

Stereotimes (USA) – ADL GT40a and H128  
Review  
May 2015



## Alpha Design Labs GT40a USB DAC and H128 Headphones

### Feeling High End Audio Again



This past CES was very different for me for a lot of reasons. First, for the first time I was the only Stereo Times writer who showed up and covered the show. With the proliferation of other shows now on the horizon many of our guys are being stretched to the point that it just makes more sense to cover a show that is more localized than coming to a city as expensive as Las Vegas. With Axpona being in my hometown of Chicago just a few months later you're probably wondering why I wouldn't have sat out this show too? Well, let's just say that

spending a few days in Las Vegas in the middle of a Chicago winter sounded like a good idea... and my girlfriend was in complete agreement. Second, 2014 was a year that saw me write only one review, and that was of a powercord designed for digital components. I wasn't really "feeling" audio high-end last year and I began to realize that my subscription copies of *TAS* and *Stereophile* were just piling up in stacks right along with the *UTNE Reader* and *Jazziz* magazine. And third, with not just all the new shows but also all the new web-zines clamoring for the same gear for review it has become more and more difficult to get products in for review. I could have settled for just reviewing some of the junk that some companies solicit me with on a weekly basis but I knew I wouldn't enjoy that and it wouldn't be very interesting to our readership. So for most of 2014, I took a pass.

**Dave's Associated Equipment:**

**Analog Front End**

George Warren Precision Sound Turntable  
Moth Arm2 Incognito wired tone arm  
Benz Micro Ace Cartridge  
Transfiguration Phoenix

**Digital Front End**

Vitus Audio RD-101 DAC/Linestage  
OPPO Digital DV-980H Universal Disc Player  
Apple TV

**Amplification**

Bel Canto Ref 1000 Mono Amps  
Bel Canto M300 Mono Amps  
PassLabs XVR-1 Electronic Crossover  
PassLabs XP-15 Phono Stage

**Loudspeakers**

Escalante Design Fremont  
Black Moon Audio Fidelity One Loudspeaker  
Magnepan MG20 Loudspeaker

**Cabling**

Entreq Audio Konstantin Cables  
Entreq Audio Apollo Cables  
Stealth Audio Cables  
Graditech Cables

**Accessories**

Adona Corporation Zero GXT Equipment Stand  
Acoustic Revive RTP-2 Ultimate Power Supply Box  
Isoclean 60A3 II Power Conditioner  
Entreq Vibbeaters  
Entreq AC Wraps

I decided to attend this year's CES in hopes of coming across something that would re-engage my love of high-end products. You see, while there is a proliferation of stuff available out there, at the other end of the spectrum there are a lot of products out there that I was struggling to look at, listen to and then not bust out laughing when the sales rep told me with a straight face just how expensive that product was. I mean, for those of you who attend audio shows or demos at your local dealer, think of how many times you've walked into a room, heard a nice piece of music and then had the person representing the AC line conditioner step up and inform you that his product was priced at more than \$10,000! My guess is that your first response was probably not, "Wow! What a bargain." It was probably more along the lines of, "You've got to be shitting me!" I also began ponder other things about the current state of high-end audio such as, "How many different turntables can VPI possibly build?" "How long before there's an audio show in Moline, Illinois?" and "Why are there so many companies making headphones?"

It was that last question which really nagged at me while I was at CES. There were hundreds of different types of headphones available in every color and style imaginable. Another thing that was in abundance was headphone amplifier/DAC units. It appears that while I've been worrying about the bad and grotesquely overpriced direction of many audio components, computer-based audio has grabbed a massive piece of the audiophile marketplace. And quite frankly, all I can say to that is, "thank God!"

