC/streamer
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I don't suppose it's deliberate but some companies manage to come up with the most confusing naming for their products and Merging Technologies has joined the club. Originally the Swiss brand brought out the NADAC network attached DAC, essentially a digital to analogue converter with a network connection that meant you could send music data to it over Ethernet. Their next step was to create the Merging Player which is nearly identical to a NADAC except that it has a network streamer onboard, it has the same casework and name on the front but extra electronics inside. You see where confusion might arise. More recently they have released an external power supply for both NADAC and Player called logically enough, Power. But, and here's a little bit more diversion, the standard NADAC or Player cannot be used with a Power, it can only be used with units that have no mains inlet in the back, just a connection for the power supply umbilical. Owners of existing NADACs and Players can have them modified for use with the Power for the sum of £340.

Merging come from a pro audio background, they build the Pyramix multi-track recording system which they have been making for over 25 years, their speciality is DSD, a format that has always been rare in the studio environment. The NADAC grew out of the Pyramix Hapi and Horus converters but comes in considerably more lavish attire and with numerous refinements, including in the case of the Player a Roon Core which is effectively a PC that runs Roon software and gives end users an control app that is very hard to beat. This was a very canny move, Merging figured out that building a decent control app is very difficult indeed. Many have tried but few have succeeded to the extent that one might desire, my experience of the things is that there are a handful of well thought out control apps at best. By incorporating a Roon Core and providing a lifetime subscription to the service means that

Merging are able to offer a top notch streaming experience with none of the grief usually involved, and should you already have a lifetime sub £500 is knocked off the price.

[Merging-Player-Power-rear.jpg](#)



As the Player is also a DAC it has digital inputs in coaxial, AES/EBU and coaxial and optical varieties. The BNC socket looks like another coax input but is in fact a word clock connection. There are also a couple of USB slots that can be used with a hard drive with music on it, thus eliminating the need to have an external NAS drive. In most systems where a USB HDD connection is available navigating the drive through the app is not as straightforward as navigating a NAS. With Roon however you can incorporate music files from anywhere into the library and access them on the Roon Remote app, and that goes for Tidal as well where integration is particularly seamless. I have to admit to wondering why Roon has been so successful prior to using it with the Merging Player but now I get it, it's pretty cool.

The network connection on the Player is not a standard RJ45 but a Ravenna variation on that theme, this looks like an RJ45 in an XLR type plug/socket but Ravenna is not just a connection, it's a way of life, well not quite. What it is however is a centralised clocking system that ties the digital clocking of source and DAC together, if the source is a Ravenna device that is. At present this is limited to pro gear but I'm told that the likes of Auralic, Aurender and Innuos are looking at implementing it as this can be done through software. I expected to be told that the NADAC has a ladder DAC of the discrete variety that you get with a few of the more highly regarded converters but no, this has an ESS Sabre chipset, the

sort of DAC that you can find on some fairly affordable kit yet the results indicate that it's not what you use but the way that you use it that counts, I've not heard a better chip based converter and few that sound as good of any sort.

Headphones are accommodated by both sizes of output jack, a nice touch that means there's no need for adaptors which inevitably compromise sound quality. There is also a separate DAC feed for the headphone output which means that you have to select headphone from the menu and make sure the source is set to 'Main' for it to work, a slightly arcane approach that might take a bit of getting used to. You get to the menu by pushing the volume knob and this is where inputs can be selected and absolute phase altered. A variety of other features can be selected within Roon's DSP settings including upsampling, filtering and roll-off for DSD. You'll note that the Player has no wireless functionality, there's no Bluetooth, Airplay or Wi-Fi connectivity. This is a pretty purist product whose only elaboration comes from the Roon core streaming engine which is open to Tidal but not Spotify or Qobuz.

Sound quality

One thing I usually do early on with DAC/preamps is establish how good the volume control is because this is often a limitation and you are better off maximising output level and using a separate preamp. Here however I could not better the Merging volume control which has better bass extension and power than either of the preamps I could muster; a passive Townshend Allegri and an active AVM PA 8.2. Both brought something to the party but it was hard to beat the Player on its own which is a remarkably revealing piece of hardware. Hooked up to the Innuos [Zenith SE](#) server it delivered a richness of detail that is very rare indeed. I can't recall having heard so many of the tiny sounds that combine to produce the overall texture, tone and depth of the sound of instruments and voices. This is partly because this system is so strong in the bass, an area where digital traditionally excels but it seems is held back by most converters. It could be that the Roon software gives it a subtle boost in this respect, strong bass has always been popular in the US where timber frame construction means bass doesn't get reflected back into the room. But it's not excessive in any respect, it's just strong and full of tone colour and energy that gives the music so much body that it's frankly irresistible. I did the obligatory DSD vs PCM test which produced the usual extra scale that DSD lovers enjoy but didn't sound quite as natural as PCM with classical material. Shelby Lynne on the other hand seemed to time better via the 1-bit system and that's nice. But most of my favourite material is in PCM and ZZ Top worked a treat on this medium, 'Enjoy and Get It On' (*Tejas*, Warner Bros) coming on strong and dirty with fabulous separation of the instruments and almost analytical levels of transparency with no hint of the midrange forwardness that often passes for transparency. The Merging system delivers speed with depth and in such an effortless fashion that you can turn it all the way up and let the sound carry you away.

