

HiFi Rose RS130

Korea's HiFi Rose has moved upmarket with its first DAC-less, transport-only network player – the result is an impressive combination of purity and innovative technology
 Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

As if on a one-company mission to prove all the variations possible when it comes to network audio, Korean brand HiFi Rose has gone in very short order from being an upstart newcomer to its current role as a pillar of the digital establishment. And it's done so not by the simple expedient of taking one platform and pitching it at a range of price-points, but rather by expanding its offering to fill every niche from the all-in-one 'just add speakers' system [*HFN* Mar '22] to the highly-focused high-end network component explored on these pages.

Beginning as a side-project of an executive of Citech, a Korean company founded in the 1950s to make set-top boxes for TV before developing touchscreen Internet kiosks, HiFi Rose has a rapidly evolving lineup of models based around the company's in-house Rose platform, software, and hardware. Even the all-analogue 'steam punk' RA180 amplifier [*HFN* Jul '22] – itself another example of the company's ability to have consumers expecting the unexpected – offers phone/tablet control via its own Rose AMP app.

TOUCH AND GO

Now it's moved that process along even further, launching the RS130 'Ultimate Network Transport'. The company's most expensive streaming component yet at £4299, and the first model without a built-in DAC, it's a high-end example of less being more, focused entirely on delivering the best possible digital output into an outboard DAC of the buyer's choice.

This is much more than just a stripped-down version of one of HiFi Rose's existing network players so, as befits the price, there's a lot of interest going on here, and much of it new for this model. Even the dominant visual feature, that touch-

RIGHT: Linear PSU [top] with 'supercapacitor' UPS feeds separately regulated supplies for Dual/Quad-core Cortex CPU and ARM Mali-T860 GPU [centre]. Note 256GB NVMe SSD cache [black strip, left], 10MHz OCXO [right] and optical USB/Ethernet ports [bottom right]

sensitive display across the front panel, is larger and brighter than ever (but can be dimmed!), and has large, responsive virtual buttons making setup and operation easy.

HEAVY METAL

What's more, considering this is 'only' a transport, it's a solid, hefty beast, the thick, high-quality aluminium casework contributing to the 12kg bodyweight. As usual the top-panel is adorned with a three-dimensional version of the corporate logo, inset into the metalwork, and in this case providing ventilation for the circuitry within. Ahead of this central vent, four little crystal buttons along the front edge of the top-plate allow access to favourite presets, play/pause, muting and power functions. So the RS130 can be operated using its mix of physical and virtual buttons, as well as a Bluetooth remote handset, or – as is most likely – via the Rose Connect app on an Android or Apple device [see boxout, p65].

To the rear of HiFi Rose's transport, some things are familiar, and others less so. In the former category are the coaxial, AES/EBU and optical digital outputs, plus

an HDMI out to feed audio and video to a suitable TV or AV receiver. Connections are also provided for an external third-party digital clock, and there's a further HDMI-type port used to deliver an I²S digital audio stream to a compatible DAC.

QUIET PLEASE!

The RS130 also has a lot of USB ports – two for the connection of external storage, a Wi-Fi dongle or even an optical drive for disc-ripping, and one designated 'USB DAC' to output audio to your favoured device. There's also a 'USB Fibre' port, for use with a hub to isolate the unit from external noise, and the same applies to the 'Ethernet Fibre' port, which is the only way to create a wired connection to a home network. The fibre port uses a slide-in SFP transceiver, one of these with an RJ45 port for a conventional wired connection being supplied in the RS130 box.

By switching this for a suitable adapter I was able to connect the unit directly to my existing fibre network, and the gains in clarity and focus experienced suggest that users with copper wire networking would



be well advised to insert a short length of fibre to isolate the player from any network noise. Doing so will cost around £60 – for a copper-to-fibre converter, a couple of SFP transceivers and a short run of fibre 'cable' – and is definitely money well spent.