I enjoyed listening to dozens of headphones at CES, both at the showrooms in the Venetian and over at the Las Vegas Convention Center, where you could find headphones made by companies like Beats, Monster cable, and Klipsch, just to name a few. But it wasn't until I stopped by the Venetian and came across the beautifully built Alpha Design Labs H128 headphones that I started to entertain the thought of reviewing a pair of headphones. The professionally stylish looks of the ADLs made me immediately assume an equally stylish price as well. But I was pleasantly surprised to find out that at \$458.00 they were reasonably priced as well. And in the brief moment I got to listen to them, I knew I had to get them in for a review. After a brief discussion with the easy-going Raymond Li of RLI Distribution, the U.S. distributor for ADL (parent company of Furutech), he agreed to send me not only the H128 headphones but also the GT40a USB DAC/Headphone amplifier (\$529.00) that the headphones were being demoed with. For the first time in a long time, I was excited about audio components coming to my house.



## **H128 Headphones**

Let me begin with my immediate attraction to the ADL gear. It is gorgeous. The H128 headphones are constructed with a sturdy aluminum headband that is covered with a soft and cushy "leatherette" sleeve that felt extra nice on my baldhead. Solid plastic arms come down from the headband and connect to the earpieces. The earpieces (probably not the technical term) are a closed-back "circumaural" design using Furutech designed diaphragms, a 40mm extra-large,

cryo-treated magnet and PEEK trembler film. The 1.3 meter IHP-35X Alpha-OCC headphone cable is connected to the headphone via a Furutech mini XLR and at the other end of the cable is a FT-735 3.5mm stereo connector. The headphones that drew my attention at CES were finished with lovely soft silver plastic and luxurious-looking brown leatherette. The pair that I was sent for review were finished with dark grey plastic on the arms and navy-blue on the earpieces with black leatherette on the earcups and headband. This was very handsome as well, but I am partial to the silver and brown.

So now that you know what they look like, let me tell you how they feel. Simply put these are some of the most comfortable headphones I've ever worn. The padded leatherette earcups snuggle to your ears and as I mentioned earlier, they felt great even on my follically-challenged dome. Because they are built so substantially, they may be a bit on the bulky side to some, especially if you like to where headphones while you're commuting. Also, for those who, like me, wear headphones with their smart phones, bear in mind that these headphones do not come with a mic cable. But frankly, I don't believe these headphones were designed with frequent commuting or running along jogging paths in mind. For those purposes ADL makes a splendid earphone as well. The H128s were made for long nights of curling up with a laptop or tablet and enjoying your music download library, which I did plenty of. I'll come back to that in a bit.



### **GT40a USB DAC/Headphone Amp**

Like the H128 headphones, the GT40a DAC/headphone amp is an extremely well built device. It is fairly diminutive in size (approx. 6" x 2" x 4") and lightweight (1.4 lbs.) but is built for long-term use. The chassis is made of a high-quality

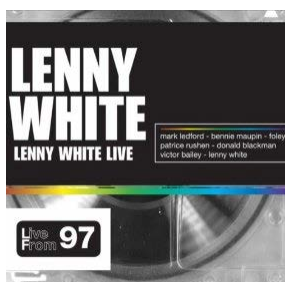
aluminum and has a nicely machined knob for volume control. On the left side of the unit's faceplate, under the ADL logo are two lighted switches: one to indicate the power is on and the other to select between using the USB or analog inputs. Next to these switches is something that I think is a very thoughtful design element; a clip signal indicator. When this light comes on it tells you to adjust the recording attenuation to 12, 6, or 0dB. Near the center of the faceplate is a 6.3mm headphone jack and finally the volume knob.

The rear of this unit really shows off its flexibility. There you will find a USB digital input/output connector as well as a pair of gold-plated, Teflon-insulated RCA connectors for analog input and output. Additionally, there are two selector switches: one for using the analog input as either a "phono" or "line" level input and the other for switching the phono input from moving coil (MC) to moving magnet (MM). And of course there's a connector for the external power supply and a ground connector for the phono.

Internally, the GT40a utilizes a high-performance 24bit/192kHz VIA VT1736 USB chip and 24bit/192kHz Cirrus Logic CS4270" DAC/ADC chip. It also uses an ADC IC chip for Hi-res recordings through the unit's analog input. The headphone amp is a Maxim MAX9722A which seems to provide plenty power for the H128s. More on that in a bit.

