



TEST.

KECES S4 – Part 2

26.12.2023 // DIRK SOMMER

Yes, you have already seen above lead picture here recently. But you certainly haven't read the associated new text. This is because Carsten Bussler didn't try out neither the input for the DS Audio cartridges, which operate with two light sources and light-sensitive resistors, nor the headphone output. I'll make up for that now.

Carsten Bussler, actually the tube specialist within the Hifistatement crew, owned a small Stax headphone model for a long time, but then lost sight of the subject a bit, even though his interest was recently rekindled: He currently has two promising representatives of this type of device at home. Of course, I could have sent him one or two headphones from my collection to use with the KECES preamplifier, but he preferred to concentrate on familiar territory and therefore left this aspect of the test to me, as I have been working with this type of transducer for years and also have a comparison object to hand in the form of the SPL Phonitor x.

However, things are a little different with the photoelectric cartridges from DS Audio: None of us have gathered any experience in this field. In view of the fact that DS Audio has officially published the specifications for the required phono equalizers, and more and more electronics specialists are now offering or at least announcing phono amps for this special type of cartridge system, it's time for Hifistatement to take up this topic too. But more on that later. So, let's stay with the KECES headphone output for now. This is designed as a 4-pin XLR socket, which leads to the assumption that there are two balanced amplifier sections feeding it. On the KECES website, there is no specific statement about the headphone output, only the rather generalized statement that the S4 has a "fully balanced design and a large selection of balanced (XLR) and unbalanced (RCA) inputs and corresponding outputs".



For headphones, the KECES has on offer only this four-pin XLR socket, which is common for balanced outputs

In any case, there is not the slightest problem when connecting the Sendy Audio Peacock with its balanced cabling to the KECES - on the contrary. The KECES is connected via the balanced Audioquest Dragon to the digital playback gear in the listening room, specifically to Chord Electronics' DAVE. On the record Ruta And Daitya, "Sounds Of Peru: Submerge / Awakening" would be the first track on the almost unheard second side. That's why I'm now skipping the familiar first four files in the digital version. S4 and Peacock do not only reproduce Jack DeJohette's strikes on the tablas within a virtual room in a precise and dynamic manner, but also, shortly before Keith Jarrett enters on the grand piano, discloses a slight change within the sonic image. Here the sound engineer has just turned up the controls for the second instrument. Fortunately, even such fine details do not distract from the music itself. On "Algeria", Keith Jarrett switches to the flute and the rhythmic drive of these almost archaic instruments doesn't leave me untouched for a second.

"You Know, You Know" continues with a drum kit instead of tablas and a heavily distorted Fender Rhodes with wah-wah effect instead of the flute: This is a melodic indulgence in tonal colours, dynamics and groove. The album then comes to a calm and relaxed close with "Pastel Morning". I will certainly no longer neglect the "second side" as reprehensibly as before - at least if it sounds anywhere near as finely depicted and yet as emotionally appealing through speakers as it does through the S4 and the Peacock combo!

For some time now, I almost can't do without "Deep As Love" from the album Changing Places by the Tord Gustavsen Trio when testing headphones and amplifiers: The calm, melodic track fascinates with an almost hypnotic musical flow, especially with beautiful timbres of the cymbals and brushes on the snare drum, a pleasantly "woody" sounding double bass and extraordinarily dynamic strokes on the strings of the grand piano. All of this can also be enjoyed when played through the Peacock and the S4. But we're not only generally talking about fascinating sounds here, so therefore the KECES must now take up the comparison against the Phonitor x. Of course, it sounds different by a few nuances, but I can't detect any differences in quality with this track. With the SPL, the instruments seem slightly smaller, further away and therefore surrounded by more space, although I have to admit that I am far less convinced when it comes to any kind of spatial imaging with headphones than with good loudspeakers. The KECES shows marginal advantages over the Phonitor with regard to dynamics, especially with the grand piano.

