

stereophile

Lector Strumenti Audio Digitube S-192 D/A converter

By Art Dudley



Ten years ago, the average consumer was unaware that he or she needed an e-book reader. Since that time, neither those people nor the authors whose books they consume have changed very much. But the people in between have grown restless and unsatisfied, and it is they who call the tune. Consequently, many of you have gone from owning books to sort of, kind of owning books (and sort of, kind of not).

Just as the publishing industry has devised a new way to empty your wallet, so has the record industry found a new way to entice you into buying *Kind of Blue* for the umpteenth time (footnote 1). That's depressing. But, on the bright side, the latest way of buying digital music has ushered in a new way of playing digital music at home: through a perfectionist-quality digital-to-analog converter with a USB input. And because that technology brings with it a new and honestly better way to listen to CDs—by playing them as perfectly ripped files, without waking the noisy and cognitively challenged guard dog of error correction—I am inclined to simply, in the words of onetime Texas gubernatorial candidate and Petroleum Hall of Fame inductee Clayton Williams, lie back and enjoy it.

And so another promising variation on a new and fruitful formula has come my way, this time from the same region of the present Italy (footnote 2) that gave us Nicoli Amati, Andrea Guarneri, and

Antonio Stradivari. **Lector Strumenti Audio**, a 32-year-old company that made a splash in the US not long ago with tubed CD players that received praise for both their musicality and their reasonable prices, has introduced their **Digitube S-192** (\$3595), a multiple-input D/A converter that is decidedly USB-friendly, and whose model name gives a clue to its reportedly high-resolution performance.

Description

The **Lector Digitube S-192** is built into a chassis that's well styled without silly excess. A two-piece steel clamshell comprises the major portion of the enclosure, with steel front and rear panels and a sedately pretty faceplate of acrylic, with a tinted window for the digital display. The faceplate also includes a small pushbutton for toggling through input choices—the **Digitube's** only user control, apart from its side-mounted rocker power switch—and a row of five blue LEDs to indicate which input is currently in use. These correspond with five sets of rear-mounted input jacks: two electrical S/PDIF (RCA, BNC), one optical S/PDIF (TosLink), one AES/EBU (XLR), and, of course, one USB (Type B).



The well-finished chassis, supported by three nicely made alloy-and-rubber isolation feet, is filled with a total of seven circuit boards, on the largest of which are the power-supply and audio-output components—the latter including the pair of ECC81 dual-triode tubes that account for another portion of the Lector's name. Two boards adjacent to the rear panel handle the digital-input chores, the smaller built around a Tenor TE8802L USB streaming controller chip. Yet another board plays host to a 32-bit AK4397 DAC chip from Japan's Asahi Kasei Microdevices Corporation (AKM), supported by an AKM AK4113VF digital audio receiver chip. The parts quality is very good throughout, and I was impressed that current-to-voltage conversion appears to be handled by discrete resistors. In contrast with the makers of other recent source components, Lector has eschewed the use of a switching power supply, opting instead for a more traditional supply built around a toroidal mains transformer of reasonable size and apparently good quality. An unusually hefty, hand-terminated, detachable AC cord is supplied as standard.

Installation and setup

I used the **Lector Digitube S-192** as a line-level source in my usual system, with Shindo's [Masseto preamplifier](#) and Corton-Charlemagne mono amplifiers, and with [Altec Valencia](#) and [DeVore Fidelity Orangutan O/96](#) loudspeakers (having recently purchased my review samples of the latter). USB cables were a 1m length of AudioQuest's high-value Carbon and a 2m-long Wireworld Revision—the latter a gesture toward at least minimal parity with my current digital reference, the Halide DAC HD, which is hardwired with 2m of WireWorld's Starlight USB cable. The tubed Lector ran slightly but not excessively warm to the touch.

In addition to using the **Digitube** as a USB-input converter, I also tried two of its remaining four inputs: TosLink, driven by my Apple iMac's PCM audio output, and RCA coaxial, driven by the non-DSD digital output of my Sony SCD-777ES SACD/CD player. But I primarily relied on the Lector Digitube as a USB source with my iMac, using Stephen Booth's [Decibel](#) (v1.2.11) music-playback software for all music files and Apple iTunes for streaming FM broadcasts. Regarding the latter, and while noting the unsuitability of MP3 files for most reviewing chores, let me also note that WCKR, my favorite Internet radio station, sounded fine through the Lector, with sufficient sonic presence that the cowbell in Bix Beiderbecke's 1927 recording of "I'm More than Satisfied" made my own cognitively challenged dog bark from the other room.

