

Musical Fidelity M1 DAC (£399)

Outboard DACs are back in fashion – and this new model from Musical Fidelity with a comprehensive suite of inputs and outputs is designed to take the spotlight

Review: **John Bamford Lab: Paul Miller**

Thanks to the ubiquity of computer audio, the market is now awash with all manner of affordable DACs sporting USB inputs, including Musical Fidelity's excellent £160 V-DAC. But the V-DAC is in a compact utilitarian 'hideaway' box powered by a plug top 'wall wart' power supply, whereas the new M1 DAC has real audiophile pretensions.

Using 24-bit Delta-Sigma dual differential DACs with upsampling to 192kHz, it features an AES/EBU balanced input (XLR socket) and a pair of XLR balanced outputs for hooking up to appropriately equipped high-end amplifiers, as well as a pair of singled-ended RCA output sockets. Also included at the rear are two S/PDIF inputs – one RCA coaxial and one Toslink optical – and a B-type USB input socket. A push button selector on the fascia is used to cycle through the four inputs.

While the M1 is capable of handing input data up to 24-bit/192kHz, don't get too excited. Its USB input is limited to 16-bit/48kHz, so it is not a cheap alternative to 'professional audio' type DACs with high-speed USB and/or FireWire interfaces. Audio enthusiasts building a collection of hi-res recordings on their PCs' HDDs will have to dig deeper for considerably more expensive



ABOVE: Blue LEDs on the fascia indicate which input is selected and the incoming data sample rate, while a green LED indicates 192kHz upsampling

alternatives. Note also that the front panel LED indicating 192kHz upsampling is a little superfluous as the M1's upsampling can't be switched in and out.

NEW LIFE

The M1 DAC's explicit sound should certainly breathe new life into ageing CD players. I fed its coaxial input from a Pioneer DV-868AVi universal player – which is in fact no bad CD

player, but with a tendency to sound 'slow' in the bass – and enjoyed a much more agile, upbeat delivery. The acoustic bass introduction to Diana Krall's 'My Love Is' from *Love Scenes* [Impulse IMP12342] displayed crisper transients with less blurring of the edges, together with a more descriptive texture that was more sophisticated. Both sharp and lucid, the M1 sounds highly polished.

I've mentioned before my prized collection of copy master DATs made by audiophile engineer Tony Faulkner 25 years ago. The M1 locked on to the 96kHz

balanced digital output of my Pioneer D9601 'HS-DAT' professional DAT recorder (Faulkner was first in the queue to buy a couple of D9601s when recording at 96kHz was in its infancy) and the sound was deliciously holographic. I was listening to intimate studio 'first takes' of the soulful jazz crooner Joe Williams, the instruments in his backing orchestra beautifully spot-lit by the M1 DAC's sprightly and vivid demeanour. Talk about looking through the recording studio's control room window...

Finally, out of sheer curiosity, I hooked up the MF to the optical S/PDIF output of a Sky TV receiver. The DAC transformed the sound. The orchestra during a BBC Proms concert marking the 80th birthday of the American composer Stephen Sondheim, now sounded full-bodied and vibrant. ☺

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HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum Output Level/Impedance	3.96Vrms / 46ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio	114.1dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0018% / 0.0005%
Distortion (20kHz, 0dBfs)	0.0013%
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.03dB to +0.13dB (48kHz Fs)
Digital jitter (24-bit; 48kHz/96kHz)	36psec / 38psec
Resolution @ -100dB	±0.1dB
Power consumption	4W
Dimensions (WHD)	220x100x300mm

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

If the CD source in your system is letting the side down, but the cost of upgrading to something much more serious is prohibitive, this new M1 DAC could be just what you need. It delivers distinguished audio, with superb detail retrieval and a broad, deep soundstage. Moreover you'll have the benefit of gaining extra digital inputs for other sources – such as that rough-sounding TV set top box, perhaps.

Sound Quality: 80%

