

# IFI ZEN DAC / £129 inc VAT

SUPPLIER amazon.co.uk



**T**he iFi Zen DAC is a compact but pleasingly heavy desktop audio interface with a stylish metal chassis that belies its price. It has an integrated headphone amp with a 1/4in stereo port at the front, as well as rear RCA outputs for speakers, and its pre-amp can be enabled or disabled for either of these.

A switch at the back selects between fixed mode – in which the pre-amp and the DAC's front volume knob are disabled – and variable mode, which engages the pre-amp and allows you to control its volume directly from DAC, which is particularly welcome when watching movies on headphones.

There are two further buttons on the front: Power Match and TrueBass. The latter is an analogue bass boost, intended to compensate for the loss of bass frequencies that can affect some in-ear and open-backed

headphone styles. Power Match adds gain to the headphone output to more effectively work with high-impedance headphones

The Zen DAC also has both front and rear balanced five-pole 4.4mm Pentaconn ports. The audiophile world is currently having it out as to whether balanced headphone connectors make any discernible difference to listening quality for consumer purposes, but manufacturers including Sennheiser and Sony have adopted Pentaconn jacks for some high-end headphone lines.

While the standard is far from mainstream, it's always nice to have more output options, even if you'll probably use the chunky 1/4in headphone connector. On which note, no 3.5mm to 1/4in converter is included, so you'll have to provide your own if your headphones use the smaller TRS jack standard.

There's no way of individually controlling speaker and headphone volume, and sound will come out of both if both are connected. The volume control knob is illuminated by an LED that changes colour to indicate the sample rate of music being played. The Zen DAC supports both the MQA and DSD audio standards, although a firmware update may be required to add these depending on the age of your unit.

The Zen DAC's audio quality is superb. It's equipped with an unspecified Burr-Brown DAC and we were thrilled by its rich, balanced sound that worked as well for Dvorak's

Requiem as for System of a Down or The Kinks, even through standard desktop speakers. More expensive headphones and speakers revealed no flaws.

This translates just as well to gaming audio. As you'd expect from a music-oriented product, there's no virtual surround sound or other audio effects, but stereo sound is crystal clear, well balanced and comfortable for extended gaming sessions on both speakers and headphones.

Its default audio profile in firmware version 5.3 has a powerful, but not overwhelming bass presence, a vivid mid-range and detailed treble.

iFi issued firmware with XMOS audio profile updates but the latest 5.3c edition sacrifices some DSD support, so we opted not to upgrade in this instance.

## Conclusion

The Zen DAC lacks the specialist gaming and surround sound features of Creative's cheaper X3, but it sounds astonishingly good, especially for this price. It has the edge if you're putting your PC at the heart of your digital music collection and we can't fault its performance in games and movies either. **GPC**

## VERDICT

At £129, and with beautiful audio quality, the Zen DAC is a first-rate desktop choice for anyone who leans towards audiophile quality and features, while still operating on a sensible budget.

DESIGN 18/20	FEATURES 18/20	OVERALL SCORE <b>92%</b>
SOUND QUALITY 38/40	VALUE 18/20	



## CALMING

- + Outstanding audio quality
- + Dedicated headphone and speaker outputs
- + Relatively inexpensive

## CALAMITOUS

- No individual volume control for output ports
- No virtual surround or other audio effects

## SPEC

**Inputs/outputs** USB 3 B, RCA out, 1/4in out, 4.4mm Pentaconn headphone out, 4.4mm Pentaconn speaker out

**Supported headphone impedance** 16–600Ω

**Max supported sample rate** 32-bit/384kHz

**Format support** PCM, MQA, DSD, DXD

**Dimensions (mm)** 117 x 100 x 30 (W x D x H)

**Weight** 800g

