

Chord Hugo TT

One Step Beyond



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Early 2015, Chord Electronics launched the Hugo TT da-converter and headphone amplifier, the bigger brother of the already legendary Chord Hugo. The Hugo TT (which stands for Table Top) is an attractive looking device, approximately the size of a hefty paperback novel. Although it has a rather large battery under the hood, it is specifically meant for home use. So how does it's musical performance compare to that of the stunningly good Hugo?

CHORD HUGO TT

Chord Hugo

When I wrote my [review](#) of the Chord Hugo (only available in Dutch) I was very enthusiastic about the musical performance of that pocket book sized da-converter and headphone amplifier. In fact, I still don't know any converter in its price range that speaks to the heart so directly. But there was some mild criticism too - not mentioned in the review, by the way. The Hugo is, no matter how you look at it, a rather dualistic device: a da-converter and a headphone amplifier. And besides that, it also had to be 'portable' or 'moveable', as I prefer to call it. And that came with some compromises, especially the size of its enclosure, which in turn resulted in some limitations regarding its connectivity. For instance: the Hugo does not have a 'normal size' USB connector, even though that should be considered its most important input. But it's 'just' a micro-USB, and that will give the discerning audiophile a rather limited choice of better USB cables. And although the analog out-

put has full-size RCA connectors, they are mounted flush with the enclosure's surface and the hole around them does not allow for interconnects with 'fat' plugs over a certain diameter. However, reading this should not lead to the conclusion that there is anything really wrong with the Hugo, it is just...well...when you are at this level of sound quality, it would be nice if some of these details were laid out just a little more robust. Enter Hugo TT...



FPGA chip

At the heart of the Hugo TT we find the same programmable FPGA-chip that is in the Hugo (and the Mojo at that...) which contains Chord's own proprietary code for da-conversion. The result of that is a rather unique da-converter that is literally second to none when it comes to measured values of noise and distortion. No manufacturer of 'traditional' converter chips even comes close. And there are more differences and extras: true balanced XLR analog outputs besides the RCA analog outputs, an additional BNC coaxial digital input and a full size type-B USB input. The battery has doubled in size (and in the Hugo TT it is supported by a 10 million uF 'supercapacitor') and it's only purpose is to act as a power buffer to feed the Hugo TT's inner workings with the cleanest possible stabilized power. Another extra on the Hugo TT is it's alphanumerical LED display and a remote control for volume and source selection. Oh, and all connections (besides the headphone outputs, obviously) are on the back panel, which makes placing it in your hifi rack much easier and straightforward than with the one-side-in-other-side-out connectors on the Hugo.



Listening to the Hugo TT

During the final and decisive listening test, I used an AudioQuest Carbon USB to hook up the Hugo TT to a dedicated Mac mini, running Audirvana+ and JRiver player software. A pair of AudioQuest Yukon analog interconnects was used to feed the TT's signal into the amplifier. Two tracks were chosen for their musicality and their recording quality; *We Can Still Learn* by Kuba, from the album *Free Ranger*, and *Battalia*, from the wonderful album *baroque Splendor*, on which Jordi Savall and his fantastic ensemble perform works by Heinrich Biber. It seemed logical to compare the Hugo TT to the Hugo, so that's what I did most, but I started off with the Hugo 2Qute, which is quite a bit cheaper and contains comparable digital and analog circuitry, but no battery. The price-gap between the 2Qute and the Hugo TT is wide and deep, and although I really love the 2Qute in its price range, it was no competition for the Hugo TT. There was so much more spaci-

ousness, authority and detail that I didn't even notice at first that the 2Qute also had a different character. Only slightly, but nevertheless very defining. And thinking back at the Hugo review, I remembered that I had noticed it before. The 'valve-like' quality that made me fall in love with the Hugo almost instantly just wasn't there with the 2Qute. One could also say that because of that the 2Qute sounds a tad more modern and more 'matter of fact', and since I don't want to do it any injustice, let's just leave it there. For the money, the 2Qute is a great little DAC, period. However, it was now possible to conclude that the Hugo-branch of the family definitely has a different character.