### Getting Into Music

Overall, the GT40a DAC and H128 headphones are thoughtfully designed and attractively built products. Considering that they come from a company like Furutech, this is hardly a surprise. Of course, good looks and solid construction don't always dictate musical enjoyment. So I was really hopeful that these products would stand up to my elevated expectations for music playback. My present reference system sounds better now than it ever has at any point in my audiophile life. So these little components would have to really be special in order to satisfy me, even though their price tags are relatively modest. Bear in mind also that these products represent my first real foray in computer audio. In this case we're talking about my iTunes library on an HP Envy PC feeding the USB input on the GT40a and the H128 headphones into its headphones jack. My iTunes downloads are all converted to WAV files. That's it. That's the system that is responsible for providing me with all-consuming sound. There was no myriad of cables to deal with. Only my computer desk was needed and no actual floor space was taken up. And best of all, using the H128's 3m long cable meant that I could still curl up on my favorite sofa, dim the lights and comfortably enjoy music.



During my first serious listening session I must have listened to nearly 200 songs. But I made note of a few that stuck with me as particularly interesting experiences. The first of many live jazz recordings I listened to was drummer Lenny White's *Lenny White Live* [BFM Jazz]. This entire recording is great but my favorite track is, "Pic Pocket." The song starts out with bassist Victor Bailey and of course Lenny White himself laying down a classic jazz riff that is the foundation for the song. This kind of song really shows off the best attributes of the H128 by not allowing the bass or kick drum to dominate your ears. On lesser headphones a song like this would have you scrambling to adjust the volume for fear of blowing out the drivers. The musicality of the rest of the performers are handled well also by both the H128 and the GT40a, particularly Mark Ledford's trumpet and Donald Blackman and "Baby Fingers" herself, Patrice Rushen's keyboard work. You hear deep into their performances in a non-fatiguing way.



But that recording is largely instrumental. I needed to know how well these products could handle a unique vocalist like say, Mr. Kurt Elling. I listened to his fabulous *Live In Chicago* [Blue Note] and my favorite track "Night Dream" about a dozen times. Kurt Elling is legendary for his vocal range and unrivaled scating abilities. This ADL pair rendered all of the subtle nuances of his vocals on this song exceptionally well. Elling's voice floats back and forth effortlessly between high-pitched passages and deep bass tones. Not only did the H128 not add any edge to the higher octaves but they almost sounded just a bit softened compared to my highly resolved reference headphones, the similarly priced Aedle VK-1 (\$480) from France. Actually, these two headphones represent the classic trade off of most audio components. Where the Aedle has slightly more extended highs than the ADL, the ADL handles the midrange and low end about as well as any headphones I've heard, and some full range speakers as well.

A recording that really tells you a lot about the abilities of your gear is French music icon, Michel Jonasz's *La Fabuleuse Histoire De Mister Swing* [WEA]. Track 10 of this live recording, "Le Temps Passe" is a heavily synthesized ballad with some bass chords that are so deep that even Dante Alighieri would say, "Damn! That's deep." Kept an eye on the clip signal indicator on the GT40a but it didn't flinch. Instead, the sonic presentation was musical and powerful even at high listening levels. This little combo really allows the listener to get into the recordings without being overwhelmed by sonic bombasts.

## Conclusion

After stepping away from reviewing most of last year, spending time with this pair from has gotten my juices flowing. Listening to these products have been a satisfying experience and knowing that one can gain so much musical joy for so little money makes me hopeful for the future of high-end audio. And make no mistake, the Alpha Design Labs H128 headphones and GT40a USB headphone amp/DAC are high-end components. After all, high-end doesn't necessarily mean high priced, it also means high quality of design, build, and music reproduction. This is what high-end audio is all about. Highly recommended.

