



HARDWARE REVIEWS

Silent Angel Munich M1 & Forester F1

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One not insignificant barrier to the uptake of streaming in a hi-fi system (as opposed to on a phone) is the perceived issue of software problems. Rather too many streamers rely on rebadged control software that is fine while it works but a pain when it doesn't. This is why Roon is able to sell its very polished control app which is ostensibly just a better looking and more data rich variant on the free alternatives, while in fact it's also one of the most rock solid bits of software in serious audio. Silent Angel have made their streamers Roon Ready but have also developed their app called VitOS Orbiter, and this falls into the reliable camp and is not a variant of mConnect with different graphics.

Silent Angel makes a small range of relatively compact products that are all about streaming high quality audio from local or external sources such as Qobuz. The company was founded by Dr. Eric Jian Huang who comes from one of the bigger NAS manufacturers and has a good enough understanding of that field to be making SSD storage in house for use in his Rhein music server. Silent Angel also makes network switches and two levels of streamer of which the Munich M1 is the more ambitious, it's available in two versions with (M1) and without (M1T) an onboard DAC and can be upgraded with a Forester linear power supply. Both versions can be used with an external DAC but you save £300 by opting for the M1T transport which only has digital outputs.



The M1 is a compact at 5.8cm (just over 2 inches) high on its rubber feet and weighs just one kilo, yet it contains all the electronics required to turn an ethernet stream into an analogue signal via RCA phono connectors or a full size headphone jack. The back panel is full of socketry but the key connections are analogue RCAs and a range of digital outputs including USB (with orange background), AES/EBU and an I2S on HDMI, an increasingly popular alternative method for sending raw digital data. While there doesn't appear to be a means for wireless network connection nor Bluetooth the M1 does have Airplay 2 connectivity. It natively streams from Qobuz, Tidal, Spotify Connect and, and, unusually, Amazon Music, there's even a beta option for Highres Audio.

It's rare for streamer makers to reveal the computer that runs their products but Silent Angel is confident that its four core 1.5GHz ARM processor is more than up to the task and happy to let us know about it. What's not apparently declared is the source of the DAC chip in the M1, they do reveal its capabilities though with PCM support up to 768kHz and DSD to DSD256, numbers which are respectable if not state of the art. The Forester F1 power supply is an optional upgrade on the supplied SMPS wall-wart and inhabits a case of the same style and dimensions as the M1 but with far fewer holes on the back, it provides two 5V, 2A DC outputs to run the M1 streamers and Bonn network switches.



Sound quality

Listening commenced with the M1 in transport mode, using the coaxial output to quite an exotic DAC (Aavik D-580) and using Roon to control what it played from Qobuz in the first instance. I put on Modern Nature's album *Annual* which has something of the Talk Talk about it albeit with the addition of saxophone. This sounded very good with strong focus and lots of character in the various instruments and voices. Then I tried a USB link which is my usual choice and the balance was a little less rich but the soundstage had plenty of precision and Joni Mitchell's voice on Sweet Sucker Dance projected well, given the level of transparency provided by this high end DAC the M1 acquitted itself well.

Some Haydn chamber music threw up an image that revealed the nature of the recording venue and provided good musical flow if not the full timbre of the original instruments being played. With its standard SMPS power supply this streamer has a clean and focussed style that is reminiscent of products from Chord Electronics and a few others, adding the Forester linear supply brings a marked improvement in timing, with things musical falling into place as and when they should. This in turn increases the ability of the music to engage the emotions and that for me at least is what this game is all about.

The Forester also gives the presentation more warmth and tonal depth with everything from Abdullah Ibrahim's clanky piano to Ben Chesney's acoustic guitar. Moving over to the onboard DAC required a little recalibration as you might expect but it wasn't long before its qualities shone through. The analogue output providing vocals with plenty of nuance and some great drumming on Patricia Barber's Post Modern Blues. The onboard DAC is strongest in the midrange which as this is the most important part of the spectrum is no bad thing but the bass has plenty of power and the upper ranges are clean and open. I enjoyed Jack White's 7 Nation Army with all its raw energy and the telephone vocal effect came through with plenty of clarity, I even got a little carried away with his I'm Shakin' which was a total blast.

The VitOS app revealed the many albums on my Melco server but wasn't possible to search through them, which with a big library makes picking out specific artists and tracks a bit slow. It's possible that there's a compatibility issue between the control software in the app and the Twonky server on the Melco. It is much more adept with Qobuz and Tidal services however with excellent graphics and ease of access. I also tried the streamer with a USB stick in one of the expansion ports on the back, easily the least expensive way of playing your own downloads, this worked well too and being a smaller collection proved to be much quicker to navigate than the server.

With Esperanza Spalding's female vocal on Formwela 4 it was easy to appreciate just how open the highs produced by the Munich M1 are, highs that help to define a clear image and make this simple song sound remarkably good considering the M1's asking price. It's worth mentioning that I was using the new Bowers & Wilkins 802 D4 speakers for much of my listening and they do not take prisoners. If the Silent Angel put a step wrong it would have been obvious, fortunately it did not and let me enjoy the chaotic boogie of live Grateful Dead and the grungy intensity of Frank Zappa playing My Guitar Wants To Kill Your Mama, the latter coming through in full filthy effect with great groove and killer guitar sound. Going over to the VitOS Orbiter control app and the Aavik DAC improved matters in terms of clarity, it sounded like a veil had been removed and this meant that even dense material gained a musical coherence that made it very easy to appreciate.

A few weeks later the Rega System One was up and running so I rebooted the M1 with its basic power supply and onboard DAC just to see how Rega's entry level system would fare with a digital source, and vice versa. It turned out remarkably well, the system excels at timing and found plenty in the M1's output to use, delivering excellent immediacy and energy from Roni Size's drum and bass classic Brown Paper Bag. This has a fabulous bit of double bass in it that worked a treat in this system, really drawing in the listener and keeping the track engaging all the way through. On more subtle pieces it was easy to hear detail and background sounds that combine with the fundamentals to give the sensation of a live sound, this being the case with Hania Rani's Music for Film and Theatre, where a solo piano plays over quiet noises in the background, noises that create atmosphere and presence and bring the performance to life.

Silent Angel have done a fine job with the Munich M1, it works well in both the M1T transport mode and as a full analogue out streamer. By saving on the cost of a big chassis Silent Angel have managed to pack in all the critical ingredients of a serious streamer at a competitive price with good build quality. The free control app seems to be more reliable than many and there is the option to upgrade this side of the equation to Roon, all in all there's nothing not to like about the Munich M1.

Specifications:

Type: network streamer with DAC & headphone amp

Distortion THD+N: RCA <0.000134%

Signal to noise: 108dB

Streaming Inputs: DLNA media server, TIDAL, Qobuz, AirPlay 2, Spotify Connect, Amazon Music, HighRes Audio, internet radio

Roon Ready: yes

Digital outputs: AES/EBU, coaxial, USB, I2S via HDMI

Analogue output: single ended RCA

Supported File Formats: AAC, AIFF, ALAC, APE, DFF, DSF, FLAC, MP3, OGG, WAV, WV and WMA

Supported Digital Formats: PCM up to 768kHz, DSD up to DSD256

Output voltage via headphone jack: 33 Ohm – 1mW, 590 Ohm – max: 27.5mW

Control Software: VitOS, Roon

Dimensions HxWxD: 50.4 x 155 x 1100mm

Weight: 1kg