Product of the Year Awards

Digital Format Converter of the Year

Berkeley Audio Alpha USB Reference Series Noise Isolation Device
$5995

This small unassuming product in a utilitarian chassis hides its near-miraculous ability to greatly improve the sound of a streamer/DAC combination. The Alpha USB takes in USB from a music server or streamer and outputs SPDIF or AES/EBU to your DAC. Its function is two-fold. First, the Alpha USB prevents noise in the server's output from getting into your DAC and degrading performance. Second, the Alpha USB reclocks the signal with a high-precision clock for better timing accuracy and thus improved sound. We've long been fans of the original Alpha USB, but the new Alpha USB Reference takes the performance to another level. It employs two of the esoteric and expensive clocks developed for the company's flagship Alpha DAC Reference digital-to-analog converter. The unit is divided into two sections—a "dirty" side that connects via USB to the server or streamer, and a "clean" side that outputs a noise-free, high-precision signal to your DAC. We've yet to discover a digital front-end that the Alpha USB, and now the Alpha USB Reference, has not significantly improved. (361)