Perhaps it's Mahler's Symphony No. 5 with the Duisburg Philharmonic under Jonathan Darlington that can reveal more differences: The recording from the Living Concert Series conveys an astonishingly credible sense of spatiality - when played back through headphones. Tonality, vibrancy and transparency as well leave nothing to be desired. The KECES seems to concentrate on the more engaging, somewhat closer rendering of the in-



For the KECES S4, the Sendy Audio Peacock is an easy load to drive

strument groups, while the SPL suggests a larger stage with a certain depth. Nevertheless, the differences are surprisingly small when you consider that the Phonitor is a dedicated headphone amplifier with rudimentary preamp capabilities, whereas the KECES is a full-featured preamp with merely a headphone output. Without a direct comparison, I don't miss a thing when listening to music via headphones through the S4.

Although it may be unlikely that anyone will make use of the KECES preamp with headphones that are more expensive than the S4 itself, I'm trying out the Dan Clark Audio Stealth - still my benchmark for closed and open headphones: I simply don't know of a more power hungry model than the Stealth. With "Help Me" from Ten Years After's album Recorded Live, the KECES' volume display shows a three-digit value for the first time during



For me, the Dan Clark Audio Stealth is not only the tool of choice for recording purposes: I don't know of any open or closed headphone model that is more tonally balanced, but also more difficult to drive



There are no setting options for the DS Audio input on the KECES. The equalizer stages from the cartridge manufacturer feature several high-pass filters. When playing wavy records, the diaphragms of the speakers show a little more excursion with the KECES than with the 30 hertz setting and using the slightly more filtered output of the DS EQ. However, this remains harmless

the quiet intro: 105 out of a possible 128. Yeah, now even a slight hiss is to be heard. However, a tap on the virtual pause button quickly makes it clear that the noise must be coming from the analogue master tape, because now sudden silence sets in. No, not even the extremely difficult to drive Stealth can put the KECES in any distress. I should now - during the loud passage of the song - quickly find my way back into the two-digit volume range, otherwise it will get difficult to deal with the upcoming assessment of the input for DS Audio cartridges...

As aforementioned, DS Audio has published the specifications required for phono equalizers to match their cartridges, so that other electronics manufacturers can also offer input stages for these special cartridges. But that's not the end of the line: DS Audio exams their designs and presents them on their website if they meet the requirements. Among such illustrious names as Soul Note, Westminster Lab, Soudation or EMM Labs, also the S4 can be found here. No wonder, since you can spend up to 13,000 euros on a cartridge without an equalizer. However, DS Audio now also offers a kind of entry-level model, the E1, which retails for 1,450 euros, but this is not yet part of the third generation.

Instead of a thin aluminum plate, a much lighter one made of boron is mounted on the cantilever in the models of the third generation. The plate moves between the LEDs and two light-sensitive resistors, each of which modulates a constant current in time with the music, which equal the signals of the left and right channels. These currents are significantly stronger than those generated by moving magnet and moving coil systems. And since the small plate - even the aluminum version - is much lighter than coils on their cantilever or even magnets, the cantilever with its low mass and the diamond stylus can follow the groove deflections faster and more precisely. More on the theory and practice of DS Audio cartridges can soon be read here. The German distributor, High-Fidelity Studio in Augsburg, kindly made a DS-W3 available to me at short notice for a first approach to the - for me - new technology, and which the chief designer Aoyagi-san declared to be the new in-house reference, although it is listed at "only" 6,000 euros in their price list.

So, although I can explore what the DS Audio concept is sonically capable of in conjunction with the matching equalizer retailing for an additional 8,000 euros, I am ultimately working with a cartridge that is oversized for the S4. In order to be able to assess the capabilities of the KECES' special input reasonably well, I make it the centre of my listening room system by connecting one of its balanced inputs to the DS Audio equalizer first and

connecting the tonearm cable directly to the S4's dedicated input later on. The first surprise was just around the corner, when I listened to the KECES in the system instead of Einstein's The Preamp. The imaging remains just as large and stable as before, there are no changes in dynamics and no restrictions in clarity. Well, the sound was a touch warmer with the Einstein. But I don't even want to calculate how many S4s with a phono input and - as I now know - a very good headphone output you can get for the price of one The Preamp.

