

## MQA (Master Quality Authenticated) - Better Sound or Effective DRM?

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MQA, which started as a steganography-type scheme to squeeze higher-resolution music into smaller sizes for music-streaming sites like Spotify and Pandora, has evolved into a general-purpose codec for enabling high-res music on CDs, and providing smaller high-res files for download sites like HDTracks and ProStudioMasters, etc. This evolution has attracted lots of controversy, as 'expert' users have accused it of being an effective form of DRM, as well as not delivering on its promise of providing genuinely higher resolution music in a smaller file size.

I followed those discussions for some time, but when they heated up recently on some high-traffic audiophile sites, I became more interested to the point of getting involved. While I realize that much of the controversy is directed at debunking the "MQA is better" idea, I decided to approach it from the standpoint of an ordinary budget-minded audiophile who is concerned only with a few things: Do the files cost more (ignoring streaming), are there any DRM issues, does it play on all of my devices, does it sound good enough on my non-MQA devices, and can I convert the files in Foobar to other generic formats - and do those conversions sound comparable to the original MQA download or CD?

Here is an example - the most recent test I performed:

Comparing the HDTracks 24/96 copy of Buena Vista Social Club to the MQA Studio version I got from the HighResAudio site, using the Macbook and Meridian Explorer-2 DAC, the 24/96 version is marginally darker - particularly noticeable on vocal sibilants ("Amor de Luca Juventud"). One effect of this is that I hear a slightly quieter background on the 24/96 version, so the difference extends evenly across the high end, and doesn't sound like a narrower EQ'd range.

This is more-or-less consistent\*\* with what I experienced with the Steve Reich/Pulse album, using the Meridian DAC. I also have a DragonFly Red DAC that's updated for MQA, but since it's just a 'renderer' and I'm not working with an MQA-capable music player, I'm not using it in any of my tests.

\*\*The Pulse album comparisons (CD-resolution MQA to 24/96 FLAC) had very subtle differences for me, while the Buena Vista differences were more obvious.

The Meridian DAC lights reported blue-white-off with the MQA Studio version, and white-white-off with the HDTracks version, as long as the Mac's MIDI settings were correct (48 khz for Studio and 96 khz for 24/96). Both of the lights displays were correct for each version, and represent high-res music (88 to 96 khz). As of this writing (4 March 2018) I don't know whether any of the well-known MQA music players are able to force the correct MIDI setting on the Mac when MQA and non-MQA tracks are present in the same playlist and are played randomly (i.e. the player doesn't know anything about the tracks' contents in advance of playing them).

Does anyone know the answer to the above Mac/MIDI issue?

I have no idea which of these versions is the best, or audiophile-preferred in terms of the treble, as these are effectively different masterings. Although I can increase the volume to more clearly discern minute differences in the uppermost treble to at least 15 khz, if there were anything going on above that, or there were any low-level anomalous sounds that got past me in normal listening, I don't know about those. I have more than a few recordings that are edgy, sibilant, or contain minor irritations here and there, but I don't hear anything in the MQA-encoded albums that suggest other than high-quality masterings.

I may be outside of the audiophile mainstream since I'm not streaming music or arguing the MQA-is-better philosophy, but I think the issues in streaming will coincide with what I've found in high-res downloads, and the philosophy aspect will take care of itself according to the users' costs, including any necessary hardware purchases.

I'd suggest to those who are worried about MQA obsolescence or degradation, who are saving and backing up their high-res files on local storage, to convert their MQA files to a generic format, evaluate the conversions for sound quality, then back those up in a separate folder or volume from the MQA files. It's a habit that any audiophile should already have, so it's not a significant extra effort in my experience. I don't see any reason why buying MQA should be any different in principle than having tapes, CDs, LPs, and digital files all under the same roof. Just observe the usual care and cautions that audiophiles have learned over the years.