That was the only tweakery involved in getting the most from this network transport, no doubt thanks to the care that's been taken in its design. A new linear power supply layout has been implemented, including an over-sized transformer and a supercapacitor by way of reservoir and isolation. An oven-controlled master clock ensures the stability of the 'timing' and reclocking of all streams, and an SSD is fitted internally to cache data from USB- or network-connected drives.

It's also possible to insert a larger-capacity SSD into the RS130 via a hatch under the chassis to provide internal storage. A device of up to 4TB can be fitted, with the stipulation that this should

be no more than 7mm thick, and preferably a Samsung drive, as that's what the Korean engineers have tested. Think about £180 or so for a suitable SSD.

YOUR DAC'S BEST FRIEND

Here I have to introduce my usual caveat regarding digital transport devices such as this... All they can do is deliver the cleanest possible datastream to whichever DAC you choose to use downstream of them. Their 'sound' is more a case of no sound, allowing the DAC to work to its full potential.

there's a sidebar to all this, in that *HFN* reviews and PM's Lab Reports [see p67] have found that highly tuned digital transports will usually have the most effect with relatively modestly priced DACs. That was certainly the case here as the likes of the iFi Audio NEO iDSD [*HFN* Mar '21], the less expensive Chord Mojo 2 [*HFN* Apr '22] and the budget AudioQuest DragonFly

ABOVE: The 15.4in-wide TFT/LCD touchscreen duplicates the setup and music metadata functions seen via the Rose app [boxout, below]. Four 'crystal' control buttons are set into the top

Cobalt [*HFN* Oct '19] proved the most revelatory with the HiFi Rose RS130.

Indeed, I'd go so far as to suggest that, while the little AudioQuest 'DAC in a stick' might prove too much of a leap of faith for buyers of the RS130, either the Chord or iFi Audio DAC would be a very good match, and the latter has the advantage of a sort-of visual blend with the transport, too.

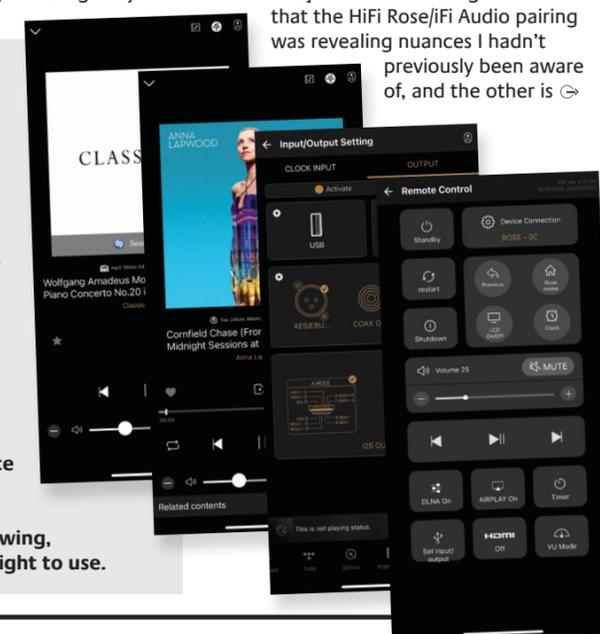
With the NEO iDSD in harness and the RS130 streaming the new, very crisp and dynamic Steven Wilson remix of ABC's *The Lexicon Of Love* album [Neutron Records/UMC; 96kHz/24-bit download], the ability of the combination to reveal levels of subtle detail in what is an exceptionally familiar recording was immediately impressive. Yes, the remastering has punched things up a bit, but even going back to my original 1983 CD copy [Mercury 810 003-2] showed two things: one is

that the HiFi Rose/iFi Audio pairing was revealing nuances I hadn't previously been aware of, and the other is

'Yes, the remastering has punched things up a bit'

