



# Back To Black

## Listening to the Wadax Reference Power Supply and Akasa Reference DC cables

by Roy Gregory

In my recent review of the complete Wadax Reference DAC and Server set up, including the Reference Power Supply (for the Server) and the Akasa Reference DC leads, I felt that a deep dive into the individual contributions of each and every part or option was a step too far in what could already be justifiably described as a sprawling article. Instead I promised to cover the various contributions and options offered by the arrival of the external power supply for the Server and the upgraded DC leads in a separate piece. Well, here it is...

The Reference Power Supply is a dedicated partner for the Reference Server. It is built into a variation on the now familiar Wadax tripartite chassis, aesthetically a halfway house between the twin PSUs that come with the Ref DAC and the monolithic head-units themselves. The central element is recessed and graced by a touch screen, of which more anon. Around the back you'll find an IEC input, a ground terminal and a DC output – which

is about par for the course as far as PSUs go... The whole unit weighs in at a substantial 40kg and features multiple, dedicated transformers and cascaded regulation stages, resulting in what Wadax claim is the quietest power supply they've ever made – or measured. Price is \$49,700.

The Akasa Reference DC leads are offered as an upgrade to the Standard leads previously supplied (a little like the Akasa Optical option over the standard USB connection). New buyers will need to specify (and budget for) Standard or Reference leads. Existing owners looking to upgrade can reasonably expect a trade in on their existing leads. The Akasa Reference DC leads feature massive, winged connectors reminiscent of those on the optical interconnect, along with bright red, embroidered silk sleeves. Inside you'll find latest generation silver/gold alloy conductors, metallurgy that goes at least some way towards explaining the \$19,800 price-tag for each cable.



▶▶ Given the option to add both the Reference Power Supply and no fewer than three Reference DC leads to a full Wadax front-end, that constitutes the best part of a \$105,000 upgrade. At that price the new Reference elements need to deliver serious performance advantages, sonically and musically. Fortunately, that's exactly what they do.

Presented with a big, fancy box and a bunch of cables, the natural inclination might be to reach straight for that massive power supply. After all, we all know how



big a difference power supplies make. But in this case the temptation should be resisted. Instead, start by listening to the Akasa Reference DC cables between the Reference DAC and it's twin outboard power supplies. The first reason is obvious: the Ref DAC already has its power supplies and you want to hear what maximising their performance can do. Secondly – and assuming that they improve performance – replacing the DC umbilicals will open the window wider; not just for any changes upstream (ie, the Ref Power Supply with or without the Reference DC lead) but for all digital sources.

Using optical disc as the source, replayed on the Atlantis Reference Transport, substituting the Reference DC leads for the standard umbilicals wrought a literally shocking difference in the musical presentation. The disc I was using for the first comparison was the Jordi

Savall/Concert des Nations recording of the Beethoven *3rd Symphony* (*Beethoven Revolution, Symphonies 1 à 5*, AliaVox AVSA9937, 3x SACD). The opening tutti exploded from the speakers with a suddenness and impact that was wholly unexpected. There was a heightened sense of purpose and energy in what is already an incredibly lively and vibrant recording. The drumbeats detonated behind the orchestra, the jumps in dynamic range and instrumental density leapt into the room with an incredibly natural presence and immediacy.

If you want to feel like you are in the same space as the musicians, this upgrade definitely takes you there!

The drama and energy that characterizes the Savall/CdN performances was a serendipitous choice, fastening instantly on the areas where the Reference DC cables impact performance. But understanding just how and why the musical and sonic difference is so

dramatic needs a little more explanation. The disc in question gets a

right royal boot up the dynamic fundament – and

revels in it. But that's not all that's going on. Break down the performance and you (perhaps not surprisingly) discover that the obvious increase in dynamic range, transparency, focus and definition is built on the basis of a significant drop in noise floor. Audiophiles and reviewers are awfully fond of talking about 'blacker backgrounds' and it would be easy to resort to that cliché here. However, it's more instructive to look at the impact on a more granular level. Look past the impressive energy and musical bombast of the *Eroica* and what you discover is not so much 'blacker' space between the instruments, but more sharply defined dimensions and separation, an absence of information bleeding into the gaps. Leading edges are crisper and



▶▶ more explicitly defined, climbing faster AND further. The spatial clarity extends through the soundstage and out to its limits. It also extends into the instruments themselves, revealing a greater sense of dimensionality and more developed harmonics. The drums that are such an obvious feature of the Savall performances are a case in point. Impressively solid and purposeful with the standard DC cables, the Reference cables reveal their hollow volume and the texture of their skins all while giving a much greater sense of the weight and energy that's injected with each strike. It's more than an incidental detail. It adds intent to their musical accents and depth to their atmospheric underpinning: the rhythmic hesitations and transitions that sprinkle the third movement flow more naturally, the playing and direction more articulate: the humour in the *pizzicato* passages that open the fourth is more obvious and makes more sense. Those examples are significant in that they illustrate just how the Reference DC cables operate on both the obvious sonic level but also on a more subliminal musical one, adding to the engaging, communicative qualities of the system. It also reveals perhaps the most important aspect of their performance – the way it functions as the icing on a (very considerable) cake.