The **Digitube S-192** is supplied with a CD-R containing a user's manual and the various device drivers required for Windows installations. A driver is not required for Apple OS X systems, but in my first few installation attempts I noted that my iMac had difficulty finding the Digitube. Lector anticipates this—the manual advises users so confounded to simply break and remake the USB connection. I did, and that worked just fine, the Lector now appearing in OS X's Sound/Output window as a selection named "lector-a." After those minor early difficulties, my computer seldom failed to recognize the Lector, even after multiple un- and re-installations for review purposes.

The **Lector Digitube S-192** otherwise performed without apparent flaw during its time in my system, its only idiosyncrasy being a rather too audible relay, the clicking of which could be heard from across the room when I manually changed tracks. The sound didn't disrupt the music, of course, but it got a bit old after a while.

Listening

Right off the bat, and in comparison with the far less expensive Halide Design DAC HD (\$450), the **Lector Digitube S-192** had a more powerful, more "physical" bottom end and, to an even greater extent, a more extended treble range. The latter quality brought with it a greater-than-average capacity for conveying texture, which served well the very sweetest and highest-quality recordings—and made a small handful of noisy ones a bit less pleasant. An example of the latter was "I'm Not the One," from the Black Keys' *Brothers* (ripped from CD, Nonesuch 523994), the grungier textures in which were laid a little too bare for my tastes, compelling me to switch from the mildly relentless Altec horns to the more civilized DeVore O/96s for the remainder of my listening. That said, the Lector did an exceptional job of communicating the impact of the kick drum, and the subtler nuances of force in the electric bass lines.

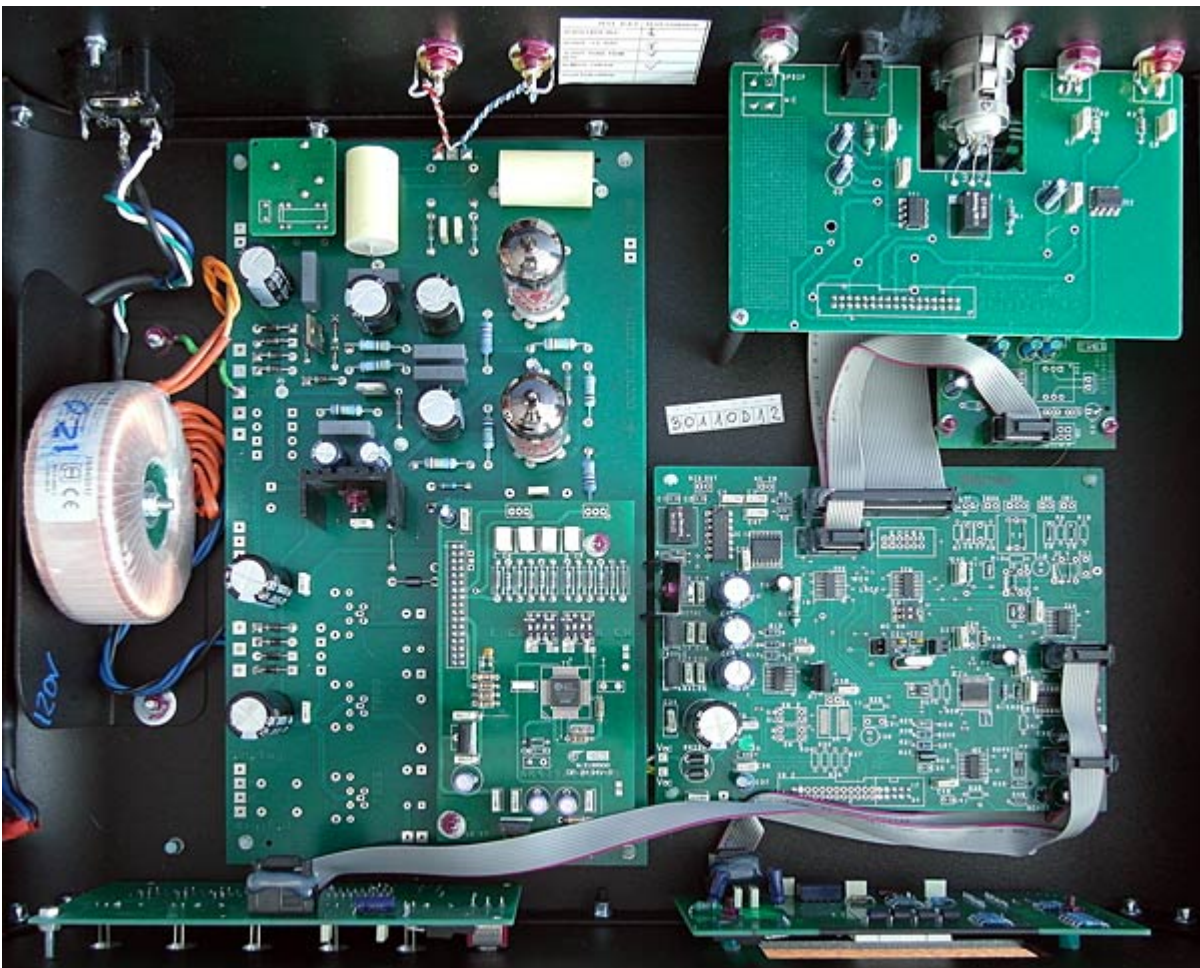
Footnote 1: I intend no condescension. Ten years ago, I was unaware that I needed handmade braided leaders for my fly-fishing lines, a conical-burr grinder for my coffee, and another guitar. Who could have seen *those* coming?

