

audiovideo

JUNE 2016

hearing • seeing • believing



Sonic summit

B&W 800 D3

REVIEWED:

ELAC SUB 2070

Super subwoofer

YAMAHA CD-S2100

Digital delight

ADL STRATOS

Sonic box of tricks

AUDIOENGINE P2

Desktop dynamite

KEF EGG WIRELESS

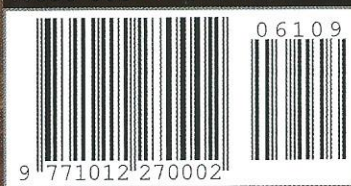
Ovoid audio

WIN!

Audioengine D1 D/A converter

Katherine Jenkins 'Celebration' CDs

Issue 306 ♦ R30 Incl. VAT



Bowers & Wilkins



Alpha Design Labs Stratos

I've been a long-time fan of Alpha Design Labs (ADL), a Furutech-owned outfit with a product line-up that includes a range of headphones and earphones, portable USB DACs, specialist cables – and a succession of desktop USB DAC/headphone amplifiers.

I still own two of the latter – the original ADL GT40 (recently updated to PCM 192 kHz/24-bit capability and now dubbed the GT40 α), and the more advanced ADL Esprit, with an extended feature set.

In many ways, the new ADL Stratos is the replacement of the Esprit, although the new device looks and feels more substantial, with internals to match.

Its range of capabilities remains as extensive as the Stratos, though: it acts as a D/A converter, A/D converter, USB DAC and digital pre-amp. It's also a high-spec headphone amp, and can be used to digitise analogue signals (such as from the phono stage) for manipulation and storing on computers.

At 215 mm wide and 180 mm deep, the Stratos is significantly larger than both the Esprit and the GT40 α , but it's still a compact device compared to normal DIN-sized components. The execution is

impressively robust, with all-metal case-work and a milled aluminium faceplate.

That faceplate is home to a volume controller, a red-illuminated digital display, and a plethora of small indicator lights – some showing the sampling rate of the incoming digital signal, others confirming the input source selected.

A round pushbutton switches the Stratos between operational and standby modes, while a toggle switch allows three-step attenuation of the incoming signal for recording purposes. There's also a red clipping warning light to signal overloading.

Headphone connection is via either a conventional, 6,35 mm stereo jack plug, or a balanced XLR input for 'phones with balanced cables – confirmation that the Stratos is serious about meeting the needs of committed headphone fans.

The rear panel is proof of the ADL's expanded versatility, compared to the Esprit. Notably, the single-ended stereo outputs have been joined by a balanced XLR output set. As far as analogue inputs are concerned, the Stratos makes provision for both line-level and phono sources, the latter switchable for use with moving magnet and moving coil cartridges.

The digital facilities of the Stratos are

comprehensive, offering both coaxial RCA and Toslink optical inputs, as well as an optical digital output. The asynchronous USB Type B socket acts as both input and output, depending on mode, and is XMOS-based, offering USB Class 2 Audio compatibility.

Under the covers, you'll find the kind of circuit components and features usually reserved for high-end gear. On the digital front, the Stratos gets the latest ESS ES9018K2M Sabre-32 DAC, which not only promises impressive dynamic range and low THD+N, but also supports PCM up to 384 kHz/24-bit, and DSD up to 11,2 MHz

To digitise the incoming analogue audio signal from its built-in phono stage and analogue inputs, the Stratos employs a Crystal CS5340 ADC chip, operating at up to 192 kHz/24-bit resolution.

An array of three TI TPA6120A2 headphone amplifiers ensures that the Stratos will cope with even the toughest headphone load. Two of the amps are dedicated to one channel each of the balanced headphone output, with the third powering the 6,35 mm jack plug output.

Even the volume control is worth mentioning: it's a performance-optimised MUSES72320 that operates at $\pm 18V$ and



The double bass was delivered with a boisterous enthusiasm that easily kept up with the music's almost frenetic tempo, creating a foot-tapping, spine-tingling listening experience.

uses a resistor ladder circuit for precise two-channel level adjustment. A small but effective remote control is standard.