Of course, you have to accept a few minor losses in terms of openness when the KECES' dedicated input takes on the W3's signals instead of the DS audio equalizers. However, its virtues - speed, resolution and good imaging - also come into their own via the KECES alone. It really doesn't have to be the W3: I strongly recommend to try out the DS Audio E1 or - bearing in mind the enormous sonic performance of the S4 - the 003 as well. What you save on the preamp could then be invested in a cartridge of an even higher quality.

STATEMENT

I fully share Carsten Bussler's appreciation of the KECES S4. If you add up the quality of the headphone output and the DS Audio phono input to the outstanding build quality, the comprehensive features and the neutral, unadorned and sparkling clean sound, you can only start raving about the value-for-money ratio of the S4: For me, the KECES is one of the most exciting discoveries of the year!

LISTENED WITH

Turntable	Brinkmann LaGrange with tube power supply
Tonearms	Thales Symplicity II, AMG 12JT
Cartridges	Lyra Olympos, DS Audio W3
Phono preamp	Einstein The Turntable's Choice (balanced), DS Audio
NAS	Melco N1Z/2EX-H60 with external AudiaZ linear power supply
Streamer	Auralic G2.1 with 2TB SSD
Up-sampler	Chord Electronics Hugo M-Scaler with Ferrum Hypsos
D/A converter	Chord Electronics DAVE with linear power supply
LAN switch	Ansuz PowerSwitch D-TC Gold Signature, SOTM sNH-10G
Pre amp	Einstein The Preamp
Power amp	Einstein The Poweramp
Headphones amp	SPL Phonitor x
Loudspeaker	Børresen 05 SSE
Headphones	Audeze EL-8 Titanium, Sendy Audio Peacock, Dan Clark Audio Stealth
Cables	Goebel High End Lacorde Statement, Audioquest Dragon HC and Tornado (HC), Dragon XLR, Ansuz Speakz D-TC Supreme, Digitalz D-TC Gold Signature and Mainz D2 (2x), Rossaudio cable, SOTM dCBL-BNC75
Accessories	AHP sound module IV G, Audioquest Niagara 5000 and 1200, Synergistic Research Active Ground Block SE, HMS wall sockets, Blockaudio C-Lock Lite, Acoustic System Resonators, Artesania Audio Exoteryc, SSC Big Magic Base, finite elemente Carbofibre° HD, Harmonix Room Tuning Disks, Waversa Isolator-EXT-1, ADOT media converter (2x) with KECES P6 and SBooster MKII, Single-mode Duplex optical fibre cable, Ansuz Sparkz, Darkz Z2S, div. Sortz, PowerBox D-TC SUPREME, Thixar Silent Feet 20

MANUFACTURER'S SPECIFICATIONS

KECES S4 Stereo Preamplifier

Device category	Pre-amplifier with MM/MC/optical phono sections
Gain	MM: 52dB; MC: 72dB; optical: 32dB
Total harmonic distortion (THD)	MM: <0,02%; MC: <0,05%; optical: <0,04%; RCA: <0,0015%; XLR: <0,0015%
Signal-to-noise ratio	MM: 78dB (A-weighted); MC: 70dB (A-weighted); optical: 75dB (A-weighted); RCA: 110dB (A-weighted); XLR: 110dB (A-weighted)
Inputs	1x RCA MM/MC; 1x RCA optical; 1x RCA Line; 2x XLR Line
Outputs	2 x RCA Line; 1x XLR Line; 1x 4-pin XLR for headphones
Input impedance	MM: 47kohms; MC: 56/100/220/470 ohms / 47kohms; optical: >10kohms; RCA/XLR: 170kohms
Housing colour	Black (Material: Aluminum)
Dimensions (W x D x H)	300 x 279 x 66mm (both devices)
Weight	4,5kg (Power supply); 3,5kg (Pre amp)
Max. power consumption	90W; 0,5W (in standby mode)
Others	Remote control
Price	4000 euros

DISTRIBUTION

Robert Ross Audiophile Produkte GmbH

Address	Alemannenstr. 23 85095 Denkendorf
Phone	08466 905030
E-Mail	r.ross@robertross.de
Web	kecesaudio.de