

Cambridge Audio

DacMagic XS DAC

INCREASINGLY, MANY OF us are enjoying hi-res music stored on a computer having been downloaded from an HD audio website such as Linn Downloads or the Nordic Sound.

To the concert connoisseur using an internal DAC is like asking the LSO to play in the bandstand at Regents Park in a force 10 gale. There is already a handful of external USB DACs on the market including the acclaimed (*HFC 377*) Meridian Explorer, which retails for €299, and the equally impressive €149 AudioQuest Dragonfly.

Size matters

Cambridge Audio ships the DacMagic XS in a much larger box than is needed for its size. The contents have not settled during transportation like a box of cornflakes, but the packaging makes you feel better about spending €149. Cunning, eh? But it's pleasing to discover that the unit is in fact smaller even than the picture on the front. The 5.4cm-long device weighs less than 25g, but seems durable and looks classy with slightly rounded edges and a tough, brushed aluminium finish. Two large buttons are provided for altering the volume in 54 steps. You can also use the slider in iTunes, but the quickest and most convenient method of volume adjustment – the function buttons on a keyboard – are annoyingly disabled.

DacMagic XS is supplied with a 14cm-long USB cable and a soft pouch for protection during storage. Adopting a cable-tethering approach, like the Meridian Explorer, means it won't stick out at the side of your laptop like the Dragonfly does and is less likely to break than a built-in USB connector. One end of the unit sports a micro USB socket the other hosts a gold-plated 3.5mm jack and a tiny LED, which glows when in use. Mainly intended for use as a headphone DAC, you could also hook up the DacMagix XS to a desktop amplifier using the 3.5mm output. Inside is a high-quality



ESS9023 24-bit DAC that supports sample rates up to 192kHz. Minimum headphone impedance is 12ohms and the output voltage is a generous 2V RMS, meaning you shouldn't ever feel short changed volume-wise when using long cable runs or low sensitivity headphones. You can manually switch from USB 1.0, which has a maximum sample rate of 96kHz, to 192kHz-compatible USB 2.0 operation by simultaneously pressing the volume buttons for a few seconds, whereupon the LED changes from green to blue. On a Mac you can easily check the sample rate from within the Audio MIDI utility and manually match the sample rate to the native rate.

I use a set of Philips Fidelio M1 headphones, which are closely matched impedance-wise to the DacMagic XS, and the results are good, but not startling with MP3s. Thomas Newman's *Six Feet Under*, for example, has decent resolution throughout the dynamic range and reasonable bass, but the clarinet lacks a bit of spit and polish and transients tail off quickly. It's a similar story with Kyu Sakamoto's *Sukiyaki*, where the bass feels a bit cramped. Stepping up to some AAC tub-thumping electronica, *Silent Shout* by The Knife is delivered with greater bass response extracting maximum impact from the muffled drums. With *Sad*

February by the Unthanks, a 16/44.1 AAC file, bass again lacks a bit of firmness, but the midrange and upper registers are nice and open, revealing all the emotion of the vocals and chilliness of the piano.

Moving on up

Upping the ante with some 24/96 ALAC fodder in the shape of Susan Wong's *Desperado* it's like removing a pair of wellies and slipping into your favourite slippers. Now my ears are as happy as an eight year old in Hamleys. The additional dynamic range gives everything so much more punch and control, but there's a lightness of touch so that the mesmerising vocals seem to float. Mozart's *Violin Concerto No 4 in D Major* – down-sampled to 192kHz from a DXD 24/352.8kHz WAV file – reveals incredible clarity, especially the lead violin, which is crisper than an early morning February stroll.

The wonderfully compact DacMagic XS doesn't have quite the same amount of authority as the Meridian Explorer (nor does it have an S/PDIF optical output for that matter), but it is less than half the price. Given how masterfully it handles hi-res sources in particular and its sterling work with lower-quality material, it isn't hard to say that this is probably the best entry-level DAC around. **AJ**

DETAILS

PRICE
€149

WEBSITE
cambridgeaudio.com

OUR VERDICT

