

Gold Note DS-10

Streaming DAC with “il suono italiano”, the Italian Sound



Product: Gold Note DS-10, DAC, Streamer and Pre-amplifier
Manufacturer: [Gold Note](#) - Italy
Approx. price: £2.5k/€2.5k/US\$3k
Reviewer: [Bevan Court](#) - TNT USA
Reviewed: July, 2020

Il suono italiano

Gold Note is an Italian company, founded in Italy in 2012 by Maurizio Aterini, his wife Elena and partner Alessio Oronti. The aim was, in their words, “to speak a simple but evocative language in order to bring the best of *Made in Italy* to the whole world.”

I am not the first TNT reviewer to get his hands on Gold Note products, the [PS-10 Phono preamplifier](#) and the [Goldnote Mediterraneo turntable](#) brought glowing reviews from my esteemed colleagues.

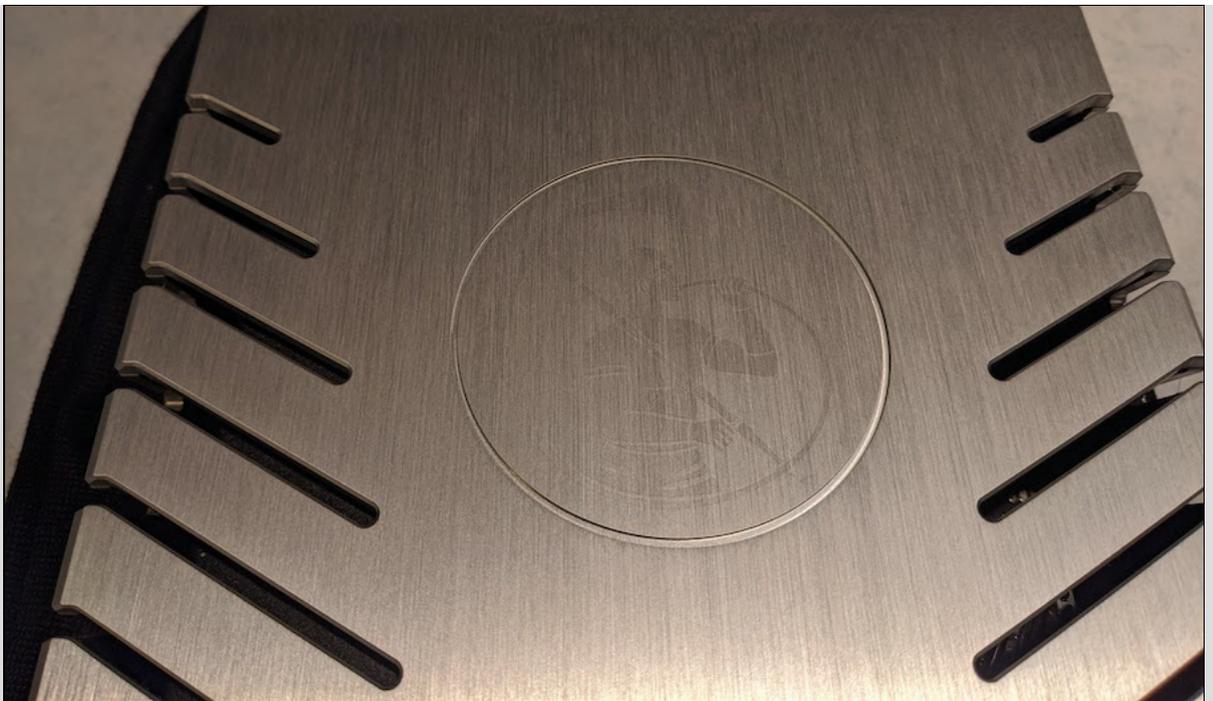
I have a little confession at this point, when I agreed to do the review, I had not really been exposed to the brand - the other reviews were very much based in the analog realm, whilst most of my listening in the last 6 years or so has been mainly digital. I was perhaps a little naive about the esteem that this company was held in by reviewers and maybe a little ignorant of the price tag.