I used the Stratos in the same role as the Esprit in my system, which means I hooked up a Linn Sondek LP12/Ittok/Benz Micro Wood L deck directly to its phono input, operating in MC mode. I then ran Furutech's new GT2 Pro USB cable from the Stratos to my 13-inch MacBook Pro running VinylStudio 8.8.0.

The balanced outputs were used to link up the Stratos to my regular Ayre AX-5 integrated amplifier, while I roped in both Sennheiser HD800s and Momentums to audition the device from a headphone perspective.

In this configuration, I was able to digitise analogue content from the Linn to my MacBook via USB, employ the Stratos as a USB DAC for music files on my Mac and Synology NAS utilising Audirvana 1.12.5 playback software, use it as a headphone amp for both digital and analogue content, as well as trying it out as a DAC accepting digital content from my Esoteric UX-3 SE universal deck.

The Mac needed no special software, and instantly recognised the Stratos as a digital playback device. Thus, Audirvana also identified the Stratos and confirmed its DSD and PCM capabilities.

Amber Rubarth's *Scribbled Folk Symphonies* (Chesky 192/24 FLAC) sounded airy, open and delicate played from my Mac. It's an ambience-rich recording, with beautifully rendered acoustic guitars and strings, creating a subtle, even frail, musical backdrop for Rubarth's tender vocals.

The Stratos effortlessly extracted and contextualised the finer nuances of the music, creating a real sense of presence and dimension. The tonal balance tended towards neutrality, with a leanness that steered clear of bias or attenuation, while doing full justice to the heft and substance of the music: indeed, it added to the believability of the recording.

The cellos on 'How To Get By' were delivered with a robust power and assurance, while Rubarth's vocals were crystal clear, soaring above the lucidly presented accompaniment with an almost angelic grace.

When I played the gritty, jazz-infused rendition of the Led Zeppelin classic, *Black Dog*, off Larry Coryell/Victor Bailey/Lenny White collaboration on *Electric* (Chesky 96/24 FLAC), the Stratos underlined its ability to define space and timing with clear, incisive accuracy, while also extracting the blood and guts of the music.

Coryell's probing guitar, the hard-hitting percussion and the swashbuckling bass sounded magnificent, with the kind of front-of-house sound that confronts the listener with a full helping of musical action. Again, attention to detail was a hallmark of the sound, helped by clarity and impetus.

VITAL STATS

DAC chip	ESS ES9018K2M Sabre-32
ADC chip	Cirrus Logic CS5340
Digital conversion	PCM: Up to 384 kHz/24-bit DSD: 2,8 / 5,6 / 11,2 MHz
Frequency response	20 Hz to 20 kHz (± 0,5 dB)
Signal-to-noise ratio	> 96 dB, A-weighted (line output)
Output level	5 Vrms (analogue)
MM/MC	Selectable. MC: 0,4 mV. MM: 4 mV
Loading	47 kOhm (MM), 100 ohms (MC)
Analogue inputs	Phono RCA, line-level RCA
Digital inputs	Coaxial RCA, Toslink optical, asynchronous USB
Analogue outputs	Balanced XLR, single-ended RCA, Balanced XLR and 6,35 mm stereo headphone jack
Digital outputs	Toslink optical, USB Type B
Dimensions (WxDxH)	215 x 180 x 64 mm
Weight	1,33 kg
Price	R23 400

Verdict

Gives new meaning to the word 'versatility', thanks to an extensive features set that combines a MM/MC phono stage with USB DAC, ADC and headphone amp functionalities. Best of all, it sounds even better than the specs and features suggest.

Supplied by

AV Cables
012-940-9561/082 774-4831

e-Mail

info@avcables.co.za

Website

www.avcables.co.za

OUR RATING: 84 / 100





The Bassface Swing Trio's *Plays Gershwin* (Stockfisch DSD64) was handled with true aplomb, capturing the essence of the music to compelling effect. On 'Strike Up The Band', the piano's liquid flow and agility were compellingly expressed, with just the right mix of ring and urge, while the drum kit sounded fresh and energetic, with plenty of snap and punch.

