

DELA (MELCO) S1 Network Switch

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DELA (MELCO) S1 NETWORK SWITCH

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*Editor's Note - This MELCO S1 unit has been reviewed with the MELCO branding. However, MELCO is rebranding to **DELA**, which is a change driven by Buffalo Inc.'s restructuring and aims to solidify **DELA** as the flagship high-end audio brand within the group. The change is primarily a name change, with no technical changes to the products themselves, and prices will remain the same.*



I recall chatting to MELCO's Alan Ainslie many moons ago, following the launch of their S100 network switch, which sold for circa £2,000. At the time, I was confused as to why I needed to spend so much when the MELCO NA1/2 that I had just purchased included one. Unable to justify the price tag, I promptly ordered the more affordable Silent Angel Bonn N8, which fundamentally improved the performance of networked audio in my system of the day and opened my receptacles to the concept that removing network noise was critical to achieving top-quality results in such systems.

Naturally, I upgraded to the MELCO S100 and subsequently enhanced its performance by replacing the power supply with the Plixir Elite linear power supply. An ADOT SFP optical fibre converter took things to another level. Following the purchase of MELCO's N1-S38 server, the final link in my pre-server chain was MELCO's C1-D20 copper SFP cable, which elevated the performance of my digital 'front end' to a level I had considered to be 'end game'.

MELCO'S £5,000 S10 switch promised better performance, which I am reliably informed is backed up in listening tests. Still, alas, it never made it to my listening room before being quietly discontinued a few months ago.

Design

Both the S100 and S10 MELCO switches were based on existing IT-based technology from Melco's parent company, Buffalo Electronics. The flagship S1 we are examining here is a completely redesigned model, with the sole aim of minimising network noise as much as possible from networked audio data. The S1 includes a fully customised 12V linear power supply, an NDK clock and a custom motherboard. The casing matches the aesthetics of Melco's premium server models, the N1 and N5. With their black casing and silver 'cheeks', they aesthetically match my Simaudio Moon components.

You can also order the S1 in full silver, but I suspect most customers will opt for the two-tone.



MELCO S1 Network Switch, rear detail with external clock BNC connection

Box Of Tricks

Compared to my S100 and, indeed, any other network switch I have hosted, the MELCO S1 offers a myriad of features. Although a search online reveals the S1 is not alone in offering switchable input and output speeds, it is the first time I have experienced such a feature. Each of the four SFP inputs is switchable between 10 Gbps and 1 Gbps. I used one of these to connect the S1 to my ADOT SFP converter, which outputs at 1 Gbps, so I found it only worked in that setting. Additionally, there are seven RJ45 outputs, which are switchable between 1 Gbps, 100 Mbps and 10 Mbps. You can switch off any unused ports, which further reduces noise.

I used one SFP output to feed my MELCO N1-S38 via the copper SFP C1-D20 cable, and another part to feed my BT TV box, which I found only worked satisfactorily at 1 Gbps. I turned off the TV box and indeed defeated the input for critical music listening. You can also turn off the front panel display to further reduce noise, which I did.

To the rear, along with the plethora of SFP and RJ45 input sockets, is a BNC connection for an external clock, a USB 2.0 for power supply output only and a switch for turning off the LED indicators, which, like the front panel indicators, change colour depending on the output speed. Unfortunately, I did not have an external clock available to try with the S1 and my own N1, but a reviewer friend tells me he got great results with the Mutec Ref10 Nano 10MHz external clock hooked up to the N1-S38 and S1.



MELCO S1 Network Switch with matching N1 Library

As the owner of a Melco N1-S38, the build quality of the S1, which is of a similarly high standard, comes as no surprise. Still, it is worth mentioning that it is exemplary and subjectively helps justify the cost of both products.

For full details of the Melco S1 Network Switch, please visit the MELCO website using the QR Code.



Melco S1 Network Switch rear profile from the DELA website

How Does Noise-Free Networked Music Sound?

I must admit that I felt I had already maximised the digital front end of my system before the S1's arrival and that it would only provide a few niceties on top. My Simaudio Moon 780D is now out of production, but it gives most high-end DACs a run for their money. This DAC, paired with Network Acoustics digital cables, provides thrilling music without fatigue. However, the S1 has elevated the performance of this front end to a new level.

