

FURUTECH

Stuff Magazine (UK) – ADL Cruise Review

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Why you need to be into...

Portable audio

Fraser Macdonald explains why a portable DAC is the key to getting great sound even when you're on the move

Computers and smartphones are the cornerstones of modern hi-fi, as fundamental to the digital music revolution as vinyl was to the Golden Age of Stereo. But then again, they're still computers – and therefore sonically compromised compared to a dedicated music player such as a stereo.

That's not to say they're hopeless. Put in the

effort to coddle your content and you'll get decent sound quality from even a dirt-cheap laptop or phone these days. It doesn't even take that much effort, really: store your tunes using lossless or uncompressed encoding, and use error-busting accurate-rip software such as Max (for Mac) or EAC (PC) and you'll see immediate improvements. And if you want to be really flash, high-res music files – 24-bit/96kHz or 24-bit/192kHz quality – will take your digital listening to the next level.

But there's still one weak link in the chain: your laptop's soundcard or smartphone's DAC. That's not a problem at home, where you can fling your tunes to a high-end streamer or feed them to an external DAC, but what happens if you're listening on the train?


Well, if you've got any sense, you get yourself a portable DAC. Alright, so it may add a little complication to your listening, but the sonic returns are well worth it. Simply plug your device into your computer or portable music player via a USB port, hook your headphones up to the

device's 3.5mm input socket, and settle back for your audio upgrade. You'll hardly even notice that an ultra-compact component such as the AudioQuest DragonFly is there – until you spin your first track, that is. And the result? How's improved clarity, detail, dynamics and spaciousness sound to you... Plus, the better your headphones, the greater the benefits will be.

//Your laptop's soundcard is the weak link in the audiophile chain – so you need a DAC

Sound good? It sure does. Plus, there's the added satisfaction of garnering knowing nods from fellow DAC converts and perplexed looks from people who think you're listening to two MP3 players. And of course most USB DACs will connect to your home hi-fi too, so you can get two sonic upgrades for the price of one. Now that's geekery worth knowing about.


BEGINNER SETUP



Fiio E17 Alpen + AKG K 451
£100 + £80 | fiio.com.cn + uk.akg.com

Fiio's headphone amp and USB DAC is beautifully made, with a built-in display that makes it easy to switch between audio sources. The battery will last for about eight hours of continuous use between charges, too. Sound-wise, the E17 can support up to 24-bit/96kHz files via USB and works a treat when teamed with AKG's K 451 headphones. These portable cans are forgiving of lower-bitrate material but revealing enough to do justice to higher-quality files, covering all bases for would-be audio connoisseurs on a budget.

LAPTOP UPGRADE



AudioQuest DragonFly + Philips Fidelio M1
£215 + £160 | audioquest.com + philips.co.uk

The DragonFly is the most convenient of USB DACs. Despite being the same size as a USB stick, it's packing a 24-bit ESS Sabre DAC, usually seen in high-end Blu-ray players. It supports asynchronous transfer, plays nicely with files of up to 24-bit/96kHz, and the DragonFly logo lights up in different colours to indicate the current sampling-rate. Add the excellent Fidelio M1 headphones and you've got a near-perfect set up: the comfy M1s are sound-tight and their refined treble, imaging and weighty bass will do justice to any music.

AUDIO
EXPERT



**Furutech ADL Cruise + AKG K3003i
+ Vertere Pulse D-Fi USB cable**

£465 + £1000 + £70 | furutech.com + uk.akg.com
+ vertereacoustics.com

The Cruise is a thing of beauty. Curvaceous carbon fibre and stainless steel end caps lift it well above the herd, an internal battery delivers 80 hours of listening, and it's incredibly transparent to your source material – so much so that a hyper-clean, super-neutral Vertere USB cable is a worthwhile upgrade for better sound transfer. With its powerful amp, the Cruise is great with high-end buds such as the AKG K3003is. They'd be wasted on an iPhone – but paired with this DAC, they come alive.

**JARGON
BUSTER**

- **DAC**
A digital to analogue converter unpacks streams of binary code and translates the signal into an audible analogue output.
- **24-bit audio**
CD-quality files have a bit depth of 16 bits and sample rate of 44.1kHz. 24-bit/96kHz high-res files offer vastly more data and sound much better, while ultra-rare 24-bit/192kHz files are the audiophile holy grail.
- **Asynchronous transfer**
The DAC overrides your computer's data 'clock', taking control of the audio transfer process in order to reduce digital timing errors.
- **Lossless encoding**
The minimum standard for audio storage, if you want to justify that DAC.

EAR-ILY ACCURATE: HAUNTS FOR HI-RES MUSIC DOWNLOADS

Qobuz
qobuz.com



This French site's aural treats consist of CD-quality lossless downloads and 24-bit studio masters. It's not officially available in the UK, but firing off a quick email to its customer service dept might work.

Bandcamp
bandcamp.com



Suckle your music straight from the source in audiophile quality with this store for truly indie artists. Alongside 320kbps MP3s, it offers lossless FLACs and a 'discover' section for uncovering hidden geniuses before anyone else.

Internet Archive
archive.org/details/etree



Head to this non-profit site's 'live music archive' for a treasure trove of concert recordings downloadable in FLAC format. Its catalogue is patchy, but there are rarities from the likes of Grateful Dead and Ryan Adams available.

Pono
mypono.com



Neil Young's an avowed campaigner for better digital audio: his home for '21st Century Digital' will stock 24-bit masters and be accompanied by a portable DAC and audio player. All three are due to launch this summer.