So after agreeing to do the review and getting the DS-10 finally delivered, I was suitably impressed by the product as I pulled it from its cloth bag. This streamer is solid, beautifully engineered, but with a flair that I have come to expect of Italian products. The designer cared about how this looked and about how you interacted with it. Needless to say that this is a far cry from my previous review, the [Nanomesher Nanosound 2 DAC](#), that retailed for the grand sum of \$50. And yet, inevitably, in terms of what they do, it was the product what was uppermost in my mind whilst I was writing the review. How do you compare these to products at opposite ends of the scale?

Build Quality

This is a solid piece of equipment, machined from solid aluminium, feeling weighty in the hand, but one also cannot underestimate how nice this looks in the metal. The DS-10 looks nice in pictures, but very special in person.

A few things jumped out at me, the subtle logo etched into the top, the feel of the primary control knob, that has the perfect resistance and feel and, then finally, the cooling vents in the chassis. They are functional, but add such an individual flair, that I cannot be helped but be reminded of the slatted air vents on the Ferrari Testarossa - form and function in harmony.



What Can It Do? - What Can't It Do?

The DS-10 is a DAC, Preamp, Headphone Amp and Streamer, all in one. Without having a power amp on hand at the moment, the preamp functionality is hard to really investigate. However, the primary focus of this review will be how the DS-10 functions as a DAC and a Streamer.

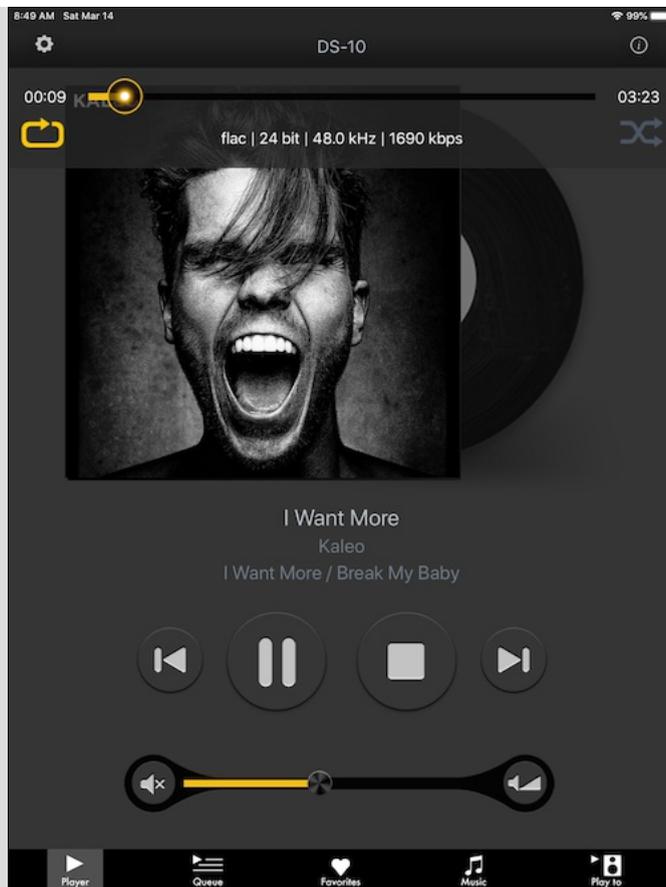
It utilizes the AKM AK9943 DAC, part of the AKM Velvet Sound range. I am not sure that I completely buy into the marketing on this (What does *Velvet Sound* really mean?), but I have liked the other AKM DACs that I have listened to.

I replaced the Nanomesher/Raspberry Pi combination in my main system with this much larger, much more expensive component. I connected up the ethernet and the interconnects to the amp and start trying to work out how to set the DS-10 up.

At this point, you scan the code on the box with your iPhone/iPad/Android device of choice and download the Gold Note app. What followed next involved much head scratching and I had to reach out to Gold Note. Their response was swift and very helpful. The manual supplied had used an incorrect code and had downloaded an app meant for a different product. I have been assured that this is fixed on the new manuals.