You don't get so much inky black background because this streamer finds information where others fail to do so, its noise floor must be incredibly low. Some recordings have very quiet backgrounds but a lot don't, usually there are harmonics and noises both musical and incidental down beneath the fundamentals and when these are combined it produces an effortlessly full scale rendition of a musical event that you would not guess was in the recording.

[NADAC-Player---Horizontal---no-text---10000px.jpg](#)



There's a fan recording of Ryan Adams and the Cardinals playing 'Hallelujah' available online (Live at Das Haus, archive.org) which is exceptionally good but not usually this substantial and for that matter, magical. It's a bit special this Merging gear. I also played an old chestnut in the form of 'Babylon Sisters' (Steely Dan, *Gaucho*) which had a presence to it that I have not previously encountered, the drums are particularly strong thanks to Bernard Purdie's phenomenal playing and the expertise of a whole army of engineers and producers. The sound of 'My Old School' from the earlier album *Countdown to Ecstasy* is less polished but has real 'body', it's solid in the room and has great punch not to mention multiple layers of sound that are opened up by the Player to an uncanny degree. There is sooo much detail presented in a coherent, high energy fashion, with no smoothing and no thickening.

I wondered if it could be a bit more snappy and tried some of the other filter settings in Room, the 'smooth minimum phase' option gives a good balance of speed and detail resolution but the 'precise linear phase' option that seems to be the default does produce better stereo and pretty tolerable timing too. It's a system and taste dependent choice but the options are easier to hear than usual because the NADAC is so revealing. Just put on Tom Waits' '16 shells from a Thirty-Ought Six' (*Swordfishtrombones*, Island) and revel in the brilliance of Victor Feldman's percussion playing, the metal instruments literally shine with vitality while the barker gives one of his finest performances. An older recording, 'Jack Orion' by Bert Jansch is clearly very crude with guitar and voice plus strange noises on the left channel and another guitar on the right, this can sound quite brash on some decent DACs but the relaxed character of the NADAC lets more of the original sound through and reveals the huge difference in sound of the two guitars.

The headphone output is in the same class, totally effortless and distinctly high resolution. With Audio Technica ATH-ADX5000 headphones good recordings sound phenomenal, solid, palpable and replete with detail. Which means that there are huge differences between recordings, Michael Wollny Trio's *Wartburg* is a deep, and rich recording with excellent bass and lots of 'air', Steely Dan's 'Gaucho' was a very polished recording by the standards of 1980 but lacks the body of good modern examples, it is however a fabulous piece of music, that much is obvious.

[Merging-Player-Power.jpg](#)



Toward the end of the review period Steve from Ultimate Stream brought over a standalone Player to contrast with the Player+Power combination. It's worth saying that in standard guise this is a pretty remarkable DAC with many of the characteristics heard when the Power is added, principally an extraordinary sense of ease combined with very high resolution. But going over to the two box system did bring significant benefits primarily in the form of a lower noise floor that allowed more fine detail and a more spacious soundstage, there's so much image width it's almost as if the speakers have been moved further apart. More fundamental still is an improved sense of timing, I'm not sure how it does this but it must be to do with the extra resolution and the coherence with which it's presented.

The Merging Player and Power combo is one of the very finest digital sources you can buy, the price is high but the standard of build and finish, the ease of use and fundamentally the degree of fidelity is in the very highest league. Combined with the Zenith SE it makes other very good DAC/streamers sound as if they are missing great chunks of the detail in recordings and warrants putting up against the best that dCS, MSB and any other high end digital specialist brand you'd care to mention. I can't recommend it too highly.

Specifications:

Type: Network streaming DAC & power supply

Stereo THD+N @1kHz: single ended -114 dB (0.0002 %), balanced -116 dB (0.00016 %)

Dynamic Range: single ended <123dB(A), balanced <130 dB(A)

Streaming Inputs: Ravenna RJ45 network, 2x USB drive

Digital Inputs: AES/EBU, Coaxial, Toslink

Wordclock input: BNC

Analogue outputs: Balanced XLR, single ended RCA, 6.3mm & 3.5mm headphone jacks

Supported Digital Formats: PCM from 44.1kHz to 192kHz in 24-Bit, DSD64, DSD128, DSD256

Output Voltage: 6.1 Vrms at 0dBFS (XLR), 2.1 Vrms at 0dBFS (RCA)

Control Software: Roon (lifetime subscription included)

Dimensions WxHxD: Player 435 x 95 x 435mm, Power 435 x 95 x 435mm

Weight: Player 11kg, Power 17kg