The double bass was delivered with a boisterous enthusiasm that easily kept up with the music's almost frenetic tempo, creating a foot-tapping, spine-tingling listening experience. The short drum solo showed just how lucid and articulate the Stratos can be, refusing to be intimidated by the pyrotechnics, but allowing the splendour and the virtuosity of the playing to shine brightly indeed.

With the Esoteric UX-3 delivering the digital wares off The Yellowjackets' *A Rise In The Road* (Mack Ave CD) via PCM, the Stratos strutted its stuff with confidence. The sax sounded full and majestic, underpinned by a sinewy, muscular bass and snappy, sparkling percussion. The piano solo on 'When The Lady Dances' was delivered with a flowing, slick ease, while the taut rapport between the band members was thrillingly represented.

The Stratos' performance as a phono stage is adept, if lacking in the versatility of many dedicated designs. That said, the 100 ohm load for MC cartridges is a good all-round setting that should suit many carts.

Certainly, the Linn sounded smooth and composed here, if a little leaner than I'm accustomed to from the Benz Micro. Given the complexity of the Stratos, I was surprised by its ability to offer an ultra-quiet, inky backdrop to the music, which allowed a full and enjoyable musical harvest. Staging

was wide open, so that the atmospherics of David Gilmour's *On An Island* (Parlophone LP)

were rendered with a smooth accessibility and assurance.

The Stratos really shines in its headphone amp role.

It takes command, even when encountering the 300 ohm impedance and taxing transducers of the Sennheiser HD800s.

Listening to finger guitar ace Guy Buttery's self-released, eponymous set (44.1/16 FLAC and LP) the guitar sounded full and lustrous, with each pluck, squeeze and slide meticulously presented. On 'In The Shade Of The Wild Fig', the sound shimmered and shone with a pure, clean intensity that made the instrument come vividly alive.

Through the HD800s, the music was closely, minutely examined, but without losing sight of the intention or integrity of the recording. The percussive urge and impetus of 'Sleep Deprivation'

gave the Sennheisers a real workout in terms of both pace and low-down bass, but the Stratos always delivered ample energy to reflect the athleticism and sheer impact of the performance. And even though the soundstage is fully occupied, the attention to detail remained unencumbered.

The ADL Stratos is a truly versatile, truly talented component that can fulfil a variety of tasks, depending on the needs and demands of the user. Its penchant for precision, pace and lucidity are consistent throughout, always allowing the music to come into its own.

For some, its transparency and tonal neutrality may sound a little too lean, while also exposing the shortcomings of compromised recordings. By the same token, it does full justice to decent productions and performances, extracting vital elements and subtleties to the benefit of the listening experience.

Add its extensive range of facilities, linked to reassuringly crafted build quality, and the Stratos is a worthy successor to the Esprit in every respect.

Deon Schoeman

Associated Equipment

Linn Sondek LP12/Ittok/Benz Micro Wood L
 Valve Audio Whisper phono stage
 ADL Esprit USB DAC/headphone amp/phono stage
 Esoteric Audio UX-3 SE universal deck
 Ayre Acoustics AX-5 integrated amplifier
 PS Audio DirectStream DAC
 Vivid Audio V1.5 loudspeakers
 Sennheiser HD800 headphones
 Sennheiser Momentum headphones
 13-inch MacBook Pro/OSX Mavericks/Audirvana 1.12.5 Synology 213+ NAS
 TelluriumQ interlinks and speaker cables

Software

Amber Rubarth — *Scribbled Folk Symphonies* (Chesky)
 Larry Coryell/Victor Bailey/Lenny White — *Electric* (Chesky)
 Bassface Swing Trio — *Plays Gershwin* (Stockfisch)
 The Yellowjackets — *A Rise In The Road* (Mack Ave)
 David Gilmour — *On An Island* (EMI/Parlophone)
 Guy Buttery — *Guy Buttery* (Self)