What the Akasa Reference DC cables bring to the party in terms of greater resolution and a lower noise floor, wider dynamic range and more explicit dynamic discrimination is undoubtedly impressively effective. However, whereas their sonic impact might be considered a no brainer, it's real importance rests (and relies) on whether it works on a musical level. Without the structure and pattern to bind the dynamic fireworks together, without the security of a firmly defined temporal foundation, all that extra energy and dynamic contrast will serve only to pull the performance apart. The Reference DC cables rely absolutely on the structural and temporal integrity of the DAC's processing and output. And that matters because it puts the standard DC leads in context. Run the Ref DAC with those standard leads and you will get all of the time domain and amplitude benefits that have been so widely reported and translate directly into the most engaging and natural digital replay I or many other commentators have experienced. You also get the natural tonality and

harmonic development, weight and presence that the Wadax is rightly renowned for. The Reference DC leads just deliver more of the same – and very welcome it is too. They increase the DACs expressive range and sharpen its musical intent still further. But – and this is the most important point – they in no way invalidate the performance with the standard leads. The DAC and Server already set the standard for digital replay. Adding the Akasa Reference DC leads to the DAC just raise the same bar that much higher.

Playing Eliza Gilkyson's emotionally coruscating album *Land Of Milk And Honey* (Red House Records, RHR CD174 – perhaps one of the most insightful commentary on the gulf in understanding between America and the rest of the world that I've yet heard) the Reference DC leads add a depth and genuine pathos to the emotional desolation of songs like 'Tender Mercies' or 'Ballad Of Yvonne Johnson', expose the ennui of 'Separated', bring a burgeoning sense of hope to 'Wonderland'. They're all great songs, beautifully performed. The performance is that much better, the vocals that much more direct, the recording so much more convincing with the DC leads in place. Forgetting the system, getting sucked into the songs becomes less of a reach. So much so that you no longer even notice it happening.

With the Reference DAC so clearly enjoying the company of the Reference DC umbilicals, it's time to move on to the Reference Server, starting with the addition of the Reference Power Supply, initially using the standard umbilical to hook it up. Unlike the CH Precision components, adding the external power supply, you don't need to maintain the head unit's connection to the AC supply. The Server's power supply is still utilised for housekeeping functions (isolating those from the signal path) but it takes its own feed from the Reference PSU. That means that you simply swap the power cord you were using for the Server to the Reference Power Supply. As usual, you will need to address the mains polarity of the new component. In an extremely welcome innovation, the Reference Power supply offers on-the-fly switching of AC polarity from its front panel. The display tells you the phase of the incoming AC polarity and the touch screen allows you to switch the phase of the output between 0 and 180 degrees. Anybody who has experimented with mains polarity will be familiar with the benefits of getting this right: increased focus, ▶▶

▶ separation, dynamic range and low-frequency definition. I'm not sure if it is a result of the instantaneous switching on the Reference Power Supply, but in this case the differences are both immediately and unusually apparent – even obvious. Once you've sorted that, you are ready to listen in earnest...

## Better beats!

Adding the Reference Power Supply to the Server can only be described as a major upgrade. Playing a locally stored DSD64 file of the Shostakovich 1st Symphony (a live concert recording of Kurt Masur conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra) you can hear the difference before the music even starts. The familiar sound of the Royal Festival Hall (and its typically noisy, shuffling crowd) comes up with the mics, the space and the incidental noises much more clearly defined in space and depth. The sparse, orchestration of the quixotic, almost jokey opening bars is beautifully located in space, the contrasting location and tonality of each instrument distinct and individual. The double basses are wonderfully textured and float free of the stage – just as they should. The dimensionality of both orchestra and acoustic is both more stable and more natural. But it's not just dynamic range, transparency and separation that are improved. The temporal security and sense of flow are also fundamentally improved, whether it's the disparate instruments and phrases of the Shostakovich gelling into a single and more convincing musical whole, or the power and drive, pauses and percussive cannonades of Elvis Costello's 'Little Triggers' (*This Year's Model*). In fact, if you want to hear just what the Reference Power Supply does to not just the sheer solid substance of drumbeats, but the precision of their placement and patterns, I can think of few better places to start. The whole track hangs off of

those drum figures and if they aren't spot on, it really does die a slow, lingering death...

In the same way that the Server/PSU conjures the RFH acoustic, in the same way that it captures the way the energy of the orchestra comes off of the stage, it has an uncanny ability to capture the flow and presence in the performance. The Akasa Reference DC cables give you the Ref DAC but better. The Reference Power Supply makes a more fundamental change to the Server, rendering both locally stored and streamed files significantly more natural, rhythmically, tonally, dynamically and in terms of stereo



perspective. Particularly with acoustic music – whether pop, jazz or classical – the Server/Power Supply creates a solid musical presence in the room, one that ranges free of system constraints and draws the listener into the performance. Vocals are particularly captivating, the subtle details of diction and articulation combined with the almost physical presence particularly natural and convincing. Of course, the better the recording, the greater the pull, but even on mediocre and mainstream material, the sense of substance, uninhibited dynamics and fluid progress carries the listener along. There's such a natural sense of pace that I found myself anticipating familiar music exactly as I do at concerts.