Footnote 2: It wasn't until 1870, well after the time of the historically great luthiers of Cremona, that Italy went from being a loose collection of city-states to the present unified nation.

Indeed, I was impressed with the Lector's ability to convey touch. To listen, through the Halide DAC HD, to "Scarlet Town," from Gillian Welch's *The Harrow & the Harvest* (ripped from CD, Acony ACNY-1109), was to hear the various sonic cues associated with a stringed instrument played with varying degrees of force; to hear it through the **Digitube** was to *hear that force*. And through the Lector, plucked strings in the scherzo of Mahler's Symphony 2, with Gilbert Kaplan conducting the London Symphony Orchestra (ripped from CD, MCA Classics MCAD 2-11011), were much more *physical*. On that recording, the Lector also delivered exceptional spatial

performance, with an abundant sense of depth and convincingly solid and stable image placement. I was surprised, however, to note that the Halide converter delivered a better, bigger sense of overall scale with this recording.

For all that, the Lector's greatest strength—which proved consistently impressive with classical fare—was how it allowed voices and instruments to emerge with their timbral colors intact. We can argue all day about the subtle minutiae of the color "correctness" exhibited by this or any other playback device—an argument that holds little interest for me up until deviations from the norm get *really* hairy—but the fact is, in this era of digital *and analog* playback gear that sounds bleached of all flesh and blood, a product capable of this degree of color saturation is a beautiful thing. So it was when I auditioned the XRCD remastering of Ravel's *Pavane for a Dead Princess*, recorded in 1957 by Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (ripped from CD, JVC JVCXR-0215-2). As with Kaplan's Mahler, the **Digitube** honored pizzicato strings in a manner that was beyond either the Halide or the somewhat older Wavelength Proton converter. Yet it also did a gorgeous job with massed violins—which have, in that recording, a sheen that I associate with RCA's orchestral recordings of that era—and it did a spine-tinglingly convincing job with the timbres throughout the woodwind section.



Yet another Mahler recording—my current favorite version of Symphony 6, by Pierre Boulez and the Vienna Philharmonic (ripped from CD, Deutsche Grammophon 445 835-2)—showed the **Digitube** at its best. The first thing that impressed me, after the believable power and impact of the opening chords, was the richly textured string sound, every voice announcing its presence with rosy realism—or so it seemed. I admit, there were moments when I wondered if the **Digitube** might have been exaggerating some textures. The side drum, for example, while put across with

wonderful impact and color, also sounded very slightly fuzzy during some rolls. I was also a bit puzzled by the way the Lector reproduced the brass in this recording, which, despite the Lector's extended treble, sounded darker than through the Halide; the less expensive converter afforded those instruments their full measure of glow. Go figure.

In spite of its classical sympathies, the **Lector Digitube** also performed well with rock and pop recordings. The electric bass in "Marrakesh Express," from *Crosby, Stills & Nash* (192kHz file, Atlantic), sounded deep, colorful, and tight, and the same was true of Paul McCartney's great bass line in "I Am the Walrus," ripped from the Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour*, from *The Beatles in Mono* (CD, Apple 5099969945120)—although with that remastering and other mono recordings the Lector was again bested by the Halide DAC HD in terms of scale. "Money Becomes King," from Tom Petty's *The Last DJ* (ripped from CD, Warner Bros. 48396-2), sounded sensationally good. The Lector brought out from this nice if somewhat plasticky recording more impact, detail, color, and involvement than did the superb Halide—compared to which, the Lector also did a superior job of separating the sounds of various instruments during the louder, more cluttered passages.