Switching from the Hugo to the Hugo TT it took me about two seconds to hear that, although the Hugo TT comes from the same mold as the Hugo, it is vastly superior to its little sibling. In every possible way. Not a huge surprise, because the TT is twice as expensive, but the Law Of Diminishing Returns, which dictates that once you are at a certain quality-level you need to lay out a substantial wad of cash for just a minor improvement in sound

quality, just does not apply to this series of da-converters by Chord. The Hugo TT offered a substantially larger amount of spatial information, and the improvement in focus was actually shocking. Higher frequencies were abundant, but very clean and smooth as silk. That deliciously mild 'valve sound' was there with even greater persuasiveness, just like the warm and deep lower frequencies. The Hugo TT gives you a pinch less of the 2Qute's absolute tightness in the staccato kickdrum when you listen to electronic dance music, but to me that was not a big problem. The differences are minute and both converters have a near-perfect timing anyway, so let's not make a big fuss about it. Then I listened to the music of Heinrich Biber by Jordi Savall, the Hugo TT sounded a lot more 'analog' than the 2Qute, and compared to the Hugo it offered more vibrant colours and 'rounder' dynamics that (and this may sound like a contradiction) had more power. The music was less edgy, played with more ease and offered more natural detail in a very organic way. For instance: the reverb of the church where the Savall album was recorded was more beautiful and more lifelike than I had ever heard it. The feeling of 'being there' was overwhelming, the sound embraced me and made me sink slowly into that pink cloud of musical bliss.



Well...

At times it can be very difficult to come up with a conclusion that effectively sums up everything that was said before, but I can be very brief about the Chord Hugo TT. Despite its 'above average' price I think it's a stunning DAC. But now it seems that I took a bit of a chance when I called the smaller Hugo 'downright musical', because now I have to come up with a fitting superlative for the Hugo TT. And since 'musical' is an absolute property, that superlative poses a bit of a linguistic challenge. So as a rare exception to my own rule I must revert to the rather iffy phenomenon called 'hyperbole'. I just can't help it. And only because I had the chance to listen to the new top-end DAC by Chord called DAVE, shortly after listening to the Hugo TT, I have to grant it the honorary title Supermusical. Sorry, but that will have to do. Because Ultramusical has been reserved for the DAVE...



Extra information

For more information about the Chord Hugo TT usb da-converter and headphone amp, please visit our art`s excellence webstore:

[Chord Hugo TT](#)

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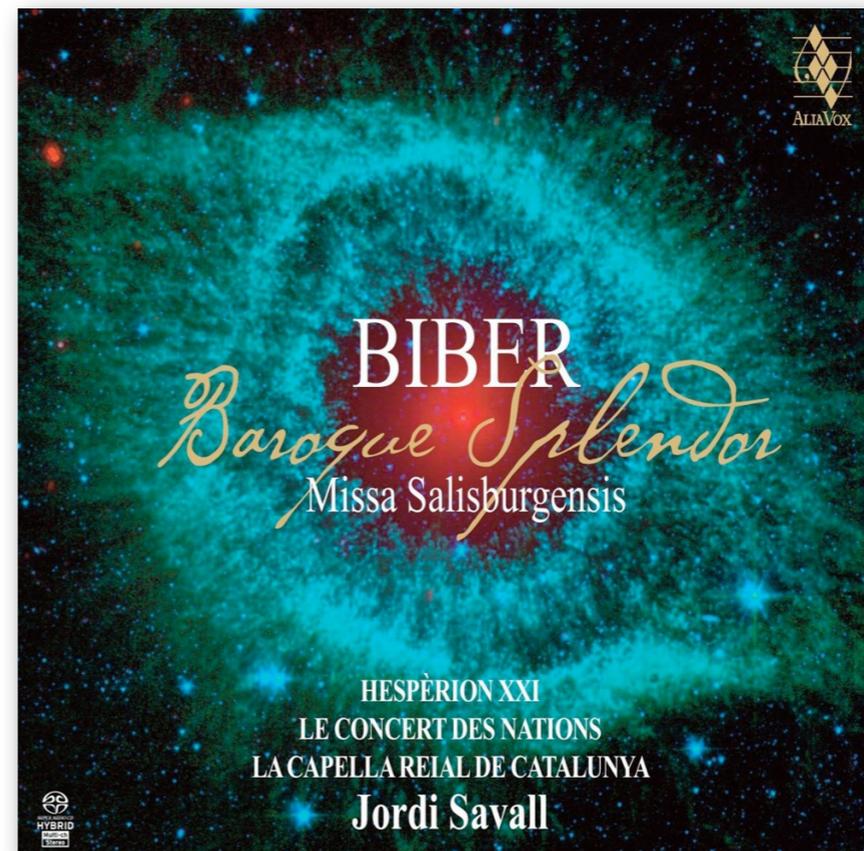


Kuba - Free Ranger
Jordi Savall - Biber: Baroque Splendor

Tidal



Kuba - Free Ranger
Jordi Savall - Biber: Baroque Splendor



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