By any standards, that's a remarkable performance, setting the Wadax Reference set up alongside the best ▶▶

▶▶ disc replay systems I've had the pleasure of using. As I noted in the system review, it can't match the absolute humanity and intimacy of the best record replay or the super stable spatial definition of the best optical disc (short of glass CD), but its sense of presence and musical purpose constitute its own musical super powers, powers that are unleashed once you add the Reference DC cables to the DAC and the Reference Power Supply to the Server. It's not so much that the sound of the Wadax is more life-like – more that it's more like life!

But what of the Reference DC cable between the Power Supply and Server? In sonic respects, the impact is similar to that

on the DAC, especially in terms of overall clarity, leading edge precision and the placement of notes, sudden dynamic response and presence, but – and it's a big but – the affect is rather different. Nor is it as simple as half the cable, half the sound? This is a question of overall quality rather than the simple quantitative uplift delivered with the DAC. In the context of the Server, the Reference DC cable certainly delivers more – but it also alters the balance of the sound, something that some systems (or files) can accommodate better than others. In one sense, the problem here is that the Power Supply has already done such a stonkingly good job of organising and filling out the Server's sound, that in musical (as opposed to sonic) terms, the added resolution, textural and dynamic niceties that come with the Reference DC cable fit more into the 'nice to have' than the 'must have' category.



Add to that the fact that the standard lead also does an excellent job and makes for a highly enjoyable and engaging performance and you've got the classic cost/benefit trade-off. Listening to Anne-Sophie Mutter play the Sibelius *Violin Concerto* (with the Staatskapelle Dresden on the album *Back To The Future*) the Reference DC lead adds clarity and bite, jump and dynamic impact, making for a much more immediate and incisive sound, but it's a sound that also demands more of the system and its set up.

The added dynamic snap, attack and transparency really work for the Sibelius, with its angular lines and reliance on articulation, from both the player and

the supporting orchestra. Adding the

reference DC cable draws finer lines and sharper corners. But move on to the jagged, strident style of the Lutoslawski *Partita, for Violin, Orchestra and Obligato Piano* that features on the same album, and those same clearly defined edges can start to cut...

In this situation, that added clarity and slightly spot-lit

sound can become altogether too much of a good thing. Likewise, in a system situation that exhibits any tendency to brightness, or playing files that suffer from hardness or glare. The Reference DC lead offers obvious sonic advantages, but it is also potentially unforgiving of flaws in partnering equipment, system set up or source material.

I could certainly see system circumstances in which the richer, creamier and less incisive sound of the Standard DC lead might put up a serious fight, might even be preferred. Listen to the Sibelius and it offers a fuller, warmer and arguably more emotive performance that certainly carries its own appeal. On the Lutoslawski there's no question that it delivers a safer and less demanding presentation, one that I could see many listeners, finding more comfortable, particularly long term and across a range of different material and different files. Do you want your system to offend? Real music



▶▶ can and does, as does real life, but that doesn't mean you want to invite it into your home. So this one comes down to listening preferences and system matching. Yes, the Reference DC lead does bring performance advantages to the Server/Power Supply combination, but the importance (and price/value) you place on those advantages may well vary. Back to back, the contrast is clear, but over longer term listening, both can prove extremely satisfying, albeit in slightly different ways. In this case, the cake is already iced and the Reference DC lead is the cherry on the top. I like cherries and in this case and in my system it's a cherry that is definitely nice to have... But not everybody will agree.

### Choices, choices...

What all this does is establish a clear hierarchy as concerns upgrade priorities. If you own a Reference DAC then the Reference DC leads are a no-brainer. If you own the Server as well, then the Reference Power Supply is equally compelling. If you can only do one or the other? That depends on your listening biases. If optical disc is still an important part of your listening then I'd opt for the DC leads first, on the basis that they lift the performance on everything you play. If however, you find yourself fully committed to streaming in one form or another, the Reference Power supply will definitely take precedence: its transformative influence on the sense and intelligibility of file replay is impossible to ignore. Once you've done both of those things (but only then), it's time to consider

the Reference DC lead on the Server. If you've already bought into the musical and performance advantages of the Wadax components, then both of these first two steps are going to be slam-dunk upgrades, steps that I can recommend unreservedly. Of course, in the overall scheme of things, given the cost of the Wadax front end as a whole, the price of a single additional DC lead might seem inconsequential. But the bottom line is that \$20K is still \$20K and I'd definitely advise listening to that step before simply rushing in. At least the Reference DC leads are plug and play and I can't see a Wadax dealer refusing to loan them to any customer who already owns a Reference Server and/or DAC! But I've a sneaking suspicion that when it comes to the link between Reference Power Supply and Reference Server, we haven't heard the last word from Wadax. 

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Wadax Reference Power supply - \$49,700 USD  
Wadax Akasa DC Standard leads - \$1,200 USD (1m)  
Wadax Akasa DC Reference leads - \$19,800 USD (1m)