

THE ENCORE MDSB BY SONIC UNITY



USB DACs are nothing new to the market and I have only really paid attention to one of them the D3 from AudioEngine last year. Mike swears by his Aegis from Cozoy, others disagree but by and large my laptop has been a USB stick DAC free experience. I got what they are about and I understand the iGadget guys can benefit from a greater audio experience than what they current get right out of their on-board soundcard but apart from the D3 I have felt these sticks do not offer a huge step up to justify getting them as well as the fact DAP's have a DAC function these days built right in there that can often be superior.

But I could change my mind. Especially when Sonic Unity asked me to try their €129 Encore mDSD stick, which I actually think could be the best yet in terms of sonic reproduction at the stick level and certainly the most capable in terms of specs for the price.

What is it?

It looks like a large USB stick and to the uninitiated you will probably think it is an oversized memory stick. Much like the AudioEngine D3 it packs an audiophile punch as a micro sized DAC/AMP that is designed to allow you to digitally bypass the rather inferior cacophony of audio from your on-board PC or laptop soundcard. In doing the resulting critical expectation is that it will output a symphony of joyous melody at a much higher bit and/or sample rate and thus you will have a much better audio experience with the headphone of your choice stuck into it. Hurrah!

Unlike other USB DAC sticks though the Encore mDSD decodes at fantastically high rates including 32-bit/384kHz PCM and native DSD 256 decoding which puts it out there almost in a league of its own in terms of future proofing and reproduction capability compared to the other mere mortal sticks in the market. Both the D3 and the DragonFly hit the decode ceiling at 24-bit/96kHz so modern hi-res file formats such as PCM and DSD are off the menu. They are also priced at € 129 to € 195 meaning value wise on paper the mDSD packs a lot more for the same price or less. Only the LH Labs Geek Out 100/1000/V2 USB DACs, priced at around € 250 plus, are capable of DSD and even then its DSD128 as opposed to the mDSD which sails onto DSD256 without stopping to catch it's breathe.

Build

That being said it is one of the fatter USB DAC sticks out there in the market today. Those with an array of USB ports might not be too fussed on the fact that when plugged in the dimensions of the mDSD case actually prevent any adjacent USB ports from being used by other cables and gadgets such as its girth. Of course if you have a single USB port just sitting there then this is not an issue, but for a laptop such as mine, an Alienware then technically I need a USB extension cable to allow maximum use of all my USB ports. Luckily I have such a cable. It is odd how you acquire these things over the years and when they become rather useful.

The casing though is rock solid aluminum 2 piece joined at the center and feels plenty sturdy. It comes in two colors, black or silver. The silver matches up pretty well to Mac laptops in terms of color coding and the black should do for everyone else. On the bottom you have 4 small hex key screws holding everything together.

Everything else is well laid out though minimalist in aesthetics. To the left side you have two volume control buttons plus and negative labelled and to the bottom you have the dual 3.5mm/optical jack out. This dual jack I quite like. It makes the mDSD something more than just a standalone closed circuit DAC/AMP. SPDIF out gives me system connectivity.

Functionality

The Encore mDSD is not only a DAC it's also an amp as well as potential system component with SPDIF out, but there is more. It can also connect with iOS and Android devices using the Apple camera connection kit and any USB OTG cable and USB OTG digital audio capable phone. In fact, when speaking to Sonic Unity on this they mentioned that this was primary aim of the mDSD and what, they hoped, would set it apart even further and that was its high degree of flexibility in connecting to mobile class devices such as iPhones and Android phones.

The mDSD is built around the Sabre ESS 9010K2M DAC chip with XMOS USB chip. I have a warm feeling for this ESS chip. It's a highly regarded mobile class DAC chip with a stable and low power draw and when implemented well can sound very clear with plenty of detail. Codec decoding is excellent with most lossless and lossy formats including DSD support. Quite a lot of the audiophile grade portable DAC products on the market today come equipped with the 9010K2M including the Resonance Labs Herus and the NuPrime uDSD and at a higher price than the mDSD. The fact it can be stuffed into a €129 DAC speaks volumes for how much prices have dropped now on this chip.

Since the mDSD is not battery powered, instead drawing from the source power supply, Encore have wisely designed the draw from mobile devices



to be less than 20mAh, below the max allowable from iOS gadgets and should avoid heavy or fast drainage from your phone or mobile source. That being said, resolution of files, volume of output and whatever else you are up on your device during playback, can and will affect battery life so this is not a hard and fast rule.

