



HoloAudio May KTE

November 7th, 2023 // WOLFGANG KEMPER

The internationally renowned digital-to-analog converters from HoloAudio have been around for some time. However, HoloAudio does not have a distributor or dealer in Germany. The Dutch importer, the hi-fi studio Magna Hifi near Alkmaar, has now sent us the top model May with Kitsuné modification for testing.

As a test editor, I sometimes live dangerously. It happens again and again that a test device musically outshines your own reference device to such an extent that after the test subject is returned, you no longer want to hear your own setup and want to own the test candidate. This happened to me recently with the Ideon Audio combination of Eos DAC, streamer and reclocker. Unfortunately, what spoke against purchasing the Ideon Eos station wagon was the price. In addition, there is subjectively a lack of equipment, which is perfect for the usual USB connection, but for me personally it didn't offer enough connection options. Because I am an avowed fan of I2S connections. However, these are just as rare as they are technically problematic, as there is no standard for contact assignment and cable lengths of over one meter also have a significantly negative effect on the sound. So I went looking.



The models from the Chinese manufacturer HoloAudio seemed particularly interesting to me, as they differ from similarly equipped competitors such as Denafrips and Audio-gd. These two Chinese brands are also not available for purchase in Germany. Magna Hifi has also been offering Audio-gd for many years and provides an excellent service, which I also used for my old D/A converter years ago. My tube preamp, which has long been an integral part of my audio chain, also comes from the Dutch. They now provide me with the top model among the HoloAudio D/A converters, the May KTE. KTE is the abbreviation for Kitsuné Edition and stands for extensive tuning developed by the US hi-fi specialist retailer KitsunéHifi. This is intended to give the HoloAudio May KTE maximum musicality compared to the less complex May Level 1 or May Level 2 versions, which of course also cost less. The name Kitsuné refers to a mythical Japanese fox creature, which also has meaning in other cultures. Accordingly, a fox logo adorns the Kitsuné Edition of the May and also its cheaper offshoot HoloAudio Spring KTE. According to the Magna-Hifi website, the May Kitsuné Edition differs from the standard Level 2 in the following points:

two hand-made 100-watt O-type transformers with 1.5 millimeters of pure silver wire instead of the 6N copper flat wire in the toroidal transformers

Hand-selected DAC modules with the best measured values are intended to increase the dynamics

CNC machined black/copper DAC module covers with laser engraved KTE logos on each module

pure silver-plated and rhodium-plated Faston connectors at the IEC input

Red Nano fuse with gold/silver, graphene and quartz filter materials

KTE capacitors instead of standard Vishay capacitors, KTE caps replace Vishay's on the L1/L2 models. Extensive testing demonstrated outstanding voice production and was more than just a subtle improvement over L1/L2

Custom-built HoloAudio 1000 volt 1 microfarad capacitors replace the standard Mundorf Evo silver/gold capacitors



That's a lot of upgrades and is reflected in the purchase price of 1030 euros compared to the May Level 2. The O-transformers are intended to generate a more homogeneous magnetic field than the usual toroidal core transformers and create the basis for the low noise of the May KTE. HoloAudio's D/A converters are all R2R ladder Dacs with a discrete design. HoloAudio mastermind Jeff Zhu is proud to have developed the first ladder DAC to truly handle DSD natively. The May Dac features separate patented R2R D/A converters for PCM and DSD with Jeff Zuh's patented "Linear Compensation" technology, shielded with copper. The May has a double monaural design and is divided into two equally sized housings for the power supply and the actual converter. The analog output stage is completely DC-coupled and discrete in Class A; no capacitors are used in the signal path. As preferred by the manufacturer, the May works without oversampling. However, you can still choose three different oversampling options in the menu: on the one hand there is pure PCM oversampling or pure DSD oversampling, secondly the option to convert everything into PCM, or thirdly to extrapolate everything into DSD. Since you can choose between these five variants while listening to music using the CNC-milled aluminum remote control, you can easily determine your preferred mode. I tested the May without oversampling because, in my experience, this conveys the most musicality. Short listening excursions into one or another oversampling variant seemed very promising for some music, but overall, non-oversampling is the right choice for me.