*Dave Thomas*



#### **Specifications:**

##### **H128 Headphones**

Acoustic Design: Dynamic closed-back

Driver: 40mm diameter special high-flux magnet

Sensitivity: 98dB SPL (1mW) at 1 KHz

Frequency response: 20Hz ~ 20kHz

Input Power: 200mW (Max.)

Rated Impedance: 68 Ohm @ 1KHz

Ear pad: Leatherette

Head Band Pressure: 4.5 N Approx.

Connector: Nonmagnetic rhodium-plated stereo α (Alpha) mini-XLR socket

Weight: 280g (9.84oz) Approx. (without cable) 320g (11.2 oz) Approx. (with cable)

**Price: \$458.00 USD**

##### **GT40α USB DAC Specifications**

USB & Analog Playback and Record multimedia audio system

Connectivity: USB B Interface, Analog input/output RCA jack

USB Playback Resolution: 24bits/192kHz (Max)

USB Recording Resolution: 24bits/192kHz (Max) supports 44.1/48 /88.2 /96/176.4 /192 (kHz)

Frequency response: 20Hz ~ 20kHz (+/-0.5 dB)

SN ratio: >90dB (A-wtd) / Line Output

Line Output Level: 5 Vrms

Line Input Level: MC 0.4mV / MM 4.0mV / Line 2Vrms

Headphone Output Level: 1% THD 1kHz (Max.)

94mW(16 ohm), 110mW(32 ohm), 98.6mW (56 ohm), 23mW (300 ohm)

Power Supply AC Adaptor Rating: Erp step2 compliant, 2Wire AC Input Type, Class II, AC/DC Switching

Adaptor output DC 15V / 0.8A / 12W

Dimensions: 150 (W) x 111 (D) x 57 (H) mm

Weight: 650g Approx.

GT40a Windows driver supports Win XP, Win 7 and Win 8 (not Win Vista)

**Price: \$529.00USD**



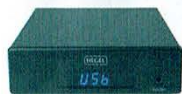
ON TEST



**Denon DA-300USB**  
**£329 p29**  
 This desktop DAC/headphone amp from respected AV brand Denon comes with a stand so that it can sit upright, and incorporates the company's proprietary Advanced AL32 processing as found on its upmarket disc players.



**ADL X1**  
**£395 p31**  
 A portable DAC/headphone amp from newcomer Alpha Design Labs capable of handling inputs up to 24/192, the X1 is just as happy sat between a computer and a hi-fi system or neatly piggybacked to an iDevice. But how does it sound?



**Hegel HD12 DSD**  
**£900 p33**  
 Another new brand to the UK, Hegel hails from Norway where it likes to do things a little bit differently. Don't be fooled by the simplistic styling at the price; this home DAC/headphone amp has some impressive capabilities to bring to any music system.



**Henry Audio USB DAC 128 mkII**  
**£210 p35**  
 This straightforward USB DAC from Norway supports formats up to 24/192. This latest model is the continuation of an open-source project started by a group of enthusiasts who wanted to make an affordable way to listen to hi-res music.



**iFi Nano iDSD**  
**£165 p37**  
 The cheapest by a good way, this portable DAC/headphone amp is housed in gorgeous alloy casework and is designed to give excellent value for money and serious sonics. But how does it fare among such exalted company?



**LH Labs Geek Out M**  
**£249 p39**  
 No prizes for style, but the dinky Geek Out M punches way above its weight. It's perhaps better known for the huge crowdfunding support it received, but this mini USB DAC/headphone amp has much to offer and promises to deliver great sound.





# ADL X1 £395



No bigger than a smartphone, could this be the perfect choice to boost sound quality on the go and at home?