Until I had experienced the low noise floor provided by the MELCO S1, I did not appreciate how close a digital source can get to the sound of a top analogue one. The first thing I noticed was the dynamic range. There is a lack of fatigue that initially gives the impression that you are listening at lower volume levels, particularly during quieter passages of music. Leading edge detail is present and correct, but it is finely resolved and unexaggerated, until the levels within the music and recording demand otherwise. A great example of this is the first track I played, *Dry The Rain* from The Beta Band's *The Three EPs* (Qobuz 24/44). This track begins softly and builds into a rollicking jam. The opening drums are now softer and further back in the soundstage, which is now wider. The guitars now flank the left and right extremities of my listening room. The vocals are purposely muted at this part of the track; the processing used to do so is clearly rendered by the S1. As the track builds and the guitars come in at higher volume, it is now clear that the band are really clicking. The S1 gives the bass guitar added space, which helps drive the track along. The trumpet that was previously somewhat diffuse and ill-defined is now precisely placed and has more energy, yet sounds natural and unfatiguing. The S1's dramatic lowering of the noise floor allows the speakers to disappear, and music to flow across the room in an unhindered manner.

Moving over to Miles Davis's classic *Kind of Blue* (24/192 download), Miles's phrasing and impeccable timing are further revealed. I can now hear how the notes are shaped, and the acoustic is so palpable that I could be in the room with the musicians. The instruments have a sense of body that makes them utterly believable. Note this is a download, not streamed. That a network switch improves the performance of stored media is tough to get one's head around, but it is consistent with my previous experiences with different network switches, just far more so in the S1's case.



MELCO S1 Network Switch, internal layout

Another great analogue recording, Dead Can Dance's *Into The Labyrinth* (Mofi SACD rip), is presented in a way that sounds utterly, well, analogue. As most familiar of the album will know, this album was recorded in a converted chapel. The S1 renders the natural reverb more realistically and removes the last traces of digital artifice that I previously was not aware was there, until it wasn't. Improved vocal expression, texture, layering and separation all conspire to make this well-worn album a fresh and totally involving experience.

Switching things up with Spiritbox's latest album, *Tsunami Sea* (Qobuz 24/44), demonstrates the S1's ability to open up dense recordings. The guitars now sound fuller, more textured and as I had now come to expect, less fatiguing. This allowed Courtney LaPlante's vocals to cut through this dense mix, making her lyrics easier to follow. This album could sometimes prove a bit of an ordeal, but the S1 made it possible to follow each instrument and appreciate the intricacies of the production. As with other recordings, the soundstage became huge via the S1, yet easy to hear into and follow any of the many instruments or electronic sounds within it. This may not be the kind of music that many of our readers will be familiar with, but I'd urge open-minded rock fans to give it a try, perhaps drop in at the title track and the following song, *A Haven With Two Faces*. I did chuckle to myself after reading the Guardian's review of this album, which criticised the production – they need to listen to it on a more resolving system.

Finally, as part of our recent review of the MBL Cadenza components, I got the opportunity to test the S1's Ethernet outputs, with the help of WiiM Ultra Streamer. Wired connections will almost always sound better than wireless, but the differences between WiFi and Ethernet via the S1 were night and day. The S1 allowed the budget WiiM to deliver a truly top-class performance, with the noise floor dropping and the soundstage expanding across all dimensions.

Overall

The entry fee may be high, and only those with top-level network-based systems need apply, but if your system is worth it, then this is one of the best upgrades you can make to your digital front-end. My system already sounded great before the S1's arrival, but the newly found realism, dynamics, resolution and free-floating soundstage will be hard to lose. If you plan to pair the S1 with a MELCO N1 or N5, it makes a great visual match, as well as ensuring you get the best out of your server, especially if you take advantage of the SFP connectivity. If I can hang on to the S1 for long enough, then I would love to experiment with an external clock, such as the aforementioned Mutec, or perhaps the soon-to-be-launched ADOT LGC-100, which has been designed with Melco products in mind. In any case, the S1 has lifted the performance of my system to a level that I did not realise it was capable of. Music at home rarely sounds this organic and engaging, and I feel privileged to have had such an experience over the last few weeks.



*Alan Ainsle, the Managing Director of ADMM, representing DELA in the UK, says of this review and the name change from MELCO to **DELA**;*

*Chris was quick off the mark with this S1 review. Introduced as MELCO S1 only a few months ago, the brand will be changing to **DELA** over the next few weeks – a simple rebranding with exactly the same product and engineering; still handcrafted in Nagoya, Japan. I am pleased that Chris could not wait for the **DELA** brand to be sent to him to get the news out about his findings.*