The copper control buttons are self-explanatory and offer access to useful setting options. The menu can only be accessed from standby as it offers the basic settings

In the basic device settings, the I2S contact assignment can be selected in four alternatives, which pleasantly expands the range of connectable sources. The HoloAudio standard is identical to that of PS Audio and therefore suitable for my system. The phase of the two balanced XLR outputs can also be changed, which can be useful in rare cases. The PLL function in the basic settings, which stands for Phase Locked Loop, requires a closer look: The current May is equipped with femto clocks and new, discrete ultra-high-performance voltage regulators. The PLL circuit was specifically designed for this application. By using Crystek VXCO clocks, every incoming digital signal is re-clocked. This feature can be enabled or disabled using PLL. What is it about? S/PDIF, for example, encodes the data signal together with the clock signal so that it can be transmitted with a single-core cable - plus the ground/shielding. Encrypting the data with the clock on the transmitting side and decoding the clock from the data on the receiving side creates jitter. Toslink, as a fiber optic version of S/PDIF, creates even more jitter when translating to light and back. I2S is generally better than S/PDIF because it transmits four separate signals: three clocks and one data. It does not require any encoding/decoding functions that produce jitter. To create a truly effective PLL, you need a precise clock source that is based on the clock of the signal. HoloAudio uses the CVHD-957 voltage-controlled crystal oscillator from Crystek. Instead of a problematic digital filter to synchronize the data with the clock, HoloAudio uses a FIFO buffer in May. FIFO stands for "first in first out". The May supports DSD 1024 natively and PCM up to 1536 kilohertz. Care has also been taken to reduce the unpleasant clicking noises when switching from DSD to PCM. A completely new code was written for the USB module to optimize

performance and significantly reduce latency. The USB module has two super-fast XMOS xu208 controller chips.



The display shows the information in a pleasantly unobtrusive manner, here the selection of oversampling to DSD

The high-contrast black and white matrix display constantly shows the PCM or DSD resolution in addition to the short-term information during input selection or selection during oversampling during gaming. If a CD player is connected via S/PDIF or AES/EBU, the May shows the tracks and playing time on the display, which it reads from the data inherent in the CD. This is a very rarely offered convenience, although this data information corresponds to the CD Red Book standard and is therefore easy to read. The workmanship of the CNC milled parts of the May KTE is excellent, the visual appearance of the two components standing one above the other with the copper sides and copper feet looks elegant, but not pretentious. Even with the basic settings described, there are no difficulties in using it; everything works itself out. Purists can switch off the discreet, easy-to-read display at any time. This can also be done using the remote control with its slightly clattering copper buttons - there really are people who find this annoying. Not all of these buttons are assigned to the May DAC, as other HoloAudio devices can also be controlled with the remote control.



The May offers two I2S inputs that can be configured in the basic menu. In addition to the usual RCA input for S/PDIF, there is also a BNC input available

Of course I listened to the May KTE via USB because this is the most common connection. In terms of sound, the I2S input was superior, but this certainly also has to do with the fact that my system uses an extremely complex connection cable, namely the Audioquest Dragon 48 HDMI with a length of 0.6 meters. For USB I used an Audioquest Diamond USB or a Habst USB Ultra-3. The Holo May KTE makes the tonal differences between the cables clearly audible and therefore there are plenty of options for fine-tuning with an appropriate cable. In my system, I2S not only sounded more concise, but also warmer with more fundamental tone intensity and a more realistic reproduction of voices, regardless of the pitch. Another technical advantage in my audio chain for the I2S connection compared to the USB connection is the fact that my Antipodes music server has an I2S output, which is musically better than USB because I2S is also reclocked internally. Therefore, the comparison of the USB and I2S interfaces is not entirely fair. HoloAudio has also implanted a particularly high-quality USB port, as mentioned in the technical description. However, when connecting and listening via I2S, the May Kitsuné in my setup shows what sonic capabilities it is capable of when it is powered by a correspondingly high-quality source and integrated into the overall system with a cable that fits the tone of the system. Of course, this applies to every connection, whether I2S, S/PDIF, AES/EBU or USB. I'm excluding Toslink, also because it is mainly used for TV. So a sound description that I determined with my best individual configuration, i.e. via I2S, is in principle also valid for the other connections. As a reference, I used my modified PS Audio DirectstreamDAC and - thanks to my friend L - the more expensive Soulnote D-2 for an afternoon.