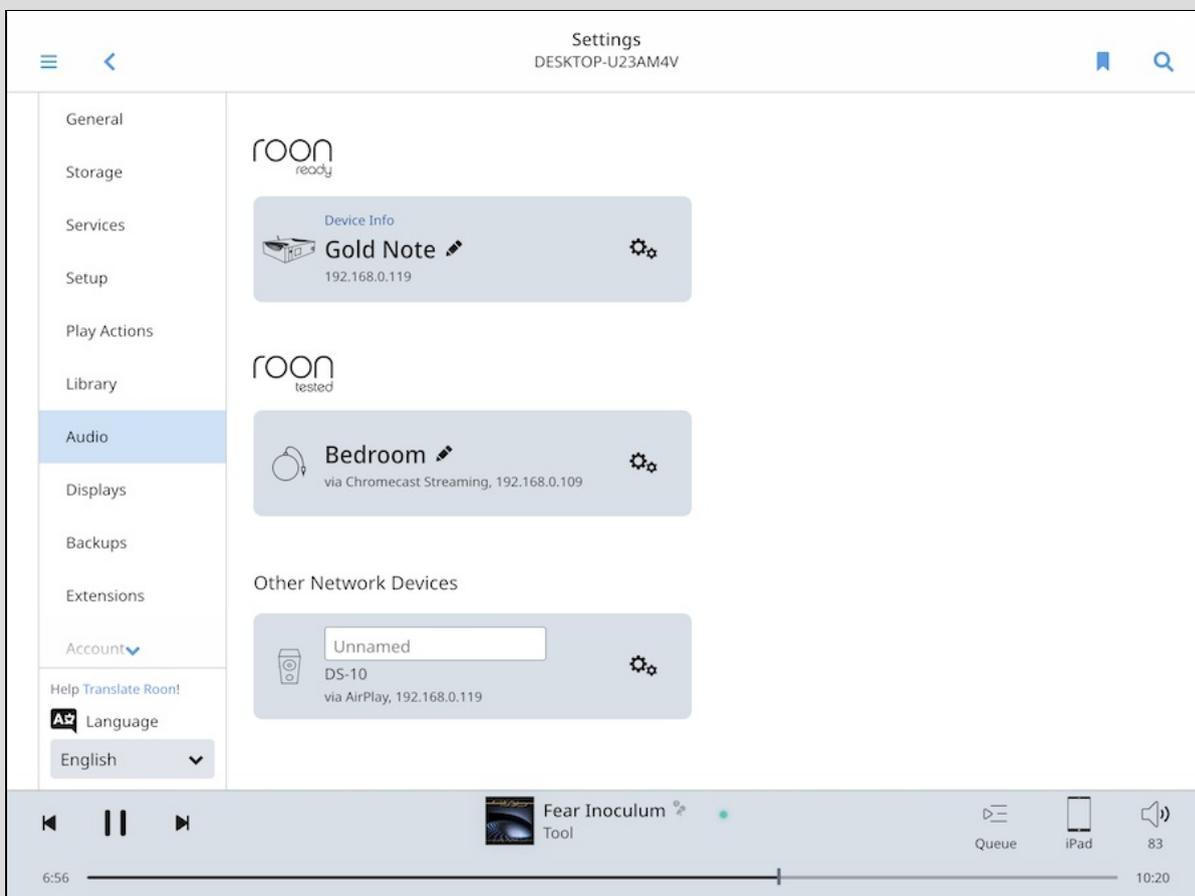
Once pointed in the right direction, I was able to get the app running. The Gold Note can use one of the many digital inputs - 1 RCA Coax, 2 Optical Tos-Link, 1 AES/EBU XLR, 1 USB-B, 1 USB-A host, Bluetooth 5.0 and both wired and wireless LAN.

Further to that, when using the app and signed in to your streaming service of choice, be that Tidal, Spotify, Qobuz, Deezer or vTuner, it can pull music directly from the internet, using your smart device as a remote. It will even act as a full MQA decoder.



Finally, Gold Note has brought not only Airplay connectivity to the party, but this is also a Roon certified device. Oh, and what a joy it was to plug the unit in, power it up, open up the Roon remote and find the DS-10 ready to go.

