



# THE “THINGEE”

**W**e know what you're thinking, and we thought the same thing: *what is it?* Well, it's a whatchamacallit, a thingamajig...a *thingee*. Actually it's the missing link between your computer and your stereo system, and it's a mystery to us why no one else makes this thing.

Blue Circle, you may know, is a Canadian manufacturer of high end electronics, including some decidedly upscale tube gear. Now and then it turns out some off-the-wall products, such as monoblocks built into a pair of bright red women's shoes, with the preamp in the matching handbag. The Thingee has an off-the-wall name, but as we shall see it's a product begging to be invented.

But what is it *really*?

On one side it connects to your computer via its USB jack. The computer powers the Thingee, and you set the computer so that its audio output goes to the USB device rather than the computer's own speakers. The Thingee offers a choice of outputs. If you own a digital-to-analog converter, you can connect the Thingee to it with a coaxial digital cable or (optionally) a fibre optic cable or balanced cable. You can also use the Thingee's built-in DAC and connect it directly to your amplifier or

preamplifier. Considering the Thingee's price, from \$169 to \$189 depending on the options, it does a lot.

You'll need to add your own USB cable, but no power supply is required, because the Thingee draws power from the USB bus. This can be a problem if your computer can't supply enough current, or if there are other devices on the bus drawing current. In that case, you'll want to add a powered USB box, typically about \$30.

The Thingee's purpose is to get around a gaping hole in the functionality of computers and stereo systems. Computers *do* have an output for an unconverted digital signal, but it isn't in the form expected by hi-fi converters or even receivers. This, then, is the missing link.

To evaluate the device, we plugged it into our MacBook Pro portable computer and ran an Atlas Opus digital cable to our Counterpoint converter and the converter to our Omega reference

## The link between your computer and your music system, from Blue Circle

system. We played a couple of CDs in the computer's disc drive. Of course we compared what we heard to the sound of our Linn Unidisk 1.1 player. And *then* we made a comparison to...but we're getting ahead of ourselves.

All modern computers have the two qualities necessary to act as a front end for this device. First, they must be able to play CDs, and second they must have a USB connector. Since all contemporary keyboards and mice use the USB bus, that takes in pretty much everything.

What if your computer is not portable? The length limit for a full-speed USB cable is 5 metres. That can theoretically be extended by adding as many as five powered USB hubs, an awkward solution, and perhaps impossible if your computer and your stereo systems are on different floors.

The actual music source can be a CD in the computer's drive, but it can also be a music file, compressed or uncompressed, played from iTunes, Windows Media, or any other software that lets you play music. Plug the Thingee into your computer, and then set the computer's audio output to be the Thingee (which will identify itself as a USB device) rather than the built-in speakers or analog audio output.

We connected the Thingee between our computer and our Counterpoint DAC, and sure enough the converter LED lit up, confirming it was receiving a signal. We were good to go.

Our first recording was encoded in HDCD, and our Counterpoint *does* have HDCD-decoding and recognized the code. The disc was *Serenade* (Reference Recordings RR-110), a recent recording by the Turtle Creek Chorale. This amazing CD sounded stunning on our own gear, but a little muddier coming from the computer. It was more difficult to distinguish the voices, though we could still make out the many layers of sound. The spaciousness of the recording was reduced. Still, this is a fine choir, and it sounded gorgeous. "There's no distortion," said Reine, "and that was what I was fearing."

The second selection was Pauline Viardot-Garcia's song on a melody by Chopin, *Plainte d'Amour* (Analekta AN 2 9903). Both Albert and Reine

noticed that the piano seemed less natural, and took up too much space. Isabel Bayrakdarian's remarkable voice remained attractive, despite some hardening when she rose in volume. There was no shrillness, though, and the considerable depth that is one of this recording's many pleasures was largely preserved.

Of course, not everyone has a converter sitting around, not when the one-box CD player is king, but the Thingee has an analog output too.

Yes, that means the little cylinder actually contains a digital-to-analog converter, but how good could it be, considering its size and the fact that it doesn't even have its own power supply, drawing power from the computer's USB bus? We connected our analog cable to the two RCA jacks on the Thingee. They are, we should note, the same color, which gave us one chance in two of getting it right, but — as they say at Google — we were feeling lucky, and we hit it the first time. We played *Plainte d'Amour* again.

And our jaws dropped!

*How could it be this good?* The piano had become natural once more, and Bayrakdarian's voice was warmer and smoother. Words were clearer, but without loss of subtlety and nuance. We rediscovered this moving song.

We returned to *Serenade*, which this time would not benefit from HDCD-decoding. Once again we were stunned. The huge space and depth we had heard with our reference were back. The space was filled, too, "with voices coming at us from left and right," said Albert. The lyrics, a little blurred last time, were clearer.

No, it couldn't compare to what we had heard with our reference, but this was more than pretty good.

There is, however, something we need to explain. The Viardot-Garcia song had been played on our Linn Unidisk, but *Serenade* had been played through our Counterpoint DAC, the same one we had then plugged the Thingee into. Did the DAC "like" the signal from the Linn's digital output better than the similar signal from the Thingee? We don't have an explanation.

But we did have some conclusions. Whether you have an external DAC or not, a computer plus the Thingee can compete advantageously with moderately-priced standalone CD players, perhaps anything costing less than possibly \$2000.

And here's another possibility. If you have both a desktop computer and a portable, you can store music (in either uncompressed or lossless format) on the desktop, but share it with a portable through a WiFi network. Put the portable next to your stereo system, add a Blue Circle Thingee, and you have your music collection at your fingertips.

The Thingee is, for the moment, a rather crude device, with potting compound rather than attractive panels. It looks as though it's been knocked together by hand, and that is exactly right. It may be a work in progress.

But it is also a device that should have existed before. The computer, a source of much in our modern life, is also a music source. The Thingee can link it to amplifiers and speakers that can do it justice.

