

iFi iCAN (Standard And SE)

By [thatonenooob](#) Posted 4/20/16

DirectDrive technology.
Completely engineered
from the sound up.



Review Details:



Pros: Clean Sound, Great Features, Excellent Build

Cons: Light, Volume Pot, Buzzing

iFi iCAN (Standard and SE)

Power in a small package.



GENERAL NOTES

For those who have read some of my past reviews, you'll notice that I've changed up the format slightly. Graphically, this new review format looks more appealing to the eye, while writing wise, I find that it is more fluid and natural. Hope you don't mind it too much, and feedback is appreciated!



INTRODUCTION

As a somewhat regular visitor to Stereo (audio store here in Singapore), I've caught more than a few glimpses of iFi's sleek product lineup. Svelte metal enclosures, tactile switches, and the wonderful iFi logo all exude an air of premium utility. Packed within these enclosures are trickle down components and technologies from AMR's (Abbingdon Music Research) higher-end products. Rather compelling indeed –surprising that I hadn't given these an extended audition. Until now, that is. Sitting on my desk are the original iCAN and the iCAN SE. Before going further, I'd like to thank iFi Audio and Stereo Singapore for providing me with a loaner unit of the iCAN SE for this now overdue piece. The iCAN was purchased subsequently, and might I add, independently. As before, I am neither an affiliate nor an employee of iFi or Stereo, and all media in this review is owned by me. If you'd like to reproduce it, or have any questions in general, feel free to drop me a line.

SPEC SHEET

The iCAN is a Class A "Tubestate Amplification" hybrid (or as iFi likes to call it, tri-brid) amplifier. It is currently available in two models: the standard and special edition. There are several differences between the SA and SE editions. The SE features boutique components, an updated "sound signature", refined XBass and 3D Holographic Sound, increased output

power (from 400 to 4000 mW), new gain settings, and a brand new iPower. Rest assured, I'll cover how the standard and SE compare in the coming paragraphs.

SPECIFICATION	iCAN Standard	iCAN SE
Gain	0, 10, and 20 dB	0, 12, and 24 dB
Signal To Noise Ratio	>117dB(A)	>123dB(A)
THD	<0.003% (400mV/150R)	<0.003% (400mV/150R)
Frequency Response	0.5Hz to 500KHz(-3dB)	0.5Hz to 500KHz(-3dB)
Output Impedance	<1 ohm	<1 ohm
Output Power	>400mW(32Ω)	>4000mW(16Ω)
Output Voltage	>5V (>600Ω)	>10V (>600Ω)
Input Voltage	AC 100 – 240V, 50/60Hz	AC 100 – 240V, 50/60Hz



PACKAGING/ BUILD QUALITY

Packaging wise, the iCAN comes absolutely stocked right out of the box. Rubber feet, matching RCA cables, a 3.5 to 3.5 cable, jack adaptor, small screwdriver, quick start manual, warranty information, and the unit itself. The overall unboxing experience feels premium, and is reminiscent of the excellent product packages made more commonly for Mac products. The best part though is that all the accessories are well thought out and have good grounding in utility, and there's nothing excessive or wasteful about it.

The design of the unit is similarly excellent. The rectangular metal enclosure is non-obtrusive and well made, but is also surprisingly light. Without the included rubber feet, the unit slides around quite easily, which is somewhat troublesome. The switches are well-made, with a solid click to them. However, the volume pot doesn't feel quite as substantial as the rest of the unit, especially when compared to my DACmini. The upside is that the iCAN is easily transportable. Keep in mind that it will require a wall outlet for operation (look to the Nano series for battery-based portable devices), but if you're looking for an amplification solution that is also both discrete and space-conscious, the iCan is the right way to go. Overall, the iCAN is a well-made piece of kit that succeeds both packaging and design wise.



FEATURES

iFi Audio has packed a ton of features into the iCAN. This wide array of options is rather intimidating, and filled with extravagant terms like XBass and 3D Holographic Sound (sounds more like something you'd find on a soundcard aimed at gamers). Don't be put off though. The iCAN is strictly business, and I found a number of its various features to be impressive. I'll cover them one by one, and share some insights on their respective utilities and functionalities.

Nearing the end of my review though, I did notice that my iCAN SE started giving off a "buzzing" sound. I do suspect that this is just an issue with my unit, as my own iCAN did not have this. I will have to check more closely on my power supply, though I don't think that's the source of the problem. Nevertheless, I was able to get a fairly good sense of the unit's capability prior to this, and with music playing didn't notice it all that much.

XBASS

Let's tackle the XBass first. After all, everyone could use just that little extra bass in their lives. I found the XBass to overall be a rather impactful, but tactful bass bump. It focuses on the lower-mid to subbass region, providing more of a grumbling "under-your-skin" boost that plays well with most headphones. Both levels worked equally well, and it simply depends on the listener's sound signature preference. The standard edition has a more forward XBass boost, but one that is lesser in quantity and less enveloping than that on the SE. For me, there really wasn't all that much need for bass boost anyways, but it'll come down to personal preference.

3D HOLOGRAPHIC SOUND

I was somewhat skeptical when I first came across this setting—especially about its efficacy. A small introduction for those who are unfamiliar with the feature. The idea behind 3D Holographic Sound isn't entirely new—at its heart, it is iFi's take on crossfeed application in a headphone amplifier system. Crossfeed is the blending of right and left channels to create a more cohesive sound image, something that is naturally occurring in most speaker systems, but rather limited in headphone settings due to the physical structure. Older implementations often featured disruptive digital processing, something iFi is quick to point out. In contrast, the iCAN

utilizes only analog processing. The first setting for the 3D Holographic Sound didn't stand out that much to me. The center image was quite strong, and it was obvious that there was blending going on. However, the iCAN shined when put to the second setting. Headspace becomes an empty vacuum, and the general image is expanded forward and around the listener. The end result is excellent, as the sound image becomes an audio panorama (excuse the rather unwieldy comparison). Ensemble jazz/classical pieces work great with this feature. Vocal tracks are for the most part, excellent as well. One never gets the sense that items are too far apart on the soundstage, and I left this feature on most of the time.

I will say that I preferred the SA's 3D Holographic Sound feature to that on the SE. I found it to be airier and more spacious, whereas the SE was smoother but less immediately striking. It didn't quite have the same sense of expansion as the SA does. Both implementations (on the second setting) are excellent though, and I would heartily recommend purchasing an iCAN simply to give the 3D Holographic Sound a spin.



SOUND IMPRESSIONS

The iCAN is a clean, albeit slightly warm, amplifier. It features an excellent amount of power, driving the T1 to fairly uncomfortable levels very easily (at around 1 PM is enough to make one cringe). It also played very nicely with my R70X and M50X, especially with the 3D Holographic Sound which opened up the sound signatures of these two relatively "closed" headphones. Do not be fooled by the unit's diminutive size -it drives with serious authority. I personally found that the iCAN SE was more closed, intimate, and fuller sounding, whereas the iCAN standard was more strident and airy. It's more a matter of personal preference, but I found both amplifiers to be very agreeable with most headphones. Both amplifiers will work with IEMs, though there is noise on the more sensitive ones and you do get very little play on the volume pot.



FINAL THOUGHTS

I did enjoy my time with iFi quite a lot. It's a great amplifier, and its features are truly well implemented and do provide a meaningful value added. If you're looking for a new headphone amplifier, I'd heartily recommend the iCAN. It's discrete, well-built, and most importantly, sounds excellent. I must say that a purchase to test out the 3D functionality alone would be warranted. Put simply - there's a lot going on at a highly reasonable price point, and iFi did a job well done with this amplifier.