Sound Impressions

The lower mid-range of the mDSD is relatively linear to the mDSD's bass response meaning low end guitar and bass rhythm work is full sounding and authoritative with a well-defined body. There is a tiny dip just after around 1k but things get elevated again around 3-5k to produce a clear sounding vocal reproduction. Timbre is engaging and accurate, nothing sounds overtly digital and not as congested sounding as the AudioEngine D3 mid-range.

The mDSD is not quite as forgiving as the drier D3 on vocals but sibilance is still very short in supply with the mDSD meaning you get a slightly forward vocal presence with good texture in both male and female vocals but if the recording sucks then the mDSD won't mask that. I did prefer vocal work that registered just a bit lower in the mDSD's signature so in comes Till Lindemann and Steve Lukather and out goes edgier vocals such as Kate Bush. That is not to say female vocals are out, Norah Jones sounded excellent on Little Broken Hearts, so did most of my huskier vocal performers such as Buika. It was really down to a question of preference and husky or meaty vocals seem to win out.

Treble

I like how the 9010K2M is tuned here for treble reproduction. I have heard a few iterations of this DAC sounding thin with a bit of top end glare and a harsh attack that gave off what we know as the "Sabre glare". Whilst it is not a honey dipped syrupy affair I am glad to hear a treble response that has a nice sparkle and touch of brilliance to it but sensibly doesn't have too much of a peaky feel to it on the lower treble and presence region especially on percussion work. Tuning here allows cymbal work to stay on the right side of splashy but still possessing a nice snap and energy.

Matchability

Again, as with the D3 previously, the power you can get from the mDSD is quite surprising and yet the efficiency handling is equally competent. Both IEMs and headphones alike can and do sound adequately driven up to a point but that point is a bit further up the chain than you might think.

Efficient headphones such as Grado and the AKG K812 where easy to drive and sounded true to form. In particular I felt the K812's brighter more uneven tonality to match well with the more controlled signature of the mDSD. Treble edge went down a notch and the K812 bass was confidently full sounding and planted. Super sensitive IEM's such as the Shure SE846 and the Campfire Audio Jupiter did not suffer from unduly high noise levels or background noise.

I was especially impressed with the performance on modern planars such as the Ether C. Though not quite scaling as good as a dedicated desktop amp, it never sounded anaemic or brittle especially with the bass and low mid-range response which still had very good body indeed. Overall the sound was quite smooth, vocals were very pleasant and it came across as a rather musical little and large pairing.

Final Thoughts

I remarked previously on the AudioEngine D3 review that I was pleasantly surprised by how USB DAC/AMP sticks performed and at € 165 I thought it was reasonably good value for money. Well the mDSD just killed that notion at € 129. It is probably the best value stick out there now for codec handling and sound quality. I really like being able to stick this little guy in a laptop or mobile phone and start playing my DSD128 and DSD256 tracks without a hitch. It is amazing how far DSD decoding has come down in price.

The inclusion of the ESS 9010K2M, normally reserved for good quality portable DAC's is a good move here. Badly worked chips of this kind sound thin, unforgiving with lower treble glare. This one doesn't. It's a neutral sounding signature with a touch of low end warmth, a solid bass response and clean and clear vocal presence. Most importantly that treble performance is good without any accompanying irritating peaks.

Power and control is also equally impressive. Noise is absent on highly sensitive IEMs and there is enough power for most mid-tier and modern planars to sound excellent and in the case of planars pretty good for the price. The Ether C hates thin signatures and this isn't one of them.

If you are in the marketplace for a quick audio upgrade on your PC or mobile phone sound then get the D3 instead of the mDSD. The mDSD is anything but 'quick', it's too good to be defined as quick, it is a serious upgrade.

Price: € 129



Technical Specifications

32-bit/384kHz PCM and native DSD 256 decoding

Discrete USB audio receiver and D/A converter

Asynchronous transfer mode for doubled jitter-reduction at data input and over-sampling filter stages

High-performance headphone amplifier

Optical output (shared with 3.5mm headphone out) capable of S/PDIF and DoP stream

USB powered, no external power supply required

Diminutive size measuring just 2 - 3/8" x 1 - 3/16" x 3/8"

Works with Android (4.1 & above with OTG), iOS (with camera adapter USB cable), Windows 7/8/10, and Mac.

Available in silver or black finish

TONALITY

8.5



BUILD & FUNCTIONALITY

8.5



MATCHABILITY

8



VALUE FOR MONEY

9



8.5

OUR SCORE