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DIGITAL SPECIAL!

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WILSON'S BEGUILING SABRINA LOUDSPEAKER!

iFi Audio Micro iDAC2

by Eric Neff

iFi Audio has been on a roll for a while now. The lifestyle arm of Abingdon Music Research has continued to expand and improve its exciting lineup of price/performance audio champions. The company's booth at CanJam at RMAF last year was overflowing with quality gear of seemingly endless variety and application. As a happy owner of iFi's portable Micro iDSD DAC/Amp, I was drawn to the booth to see what was new. The Micro iDSD is a constant Hi-Res companion on the road for business travel and can drive any headphone I plug into it. However, I was particularly interested in the new Micro iDAC2 being showcased for the first time. The Micro iDAC2 is not specifically a portable unit. It does not have its own battery and so is going to require a USB supplied power source such as a laptop. It will likely spend most of its time on a desktop perhaps among other iFi devices on the company's very well imagined (if, perhaps, unfortunately named) iRack, as the processing powerhouse of a compact two-channel system.

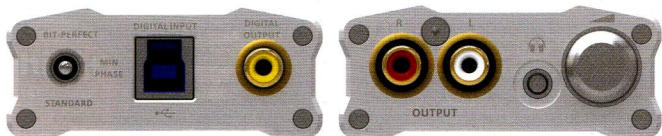
Darren Censullo of Avatar Acoustics, the US importer for iFi Audio, gave me an overview of the unit. Darren is a Top Gun former F-16 fighter pilot and he is as direct and on target as his former craft when explaining the benefits of his selected lines. Darren walked me through the AMR derived DNA found throughout this compact and affordable marvel. The Micro iDAC2 is a complete overhaul of the original and highly regarded iDAC. Gone is the Sabre DAC chip, DSD/DXD was added in a big way, PCM resolution was doubled, and

the headphone output power was increased from 150mW to a very healthy 350mW.

Taking inventory of the upgrades, I found a Burr Brown True Native chipset, bit perfect to DSD256 and PCM 384kHz. The company even incorporated a 'lite' version of AMR's Zero Jitter technology. This is a full Class A amp delivering 350mW that uses the power from the USB connection to fuel ELNA Silmic silk fibre capacitors to its line stage power supply. These are the same used in the mothership AMR units. Darren pointed out that the unit had no coupling capacitors. The iDAC2 is directly coupled to the line outs (RCA L/R or S/PDIF) and to the headphone output for the purest possible signal, a process they call DirectDrive™. Speaking of outputs, the unit does a direct conversion from USB to S/PDIF for streaming if required. It all comes in a gorgeous extruded aluminum chassis measuring only 158x68x28mm, complete with directions silk screened onto the bottom for quick review.

Hi-Fi+ Publisher Chris Martens forwarded his own iDAC2 to me with the admonition that he wanted it back, and soon! Opening the box, I went through the contents. The iDAC2, The instruction sheet, the small stick-on rubber feet, a USB cable and a L/R RCA cable. I decided to forgo the basic USB cable and hook the iDAC2 up to my MacBook Pro Retina with my iFi Mercury USB cable. The MacBook Pro immediately recognized the iDAC2 as an available sound output device. I then opened up Audirvana Plus and queued up some Steely Dan from the external LaCie Thunderbolt drive.

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My first headphone to try was the outstanding AudioQuest NightHawk. The NightHawk is an easy to drive semi-open headphone with terrific bass and a sweet midrange delivery. Queuing up 'Babylon Sisters' from Steely Dan's *Gaucho* [MCA, AIFF 24/96 HDTracks] I was rewarded with the solid bass foundation I expect from this well-recorded song. The iDAC2 offered great clarity to the instruments. I enjoy dimensionality and space because I want the sense of scale they afford and the iDAC2 provided these qualities with the NightHawk. The shimmer of the cymbals decaying properly created a satisfying top end to the ensemble. Background singers were properly positioned at the back and sides. This was a fine way to begin a listening session.

Next I reached for my Audeze LCD-X headphones. These are my open Planar Magnetic reference cans. My friends know me to be a big Star Wars fan and this was a great opportunity to listen to the John Williams scored Soundtrack

to the new *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. The 'Main Title' and 'The Attack on the Jakku Village' [Walt Disney Records, AIFF 24/192 HDTracks] opens with the primary Star Wars theme known to so many around the world. Horns had that crisp brassy attack. The scale was appropriately orchestral. Tympani had the power and authority required to create that necessary sense of gravitas. I have seen this movie several times in well sound equipped theatres. The haunting oboe and flute seemed to float throughout the theatre. The iDAC2 was able to do well by this presentation as it powered the highly regarded LCD-X's with ease.