COMING UP ROSES

The RS130 may have pretty simple basic functionality – digital data in, via a choice of ports, and then out again via a similarly wide range of connectivity – but it also offers a choice of means of control. The big, bright and clear touch-panel display is one way, as is the Bluetooth-connected remote handset [see p67], and (once the licensing is sorted) Roon will offer another approach. However, the Rose Connect app, free for Android and Apple/iOS smartphones/tablets, is the most appealing: not only does it put control in the palm of your hand, but it's also highly optimised for, and integrated into, the operating system of the player itself. Thus the HiFi Rose app provides direct access to every aspect of the RS130's setup and operation, overlaid with a slick and appealing interface for selecting and playing music, whether from NAS, USB, internal storage, or streaming services. Tracks are easy to find, thanks to a clear and logical system working across all the player's 'sources' to let you see at a glance what's on offer – even including video content to play on that front-panel screen or a connected TV. And the system will even suggest related content for your further listening, or indeed viewing, pleasure. It's well-sorted, quickly becomes intuitive, and is a delight to use.



LAB REPORT

HIFI ROSE RS130

Joining Aurender's W20SE [HFN Mar '23], Grimm Audio's MU1 [HFN Dec '20], the Innuos Statement [HFN Jan '20], Auralic Sirius G2.1 [HFN Oct '22] and Antipodes Oladra [HFN Aug '23], the HiFi Rose RS130 is firmly in the upper echelon of music storage/streaming devices. There is great flexibility in its digital input/output (bridge) functions while user-manipulation of the streams includes DSD-to-LPCM conversion, digital volume and the option of either native, albeit reclocked, or asynchronous/synchronous resampling. The latter's impact is typically very dependent on the attached DAC, but the RS130 did demonstrate a fractional improvement with synchronous (48kHz-to-96kHz) upsampling via USB, so this may well be worth trialling with your hardware.

Otherwise the RS130 was tested in as direct a mode as possible via files stored on a USB-attached SSD, its performance inferred via several outboard USB DACs including iFi Audio's NEO iDSD [HFN Mar '21], Mytek's Brooklyn [HFN Aug '17] and the dCS Vivaldi APEX [HFN Jun '22]. As we've seen in earlier reviews, AudioQuest's budget DragonFly USB hub-powered DAC [HFN Mar '14] offers a useful window on incoming data integrity and noise on the +5V supply – here the RS130 halved the 300psec jitter seen via a standard PC USB source to 156psec [see Graph 1], though <100psec is possible. Similarly, the repeating $\pm 33/66\text{Hz}/99\text{Hz}$ sidebands seen from iFi Audio's NEO iDSD DAC were all but flattened from 550psec down to just 8psec (native sampling) and to 6psec (synchronous upsampling). These figures are on a par with the best we've measured via Aurender's W20SE and N30SA [HFN Jul '23] storage/streamer solutions.

Finally, as on previous occasions, the onboard reclocking and full galvanic isolation offered by the dCS and Mytek DACs provides near-total suppression of any incoming jitter or noise on the USB or S/PDIF pathways. Very little difference in their inherent 5-10psec jitter was detected. Again, it's the more 'affordable' DACs that demonstrate the biggest uplift with the RS130. PM



ABOVE: The RS130 offers the option of wired and optical USB/Ethernet inputs alongside two USB-A ports for external media (a bay under the chassis accommodates users' own SSD/HDD hardware). Coax, AES and optical outs are joined by PS on HDMI, video on HDMI, and a USB-A output for connection to an external DAC

that I've now been buying various copies of this album for 40 years!

Going back to a recording a decade newer, Matthias Bamert's *Stokowski's Symphonic Bach* with the BBC Philharmonic for Chandos [CHAN 9259], the way the RS130 transport delivers these 'big band' arrangements of familiar pieces is certainly dramatic. Moreover, what these compositions lack in subtlety the recording more than makes up for in terms of orchestral weight and scale, as illustrated by the ample bass on offer here.

