

Cambridge Audio DacMagic XS review



Verdict:

Update your laptop audio with this compact and competitively priced DAC

Review Date: 19 Apr 2014

Price when reviewed: € 149,00

Reviewed By: Kat Orphanides

The Cambridge Audio DacMagic XS headphone amplifier is the cheapest external USB digital-to-analogue convertor (DAC) we've ever reviewed. Indeed, it's small enough to slip into your pocket, which makes it a perfect companion to your laptop. High-end headphones do big business these days, but although they make for a better listening experience, the sound you get out of them is ultimately dependent on the quality of your audio source.

Laptops and mobile devices often benefit the most from a DAC due to the relatively poor quality of their onboard audio processors and the potential for interference from other



components. When you consider the popularity of laptops and high-quality streaming services, DACs such as the DacMagic XS become very desirable.

The DacMagic XS is about the same size as a SanDisk Sansa Clip MP3 player, but is a little bit thinner. At one end is a micro USB port and at the other is a 3.5mm headphone port, along with a tiny indicator light. There are volume buttons to control the DacMagic XS's built-in headphone amp, and that's it. You can use the DacMagic XS with any computer just by plugging it in to a USB port. Windows, Linux and Mac OS X computers will detect the DacMagic XS as a simple USB audio device. In its default USB Class 1 mode, the DacMagic XS can output audio at bit depths up to 24-bit and sample frequencies up to 96KHz. To use it in USB Class 2 mode in Windows, you'll have to download a driver from Cambridge Audio's website. With the driver installed, you'll be able to output 24-bit/192KHz audio. Higher sample frequencies don't make a noticeable difference to the human ear, but you should nonetheless set up your audio hardware to take full advantage of its capabilities.

The DacMagic XS uses an ESS Sabre ES9023 DAC chip, which provides the device's high bit depth and sample frequency. We can't fault the sound quality. In side-by-side comparisons with the Arcam rPAC DAC using Sennheiser Momentum and Sony MDR-1R headphones, we couldn't tell

Details

Part Code	DACMAGICXS
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Rating	★★★★★
Award	Best Buy



between the two DACs. The bright, crystalline keyboards of Dark Tranquillity's *The Fatalist* hang in perfect clarity above a busy yet equally clear mid-range and low-end of distorted instruments, while the solid bass-heavy beats of M.O.P.'s *Ante Up* vibrantly underlay clean vocals and blasts of horn samples. The DAC's neutral sound might prompt some to increase the bass in their player's EQ settings for some tracks, which is easily done; meanwhile the delicate strains of instrumental pieces such as Dowland's *Lachrimae Antiquae* are warm, natural and without unwanted colour.

At € 149, the DacMagic XS is a great way of easily upgrading laptop audio. It lacks the phono outputs of less portable rivals such as the Arcam rPAC, so it's not ideal if you want to connect it to an external amplifier, but its built-in headphone amp with handy volume controls makes it ideal if you need top-notch sound on the move. If you love listening to music, the DacMagic XS is a great buy. Even if you're a desktop user who wants a cost-effective audio upgrade and has powered speakers with a 3.5mm input, the DacMagic XS is a great buy. It doesn't have as many features as some rivals but it nevertheless wins our Best Buy award thanks to its compact size, high sample frequency, crystal-clear audio quality and surprisingly low price.

