



Zen master

iFi's recently updated DAC and headphone amp promises a big spec at a bargain price.

Ed Selley sees how it stacks up

Hailing from the same family as the Zen Blue (HFC 460), instead of Bluetooth the Zen DAC V2 is designed as a single-input USB digital-to-analogue converter. The port in question is a USB-B located on the rear, while the XMOS controller is 16 rather than 8-core. The USB connection supports PCM up to 384kHz and DSD256 along with MQA support decoded via its Burr-Brown DAC.

Connections are comprehensive for the price, including an RCA output that can be used as a fixed-level hook-up or variable preamp output – offering great potential for using it with a pair of active speakers lacking volume control. Meanwhile, a 4.4mm connection on the rear offers a balanced output. On the front is another 4.4mm jack alongside a 6.35mm output. These allow the Zen to be used as a headphone amp and explains why the chassis is also fitted with a 5V DC PSU connection. In order to achieve the maximum quoted power output of these sockets you will need to switch over to an external PSU, which is not included but available for around £10 online. A dedicated cable that also serves as the power feed for the DAC as well as the signal input completes the picture.

Internally, the Zen DAC features a number of design details that have trickled down from more expensive

models. This includes the use of TDK capacitors and an analogue 'TrueBass' circuit to augment the low-frequency response without recourse to a DSP. Externally, the Zen DAC V2 is similar to its Bluetooth and Phono stablemates with an all-metal chassis.

Sound quality

Connecting the Zen DAC V2 to a Rega Io (HFC 464) and Wharfedale's Diamond 12.2 (HFC 479) creates a cost effective but absurdly talented system in which the iFi shines. Even without the TrueBass option selected, it reveals real weight and texture to its presentation. The deep drum that underpins *Times Won't Change Me Now* by Circa Waves is reproduced with commendable heft that helps the piece sound big and convincing. There have been times when I've found some older iFi designs to be initially very attention grabbing, but a little fatiguing over time. This is a sound that's less arresting initially, but one you can enjoy for hours.

This hasn't been achieved at the expense of drive and excitement, though. The Zen DAC powers its way through The Cinematic Orchestra's *A Caged Bird/Imitations Of Life* with finesse and a feeling of energy that compels you to keep listening. As Roots Manuva's vocals reach the soaring chorus, it does a fine job of capturing the scale of the performance without sounding compressed or

DETAILS

PRODUCT
iFi Audio
Zen DAC V2

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
USB DAC

WEIGHT
800g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
160 x 35 x 117mm

FEATURES
• Supports PCM up to 384kHz and DSD256
• 6.35 and 4.4mm headphone out
• RCA output
• 4.4mm balanced output

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congested. Compare it with a more expensive DAC, and strings don't sound as rich or vivid and the stereo image sits between your speakers rather than extending beyond, but I am consistently surprised at how close it gets to rather pricier alternatives.

The headphone amp works rather well, too. With Audio-Technica's MSR7b headphone (HFC 451), the USB power is sufficient to hit any level I can comfortably listen to. The same well-judged sonic balance of refinement and drive is present via the headphone socket and, while it hardens up a little when you run it very hard, most headphones of a price you'd habitually connect to the iFi will work on USB power alone. You can also power the Zen DAC V2 via an OTG connection from an Android phone making it portable in a technical sense if not a practical one.

Conclusion

Criticism of the Zen DAC V2 has to be seen in the context of its price. This is an absurdly talented device for the money. Connected to a digital source capable of delivering a lossless signal or better, it is consistently capable of a sound far in excess of the asking price making it an absolute bargain ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Outstanding audio performance; comprehensive spec

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Might need an external PSU for rigorous headphone use

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: An absolute bargain that offers performance well in advance of its lowly price point

FEATURES



OVERALL