The logos on the left back and the Kitsuné fox head on the housing show that this is the most complex version of the HoloAudio May

The Soulnote D2 differed from the Kitsuné May in that it had a significantly more intense fundamental tone energy, which gave voices a more physical character and gave the electric bass more plasticity and volume even in such impressive bass performances as “Jean Pierre” by Marcus Miller from the album Toto revisited . This musically appealing sound image was offset by the fascinating transparency and richness of detail of the May KTE, so that people sometimes voted for this one and then for that one. This is certainly also a question of listening taste and personal preferences. My friend was happy about the stirring musicality of the Soulnote, which I could totally share. On the other hand, I found the wealth of detail and the enormous spatial imaging of the HoloAudio so fascinating that I enjoyed six or seven hours of music with it in the first few days, which speaks for its high long-term suitability. Because despite this precision and resolution, it never sounds strenuous, harsh or even annoying. And at that point the May KTE was not yet at the peak of his musical abilities. The holo needs break-in time. He already hinted at his abilities out of the box, but lacked homogeneity and precision in the lower registers. After just a few hours, however, it was so superior to my own DAC, especially in terms of resolution across the entire frequency spectrum and significantly more realistic performances in the high pitches, that the PS Audio no longer had to be used for comparison. The precision, spatial depth and width of the imaginary stage far left and right beyond the loudspeakers impressed from the start. Instruments such as Christian Li's solo violin in Felix Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor already sounded very pleasantly plastic, silky and credible.



The separate power supply for each channel

Nevertheless: To this day, the May Kitsuné improves its musicality day by day, namely in the direction of warmth and fundamental energy, which mainly contributes to the authenticity of singing. I can't find that the remarkable nuances suffer as a result. May is becoming more and more fun. As far as the spatial performance is concerned - it is possibly due to the double mono concept - it is on a scale that I have never been able to experience with any device before. The wide stage is a pleasing aspect, and I like the resolution and depth of the instruments towards the back even more. The May Kitsuné manages to arrange the instruments in space with amazing realism and give them their own spatial contour, so that in *The In Crowd* by the Ramsey Lewis Trio the piano is clearly placed in front of the drums. For me, this contributes significantly to the listening pleasure and makes every track exciting. This also explains the long listening sessions. In this one week that the Holo has been playing music for me, I have found it extremely difficult to get away from my listening position. This enormous resolution is increasingly less in contradiction to the fullness of the sound, which perhaps seemed a little too weak in the first few days, as the Soulnote convincingly conveyed. But things now look different. Miles Davis' composition "Jean Pierre" by Marcus Mitter still sounds crisper and less lush than the melodious Japanese song, but only a direct comparison allows this conclusion. Because on its own, the music, as the May KTE conveys it, is gripping and a pleasure, even with "Jean Pierre". In the majority of the pieces of music I listen to, I don't lack the fundamental tone intensity, which I only sometimes feel is missing a little with voices or piano. However, this depends very much on the quality of the recording.



A look into the D/A converter impresses with its high-quality components and clean workmanship