Moving on to the MrSpeakers Alpha Prime closed Planar Magnetics' I put on 'Eminence Front' from The Who's *It's Hard* album [MCA, AIFF 24/96 HDTracks]. The Alpha Prime's are one of the best closed Planar Magnetic headphones out there. Sometimes a portable amp will begin to run out of steam when you put on a 'crank it up' type of song. No worries for ▶

“Lesser amps can get a bit lost in the presentation, smearing the notes. However, the iDAC2 lets each note strut its stuff to glorious effect.”

► the iDAC2. The boys had all the power they needed to keep the beat driving forward. Deep bass and that ‘all around you’ feeling that the song has always delivered. This has always been a favorite immersive track for me. The mix places you virtually in the midst of the band facing Kenny Jones’ drum kit. Pete on the left, John off to my right, and Roger at my side singing in my ear. There is a lot going on with this composition, and lesser amps can get a bit lost in the presentation, smearing the notes. However, the iDAC2 lets each note strut its stuff to glorious effect.

Wrapping up, it was time for some DSD. I reached for my personal reference headphones, the Sennheiser HD800 with their Toxic Cables SW22 Silver Widow cables. Time to double down on the testing by adding Female vocals as the final variable. Shelby Lynne’s title track from *Just a Little Lovin’* [Lost Highway, DSD64 Superhirez.com] is a time tested review track. The mixing of the vocals is superb, the band is tight, and the setting gloriously club-style intimate. The sense of space and with the initial tapping of the drumstick on the rim of the snare drum and the first bass note tells you this is special. Shelby’s clear but slightly life-worn voice sounds sadly hopeful as she longs for “Just a little lovin’ early in the morning”. Her soulful crooning for the simple intimacy of a partner’s touch reaches deep into the soul of what it is to be human at its most basic. The iDAC2 does well conveying the emotional need conveyed through the song. The recreation of the recording environment is preserved, allowing the artist’s delivery the completeness it deserves.

One of the things that I most enjoy about the iFi Micro iDSD is that it is a great portable unit, giving me most of the qualities of a strong home system when I am on the road. The iDAC2 continues in this tradition of excellence by presenting a highly engaging presentation across a variety of headphone styles. It has the power to drive most headphones without issue, and the Burr-Brown chip implementation allows for the delivery of the audio file natively without conversion degradation. For its price point, it offers an exceptionally involving musical experience. At the end of a long day, that is after all, what most of us are seeking.

Highly recommended. +

SPECIFICATIONS:

- Type:** Solid-state high-resolution PCM, DXD, and DSD-capable digital-to-analogue converter/preamplifier.
- Digital Inputs:** USB 3.0 (Compatible with iPhone, iPad, iPod and Android devices, camera kit or USB-OTG cable required)
- Outputs:** Audio RCA (2.1 V @ 0dBFS, Load >600Ω)
3.5mm Headphone (max 350mW/16Ω, 8Ω – 600Ω)
SPDIF RCA (PCM up 192kHz, DoP DSD)
- Formats supported:** 44.1/48/88.2/96/176.4/192/384kHz PCM. 2.8/3.1/5.6/6.2/11.2/12.4MHz DSD. 353/384kHz DXD
- Technologies:** True Native™ DSD/PCM Burr-Brown (1-DAC Chip; 2-Channel; 4-Signals). Bit Perfect Quad-Speed DSD256/PCM384kHz and DXD. Zero Jitter Lite™ technology with dedicated low-noise power supply. Class A, J-Fet Line Buffer and Burr-Brown J-Fet Op-Amps. DirectDrive™ with no coupling capacitors for the purest signal path
- Dynamic Range:** >114dB(A) @ 0dBFS Line out and HP out @ 0dBFS/3.2V
- Power Source:** USB Bus Power
- Power Consumption:** <1.5W
- Dimensions (HxWxD):** 28x68x158mm
- Weight:** 193g
- Price:** £295
- Manufactured by:** iFi Audio
URL: www.ifl-audio.com
- Distributed in the UK by:** Select Audio
URL: www.selectaudio.co.uk
Tel: +44(0)1900 601954