



DAC to the future

David Price thinks Musical Fidelity's new reasonably priced MX-DAC will convert many digiphiles to the brand

It's funny how history repeats itself. Just 15 years ago, the world was getting excited about DVD-Audio and Super Audio Compact Disc. These two hi-res formats had been a long time coming; nearly two decades, but it felt longer. Suddenly, we had the promise of digital music in far better quality than CD.

The hi-fi world was rightly excited, but sadly this didn't translate to the music buying public. Audio fans might have got hot under the collar, but music fans didn't, and by 2007 DVD-A and SACD were nearly history.

Not so. Suddenly they have come back – in spirit if not in body. Like a kind of digital poltergeist, the soul of

the beast has returned without a physical form! The audio world is going crazy for hi-res PCM (DVD-A's coding system), and latterly Direct Stream Digital (ditto, for SACD). Indeed, it's available on Musical Fidelity's new MX-DAC with support for ultra hi-res 32-bit/384kHz digital PCM and DSD – it plays 'double DSD', offering even better sound than SACD ever did. In both cases this is impressive stuff; the only downside being that there is currently very little material commercially available in these formats. Still, it has real appeal because it's effectively more futureproof than many of its rivals.

The manufacturer says this new DAC's technical performance is on

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Musical Fidelity
MX-DAC

ORIGIN
EU

TYPE
32-bit/192kHz PCM
& DSD-capable DAC

WEIGHT

1.9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
220 x 53 x 215mm

FEATURES

- 2x coaxial; 2x optical; 1x USB digital inputs
- RCA phono, balanced XLR audio outputs
- 2-position digital filter setting

DISTRIBUTOR

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a par with any digital converter at any price – an impressive claim. The converter chip fitted is the latest Burr-Brown PCM1795 32-bit/192kHz multi-bit Sigma-Delta design, made by Texas Instruments. It works in conjunction with a TI SRC439 sampling rate converter, and Musical Fidelity claims the MX-DAC has a very low jitter figure of just 12ppm.

Considering its price, the casework is a thing of beauty. Built in the 'European Union' (not Taiwan, as is usual for this company), it was designed in Britain and looks mighty handsome. The front panel sports LEDs showing source selected, format and sampling frequency. It annoys me that many DAC manufacturers seem unable to have such comprehensive displays, basically preferring that you trust to luck and listen in ignorance of what resolution your computer is outputting. Two filter profiles are offered, switchable on the front panel; they sound similar and it's really down to taste – and your system – as to which is better.

Round the back the MX-DAC sports two coaxial digital ins (up to 24/192), twin Toslink optical ins (ditto), plus asynchronous USB (ditto) and DSD 64 and DSD 128. Everything is processed in the DSD domain, says the manufacturer.

Single-ended RCA and balanced XLR outputs complete the picture,

along with a DC power input. Juice comes from a small 5V, 2A 'wall wart' supply, suggesting that there's room for an upgraded power supply at some future date? It's easy enough to set up; as ever Windows users need to install the supplied USB Class 2 driver while Mac owners don't.

Sound quality

Despite having whiz-bang DSD capability, most people will still spend most of their time listening to this new DAC at 16/44 CD resolution; almost all music on sale comes in this package and any type of hi-res is still rare, let alone DSD. So I kick off with an old favourite, The Style Council's

The LEDs highlight the format and sampling frequency of what you play

CONNECTIONS



- ① Balanced XLR outputs
- ② Unbalanced RCA outputs
- ③ Coaxial and optical digital inputs
- ④ Asynchronous USB-B input

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

LIKE: Excellent build; ultra-clear sound; flexibility

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

WE SAY: Neat, compact design and high-quality sound from an affordable DAC

FEATURES

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

Headstart For Happiness on CD – an early eighties recording playing out from a Cyrus CD Xt Signature (HFC 386) transport. The MX-DAC sounds super clean and clear, with little sense of its own personality. At first, when not properly warmed through, the soundstage is a tad two-dimensional but it soon widens and deepens, and the music takes on a vibrant and enjoyable feel. The song breezes along, this DAC throwing oodles of detail out at me, without ever sounding too technical or analytical. Indeed, it's a lot more lively than most at the price. By comparison the acclaimed Audiolab M-DAC (HFC 368) I have to hand sounds a little coarser, with a less sweet tonality but a fraction more detail.

Moving to the lush strains of Isaac Hayes' *Cafe Regios*, and the Musical Fidelity captures its warm and silky feel effortlessly. It's always a great test to see how well a DAC signposts the difference between recordings, and this proves something of an open window. It's pleasingly delicate too, with a genuine deftness of touch; it doesn't smash out the low-level detail in a way that some digital converters do, apparently trying to impress. Instead, the unit serves up a wide and spacious recorded acoustic, one that hangs back admirably far. Within this, instruments are tightly located, but not suffocated. The piano sparkles nicely, the electric guitar sounds realistic and the backing strings soar. I enjoy the beautifully resolved hi-hat sound, and the maracas come over believably. It's a lovely few minutes that shows how good music can be from humble CD. Moving to a sterner test of this product's mettle, I hook up the USB input and play REM's *Texarkana*. This 24/192 PCM recording (which first appeared on DVD-Audio) can sound a little murky if played on mediocre equipment, but opens up with a decent DAC. The

MX-DAC duly proves its ability, letting me follow every strand of the recording separately, yet strings everything together very convincingly too. It's quite breathtaking just how much detail this modestly priced DAC is throwing out, and so smoothly too.

I begin to run the gamut of my hi-res music collection, with a wide range of files in WAV, FLAC and DSD format. The MX-DAC continues to show a sizeable advance on its already redoubtable 16-bit abilities.

Piano sparkles, electric guitars sound realistic and backing strings soar

Wings' *Band On The Run* is delivered in wonderfully sharp focus, showing excellent image placement left to right and front to back. DSD is a treat too; Miles Davis' *So What* from *Kind Of Blue* is breathtaking in its space and power, while Alex de Grassi's *The Water Garden* amazes with its vast soundstage and superlative instrumental timbre. In absolute terms, it doesn't quite match the grace, space and pace of some of the better, more expensive DACs, but it does unexpectedly well all the same.

Conclusion

This new Musical Fidelity MX-DAC is an excellent performer with useful functionality, and it serves this up in a compact but classy package that's affordable for many budget-conscious audio fans. Its lively, musical and glass-clear sound has great appeal and only starts to fade when compared with the top DACs at twice the price. Whether you're interested in the brave new world of digital audio, or just want to breathe new life into a budget CD spinner, this DAC is worth every penny ●