One afternoon a friend and I listened to a number of recordings of Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata - Qobuz makes this easy to do - in comparison. The tonal differences were serious and the grand piano sounded believably physical and like wood, and not just in audiophile recordings. You may still know one of the long-term test records from the 70s: Esther Ofarim's "Children's Games" were a popular test piece to unmask a booming acoustic guitar or to identify discordant tones in singing. The HoloAudio May KTE reproduces vocals and guitar with fascinating nuances and body in the lady and the instrument. Any more would have been out of place. Orchestral music or even smaller ensembles with natural instruments quickly make it clear whether a playback chain is making mistakes somewhere. In Boccherini's "Sonata per il violoncello in Sol Maggiore, G.5" with Bruno Cocset and Les Basses Réunies, the cello sounds close enough to touch, extremely detailed and freed from any veil, but still like wood and with not exaggerated volume. Large orchestras such as the recordings of Robert Schumann's four symphonies with the Staatskapelle Berlin under the direction of Daniel Barenboim (Qobuz 24Bit/96kHz) were so finely fanned out that I sat through three of the works non-stop - with pleasure. Because the transparency is paired with this wonderful spatial order, which so far only this D/A converter has been able to conjure up in my listening room. Silky highs, crystal-clearly contoured and lasting for a long time, make listening to music as exciting as it is pleasant. If the music is bass-intensive, such as Live At The Loa by the Ray Brown Trio, the HoloAudio May KTE delivers just as rousing. The precision is unique and the instruments are presented with sharp contours, as if you were sitting close to the musicians. You can feel the energy of the low tones, but there is no exaggeration here.



This CNC-milled aluminum remote control is included with all May DACs

I was also very impressed by the May KTE's fine-graining abilities on the track "A Man Comes Around" from Jonny Cash's American IV. The swelling volume towards the end of the song is accompanied by distortion. But even here the holo illuminates it so fantastically that I get goosebumps, also because of the moving singing, which can be experienced here clearly and authentically. The dynamic capabilities of the May KTE are also remarkable: against an absolutely quiet background that allows even the finest quiet details to be heard, the music unfolds weightlessly and in a strikingly dynamic way. I noticed this not only when comparing the Waldstein sonatas, such as the great interpretation by Vladimir Horowitz (Sony Classical 1993 by Qobuz 16/44.1). You experience the power that this instrument can develop – great! Harry Belafonte's famous Carnegie Hall concert in 24/96 is currently playing from the hard drive of my Antipodes music server. I have never experienced this musical milestone in my listening room so finely dynamic and immediate, so spatially open without any veil. The HoloAudio examines the music down to the last detail and presents it unobtrusively on a large, structured stage, almost within reach. This sounds as exciting as it is emotionally moving - beautiful. In the many hours of listening, the HoloAudio May KTE showed no tonal abnormalities anywhere in the frequency spectrum, but ultimately serves the music unpretentiously with its excellent capabilities.

STATEMENT

The HoloAudio May KTE lives up to the brand name thanks to its almost holographic spatial resolution. He pairs these with authentic tones. He knows how to nuance it very delicately and presents the music in such a moving way that you can't turn it off. A great D/A converter whose price could be significantly higher.

TESTED WITH

Music server/player Antipodes Oladra with Roon server and HQ player

Network Ansuz Acoustics PowerSwitch A2 with Darkz Resonance Control C2T, Digitalz Ethernet Cable A2 and Audioquest CAT700 Carbon

CD drive Primare DVD-30

DA converter PS Audio Direct Stream DAC with transformer tuning and Plixir Elite BDC linear power supply for the analog board

Preamplifier Audio-gd Master 1 Vacuum

Power amplifier for bass: two Primare A-32, for mid-high frequency: Spectral DMA-100

Equalizer LA-Audio EQ231G for bass

Speaker Triangle Grand Concert

Accessories Audioquest Dragon 48 HDMI, Audioquest Diamond USB, Habst USB Ultra-3 and DIII AES/EBU, JIB Boaacoustic Silver Digital Krypton AES/EBU, Wireworld Eclipse 8 Silver and Platinum Cinch and XLR, Purist Audio Design Elementa Advance XLR, QED Genesis Silver Spiral and Supra XL Annorum LS with Enacom LS, Audioquest Niagara 5000, Hurricane HC, Source power cable, AHP pure copper fuses, Synergistic Research Quantum Blue and Orange fuses, AHP sound module lvg, Furutech NFC wall socket, room absorber from Mbakustik and Browne Akustik, Franck Tchong singing bowls

Earthing system Huesmann Double Earth Conductor Copper Edition

Creaktiv Audio furniture with absorber floors, finite element pagoda, Audio Exklusiv d.C.d. Base, acapella base