NO WORRIES

By the way, as with all the recordings I auditioned, I played the Bamert set from a USB drive plugged into the RS130, from an internal drive fitted into the transport, and streamed from my NAS array (after a lengthy scanning process to allow the RS130 to index my admittedly large music library). In each case the sound was indistinguishable, meaning the full flexibility of this transport can be used without worry.

With a more recent orchestral recording – the 2016 Dennis Russell

Davies box set of the complete Philip Glass symphonies, on the composer's own label [Orange Mountain Music OMM 0104] – the way the RS130 accentuates the rhythms in the music, and Glass's love for extreme bass dynamics set against subtle detail, is delivered to thrilling

LEFT: Although the RS130 can be accessed via the Rose Connect app, this handset also offers comprehensive control, with operations navigated via the large colour display



effect. Not least, I might add, in the Bowie-inspired 4th Symphony...

HIGH FLYER

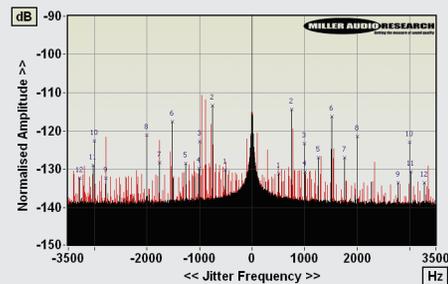
Depending on the digital output in use – and the capabilities of the connected DAC – the RS130 supports files at up to 768kHz/32-bit and DSD512, with downsampling and DoP transmission available respectively for DACs unable to match those extremes. HiFi Rose's transport is heard at its best with high-resolution files, for example delivering crystalline detail with the Hoff Ensemble's *Polarity* [2L 2L-145; DSD256]. Here there is an almost luminous view of pianist Jan Gunnar Hoff, bassist Anders Jormin and drummer Audun Kleive, fully recreating the 'you are there' impression that 2L label boss Morten Lindberg always strives to achieve.

However, the RS130 remains impressive in its handling of music at much lower data-rates, and I hugely enjoyed using it to listen to everything from Internet station Radio Paradise to some of the 2023 BBC Proms, where its clean feed made the most of the live Radio 3 stream. Do you need it? That's going to be a personal decision, but there's no denying this is a very superior network streaming source. ⤵

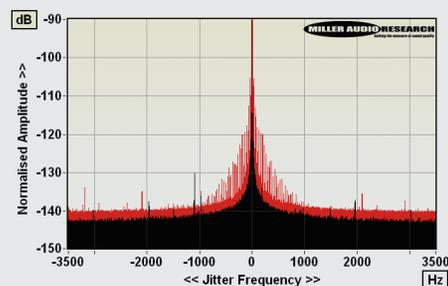
HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

HiFi Rose continues its steady progression upmarket with this transport-only streamer, retaining its innovative approach. Optical USB and Ethernet connections are deployed as a barrier to noise while the internal buffering of data from external sources – NAS and USB – helps tackle jitter and drop-outs. The result is a device that makes the most of almost any DAC you might try – even surprisingly inexpensive ones!

Sound Quality: 89%



ABOVE: 48kHz/24-bit jitter spectra from AQ DragonFly (via HiFi Rose RS130, black w/mkrs; via PC, red)



ABOVE: 48kHz/24-bit jitter spectra from iFi Audio's NEO iDSD DAC (via HiFi Rose RS130, black; and PC, red)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Digital inputs	1x Ethernet; 2x USB-A 3.0; 1x fibre USB
Digital outputs	1x USB-A; 1x coax/opt; 1xAES/EBU; 1xPS
Digital jitter (AQ DragonFly)	156psec (300psec via PC USB)
Digital jitter (iFi Audio NEO iDSD)	6psec (550psec via PC USB)
Digital jitter (Mytek Brooklyn)	7psec (8psec via PC USB)
Power consumption	18W (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	430x125x317mm / 12kg