Only Google's Chromecast protocol seems to be missing, making the DS-10 to be one of the most complete digital preamps that I have seen.



I have spent quite a little while now, messing around with various Roon endpoints. This is by far the simplest to use, no flashing of operating systems to an SD card, no figuring out networks and IP addresses. It just works. Now, for nearly \$3000, I kind of expect that, but it was flawless. In all the time that I had it to review, I can honestly say that the connectivity never failed.

I did most of my review listening via Roon as usual, but I did use the direct streaming option using Qobuz. Both work well and I could not detect a difference, as was expected.

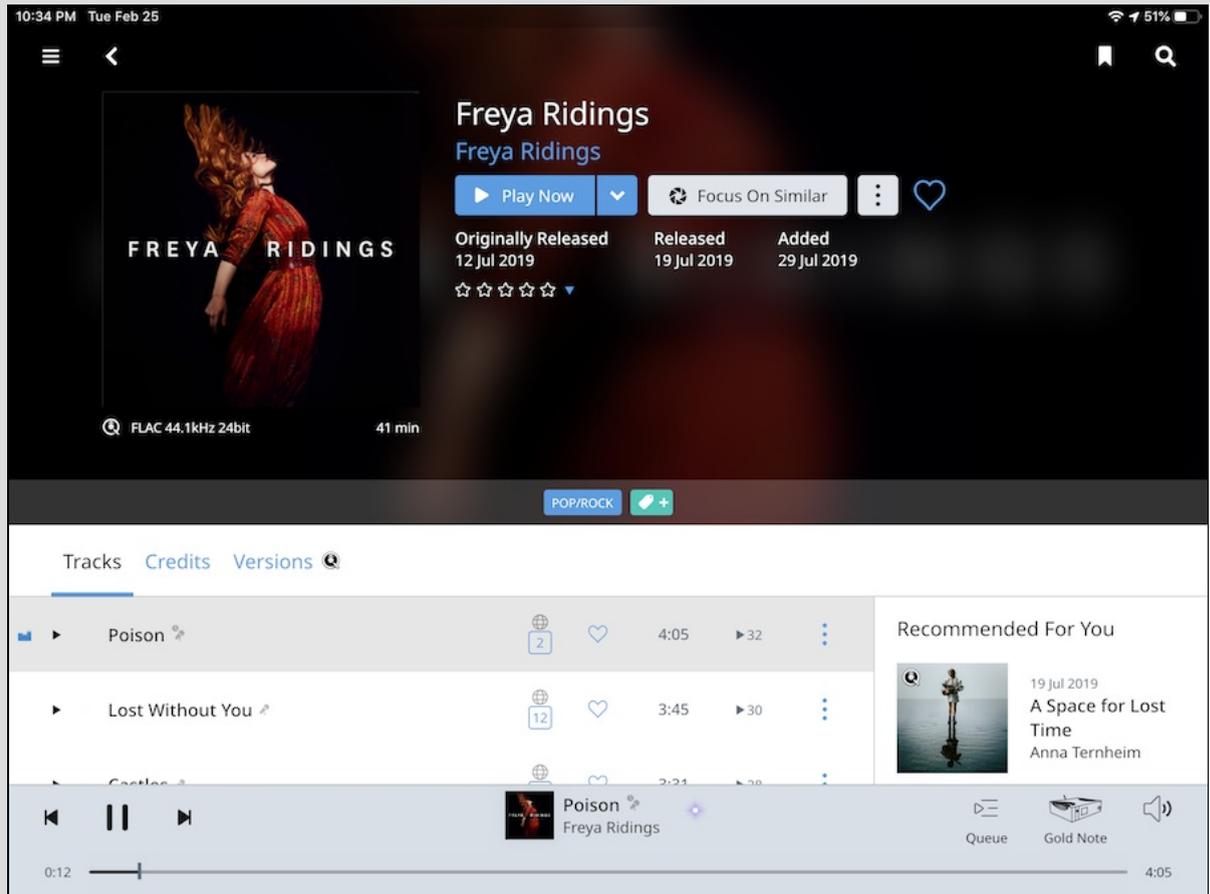
Listening

My first impression was of clarity, of an open soundstage that was not only wide, but extended in height above the speakers. It was soon clear that this wasn't just a good looking box, hiding a basic computer under a fancy wrapper, but a true piece of HiFi

I streamed some of my current favourite tracks and I was treated to an improvement in instrument separation over anything that I had used before. I was genuinely stunned at the difference that this had made to my system.