## DETAILS

- PRODUCT**  
ADL X1
- ORIGIN**  
Japan
- TYPE**  
Hub/battery-powered USB DAC/headphone preamp
- WEIGHT**  
147g
- DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
68 x 118 x 17mm
- FEATURES**
  - 24-bit/192kHz DAC
  - Format support: PCM 44.1-192kHz
  - Quoted battery life: up to 7.5 hours
  - Inputs: 3.5mm jack; USB-A port; mini USB-B port
  - Outputs: 3.5mm analogue/optical; 3.5mm headphone/line level jack
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Sound Foundations
- TELEPHONE**  
01276 501392
- WEBSITE**  
soundfoundations.co.uk

**L**ike the iFi Nano iDSD reviewed overleaf, this neat ADL X1 battery-powered DAC is designed to be used on the move piggybacked to a portable iDevice, and yet is flexible enough to sit between a computer's USB port and your main hi-fi system giving you the best of both worlds. The 24-bit/192kHz take-anywhere DAC claims to give around 7.5 hours of listening from its built-in USB-powered rechargeable battery for life on the road.

Build quality is high – it's easily the most stylish small DAC here – and is available with red, blue or silver anodised aluminium panels as well as the black version pictured. A selection of leads and adaptors are supplied to partner the X1 to your portable device or connect to the USB port of a computer. There's even a robust ADL-branded rubber band to secure it to your portable player.

In addition to the USB input, the X1 accepts line-level analogue sources via a 4-pin 3.5mm jack output and

the multi-input Toslink optical digital output on the underside. The headphone output drives headphones within the 12-600ohm range, and also supports models fitted with an inline microphone.

Six LEDs indicate the incoming sampling frequency, although the font is tiny and rather difficult to decipher. A rotary control operates on/off and volume level, and there's a selector switch for USB or iDevice connectivity alongside a ground TRRS button.

## Sound quality

For its diminutive dimensions the ADL certainly delivers an impressive sound that's very easy on the ear. In some ways the dinky device has the biggest sound of the group, with oodles of bass definition and an open and airiness to treble notes that never gets splashy. Vocals are perfectly rendered and the 24/192 version of Madonna's *True Blue* allows me to hear right into the recording, picking up on subtle details that I've never previously noticed before buried within the recording. What's surprising is that the ADL manages to convey an engaging sense of timing and rhythm when playing this album, it's almost enough to make anyone listening want to move their hips.

A 24/96 version of Kate Bush's *Snowed In At Wheeler Street* has a lovely balance and richness to the piano that is utterly convincing and backed by impressive but not overly extended bass. Vocals have a smoothness and almost analogue



## PERSONAL TOUCH

Alpha Design Labs (ADL to you and I) is a relatively new Japanese brand from cable specialist Furutech. In its short time on the planet, the Tokyo-based firm has specialised in a small range of affordable DAC/headphone amplifiers as well as on-ear and in-ear headphone models.

The main purpose of the X1 is to upgrade the sound quality from a portable music iDevice or a computer. With Furutech's cable background you can bet that good quality cables are provided to take care of the X1's flexible connectivity scenarios. Included in the box is a short (10cm) 3.5mm-to-3.5mm jack and 14-pin dock connector-to-USB cable for connection to older portables. Those with newer iDevices fitted with lightning connectors will need to factor in the additional cost of a suitable cable like the ADL iD8A, priced from £70. For charging and using a computer as your music source a mini USB-B-to-USB-A cable is supplied, but you'll need to purchase a 3.5mm jack-to-stereo RCA to output it to a hi-fi amplifier.

quality to them that makes them easy on the ear and balances Kate Bush's silky vocals with Elton John's more velvety tones to great effect.

Again Pink Floyd's *Take It Back* in 24/96 form has a wonderful sense of airiness around guitar and percussion instruments that shows off this well engineered recording; there's not a moment's splashiness to drums and the track has plenty of drive.