Still, it never got better than when I used the **Digitube** converter to play Charles Neidich and the Juilliard String Quartet's recording of the Brahms Clarinet Quintet, Op.115 (ripped from CD, Sony S2K 66285), the Lector delivering a near-analog portrayal of not just the colors and textures of the instruments but also the dramatic shadings—especially in the clarinet's stormier runs, after the switch back to the home key of B minor; the Halide sounded plasticky by comparison. The Lector went even further, reproducing a perfect and subtle envelope—almost a halo—of room sound around the gentle, final B major chord: a delightful and very satisfying moment that, better than anything else, sums up this product's musicality and charm.

Conclusions

I thoroughly enjoyed my time with the **Lector Digitube S-192**. I liked its distinctive yet non-overcooked appearance, its build quality, its flexibility, and, above all, the manner in which it

played music. Its flaws, such as they were, meshed well with my own preferences in music playback, its strengths even more so.

Even at its reasonable price of \$3595, the Lector faces strong competition, the most obvious being from the Ayre Acoustics QB-9 (\$3250). Experience suggests that the USB-only Ayre offers a shade more clarity and openness, at the expense of far less flexibility in input options; the Lector delivers timbral color and texture in greater abundance, at the expense of many more input options than some enthusiasts wish to pay for. Both are compatible with the highest-resolution digital downloads presently available (footnote 3). A dealer who has both products in stock and is willing to make an overnight loan would be worth seeking out (my attempt at an understatement). Pending such good luck, **I can heartily recommend Lector Strumenti Audio's Digitube S-192 for the musicality it displayed in my system, as well as for its attractive casework and its good value for the money.**

Footnote 3: But beware: In recent measurements, John Atkinson has noted evidence that some hi-rez downloads are actually derived from the same old 44.1kHz masters. I know: It came as a dreadful shock to me, too.

Sidebar 1: Specifications

Description: Single-box digital-to-analog converter. Tube complement: two ECC81/12AX7. Digital inputs: USB Type B, S/PDIF (RCA, BNC, TosLink), AES/EBU (XLR). Analog outputs: one pair RCAs. Sample rates supported: 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4, 192kHz (S/PDIF, AES/EBU), plus 384kHz (USB). Bit depths supported: 16 and 24 (S/PDIF and AES/EBU); 32 bits (USB). Maximum output voltage: 2.5V. Frequency response: 15Hz–192kHz, ±1dB "at hi-rez input 192kHz." Output impedance: 250 ohms. Signal/noise: 100dB, A-weighted. THD: <0.1%. Interface jitter: 20ps.

Dimensions: 16.9" (430mm) W by 4.75" (121mm) H by 11.7" (300mm) D. Weight: 17.6 lbs (8kg) net, 22 lbs (10kg) shipping.

Serial number of unit reviewed: 58592K12.

Price: \$3595. Approximate number of dealers: 5.

Manufacturer: Lector Strumenti Audio, Via Verdi 35, I-27010 Albuzzano PV, Italy. Tel: (39) (0382) 484165. Fax: (39) (0382) 481021. Web: www.lector-audio.com. US distributor: Hudson Audio Imports, 143 Bergenline Avenue, Closter, NJ 07624. Tel: (201) 768-6986. Web: www.hudsonaudioimports.com.

Sidebar 2: Associated Equipment

Analog Sources: [Garrard 301](#) turntable; [EMT 997](#) tonearm; EMT OFD 25 & TSD 15 70th Anniversary pickup heads.

Digital Sources: Halide Designs DAC HD USB D/A converter; Apple iMac G5 computer with [Decibel v1.2.11](#) playback software; [Sony SCD-777ES](#) SACD/CD player.

Preamplification: Hommage T2, [Bob's Devices CineMag Sky 30](#) step-up transformers; [Shindo Masseto](#) preamplifier.

Power Amplifiers: Shindo Corton-Charlemagne monoblocks.

Loudspeakers: [Altec Valencia](#), content/devore-fidelity-orangutan-o96-loudspeaker">DeVore Fidelity Orangutan O/96.

Cables: USB: AudioQuest Carbon, Nordost Blue Heaven. Interconnect (single-ended): Audio Note AN-Vx, Shindo Silver. Speaker: Auditorium 23.

Accessories: [Box Furniture Company D3S](#) rack (source & amplification components); [Keith Monks record-cleaning machine](#).—

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