When I listened to Redemption Day, from the new Sheryl Crow album Threads, where she duets with Johnny Cash, I was entranced. I heard every crack in Cash's voice, the raw emotion in Crow's, the brooding presence of this song draws you in, with the piano perfectly balancing everything. It really is a wonderfully mastered song and the DS-10 revels in it.

Freya Ridings, a singer songwriter from England has recorded a debut album that is truly lovely, however, I have found her vocals to be a little indistinct at times on other equipment. Not so with the DS-10, the enunciation is clearer and you can hear each individual word.



For a change of pace I ran the DS-10 into something a little more raucous, with Standing in the Way of Control by the Gossip. This can be a little unruly at times on lesser equipment, however, the DS-10 kept control of it, whilst delivering a good bass and mid performance.

It would be remiss of me not to call attention to some slight weaknesses of the DS-10. It will expose things in tracks that, listening through a smart speaker, phone or even lesser equipment, just won't be apparent. It was actually my wife who drew my attention to it as we were listening to Brandi Carlile's album, By the Way, I Forgive You.

I love this album and we were lucky enough to see her live before the lock down began and I am now a little disappointed. On a couple of the tracks, they have used double tracked vocals to add weight to her voice, possibly more effective on cheaper playback devices, but with the wide open, transparent soundstage that the DS-10 gives you, it is apparent what they have done and it sounds a little odd. The wife was not too impressed with my argument that it was the quality of the DAC highlighting the poor recording.

Switching back to the Nanomesh or even my Allo USBridge/Schitt Modi 3 combination tamed this and made my wife a little happier.

I also got the feeling that, with certain music, the DS-10 was maybe a little bright sounding, all the detail that you get comes at a very slight price. Maybe my PS Audio/Dynaudio combo is a little bright as well, so maybe you should consider that when partnering the DS-10.

The Chameleon DAC

There are a few other things that you can do with this. Gold Note calls this a Chameleon DAC, referring to the ability to adjust the equalisation curve (low pass filter), de-emphasis curve and power allowing you to change the sonic profile. I ended up preferring the default curves, however, I did mess around with the power setting, turning that all the way up. It kind of reminded me of a more subtle version of when I swapped out opamps for some Sparko Labs discrete opamps on a Maverick Audio DAC. It just gave everything a little more punch.

Headphone Amp

The headphone amp on here is a delight, tested both with my B&O H6 and my Sony WH-1000XM2 with the in-built amps bypassed. The Gold Note was superb, easily beating both my PS Audio Sprout 100's headphone stage and also the in-built amps in the Sony headphones. Bass control was amazing in both headphones, making the H6, which are usually a little on the bright side, a much more rounded headphone and just adding a little extra control to the WH-1000XM2.

Conclusion

This is a really wonderful piece of equipment, one that I will be sorry to see go as it gets packed up for its journey back to the distributor in Colorado.

Normally, the transparent treble might indicate that it might be on the bright side, however, the mid range and bass control, just make it a very well balanced sounding DAC. In short, this is a beautifully made and beautiful sounding DAC, that has made an amazing improvement to my system as a whole.

My fears about whether or not a DAC this expensive would make a difference on my humble system were unfounded, better yet, it left a massive smile on my face.

I don't really want to compare this to the Nanomesher Nanosound 2 or my Allo/Schiit combination to this. It would be like comparing my very nice, great to drive Mazda 6 with a Ferrari. The Mazda is great, but not in the same league. But it is probably a little more forgiving of a bad road, like the Nanosound 2 is more forgiving of a bad recording. I just feel fortunate that I have had a chance to review the DS-10 and experience the difference that a top level streamer/DAC can make.

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