No matter what material you play, the X1 has that rare ability to keep you listening for hours without any fatigue. Everything is smoothly rendered to show off recordings at their best with an impressive sense of scale and rhythm that just makes you want to keep on listening ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>SOUND QUALITY</b><br>★★★★★   | <b>LIKE:</b> Analogue-sounding portable DAC that's effective both inside and out |
| <b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b><br>★★★★★ | <b>DISLIKE:</b> Attachment band doesn't feel particularly secure                 |
| <b>BUILD QUALITY</b><br>★★★★★   | <b>WESAY:</b> Smooth operation and sound make this a great DAC for any pocket    |
| <b>FEATURES</b><br>★★★★★        |  |

### OVERALL



# Group test verdict

He's gathered his thoughts after hours of listening, so before he takes a rest with a well-earned cuppa **Lee Dunkley** sums up what he's heard

**WITH SUCH A** spread of models across both home and portable use this is a particularly tough test to sum up, but the minimalist Hegel is the first to fall. Although in many respects the HD12 DSD has to be admired for its tech choices, specification, super build and finish (even if its looks are a bit austere), its poor ease of use and price mean it doesn't score quite so highly against the competition here. In no way would you be disappointed by the sound from this DAC, it's just that there are better options for less. Next is the Henry Audio; a mighty fine bit of kit that looks like it's

lacking flexibility, but in fact its open-source nature will appeal to tinkerers. Ultimately though, it's up against more flexible consumer models here, and its slightly forward sound may not be so appealing to all. I love the iFi's styling, build, format support and general nature, it's just that sonically it doesn't surpass the ultra cool ADL XL, and its iDevice connectivity is cumbersome. The slick ADL X1 is quite a cool portable solution with a good, balanced, analogue sort of sound that most people will feel they can live with and enjoy. It's reasonable value

too, with plenty of features and connectivity options and is a versatile device that gives the best of both worlds. The Geek Out M from LH Labs is the kind of product that comes along every once in a while and breaks the rule book. It sounds far better than it has any right to given its diminutive dimensions, but with tech derived from the high-end Da Vinci DAC it's no wonder that it sounds so great. I wouldn't be surprised if the Geek Out is snapped up just as quickly as it attained its crowdfunding target.



**WINNER**

The Denon DA-300USB has got the looks and functionality of a great home DAC. It produces a great sound across all inputs and offers the flexibility to be placed upright using the supplied stand. Factor in its superb build and finish, and you have a very worthy winner.

Make/model	Denon DA-300USB	ADL X1	Hegel HD12 DSD	Henry Audio USB DAC 128 mkII	iFi Nano iDSD	LH Labs Geek Out M
<b>Price</b>	£329	£395	£900	£210	£165	£249
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Value</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Build</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Features</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Overall</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Great package offering flexibility and style, put quite simply it's got the lot	Ultra sleek portable DAC that sounds just as great at home as it does on the move	Distinctive design makes this DAC the most charismatic of the group	Open-source tech to appeal to tinkerers, this simple USB DAC sounds good too	Great build and hi-res format friendly, but clunky design won't suit all	Mediocre build doesn't detract from the astonishing hi-res sound it makes

### Key features

	Denon	ADL	Hegel	Henry Audio	iFi	LH Labs
<b>Coaxial in</b>	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
<b>Optical in</b>	2	Yes	2	No	No	No
<b>24/192 USB</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>iPod</b>	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
<b>XLR out</b>	No	No	Yes	No	No	No

### TRY WITH THESE

**HEADPHONES:**  
Focal Spirit One S  
£150 **HFC 391**

Few headphones manage to combine style and performance as successfully as this closed-back design. The smooth sound combines a well-integrated bass with a revealing level of detail, making them perfect for hi-res on the move.



**INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER:**  
Arcam FMJ-A19 £650 **HFC 371**

A mid-price integrated that's festooned with inputs and a useful amount of power. It wowed us with its rich and engrossing sound and makes listening a great pleasure, whatever type of music you're into.



**STANDMOUNT SPEAKER:**  
Monitor Audio Silver One £500 **HFC 390**

This super sounding standmount is available in beautiful wood veneer and gloss finishes and offers great performance at the price. You get plenty of bang for your buck with a big sound that's musically honest, detailed and enjoyable to listen to.

