

iFi Audio GO link DAC/amp Dongle Review

Posted on 10th May, 2023

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Jay Garrett tries out a portable DAC/headphone amplifier that's as easy on your ear as it is on your wallet...

iFi Audio

GO link DAC/amp

£59.95



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iFi's GO link (</uk/news/ifi-go-link-super-affordable-dac-amp-dongle>) is a bargain-priced portable USB DAC and headphone amplifier that promises to upgrade your personal audio whilst letting you use your prized wired headphones. These might have previously been resigned to domestic duties only, thanks to the great phone port cull of 2018. It offers a more compact and flexible alternative to the company's own GO bar (</uk/reviews/ifi-audio-go-bar-review>) at a fraction of the price. Moreover, you'll find the GO link easier to plug into your phone and drop into your jacket than most alternatives. Finally, should you lose this little dongle while out and about, it will be less of a pain to your pocket than if you did the same with the GO bar and other pricier options.

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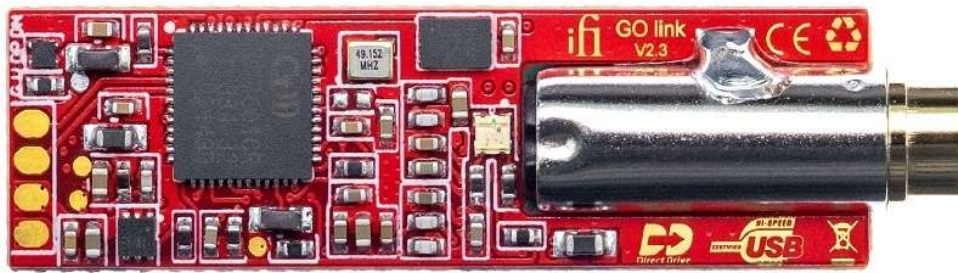
Measuring just 5.75 inches from nose to tail, the iFi GO link sports a flexible braided cable, while the aluminium-clad DAC/amp section is a mere 1.75 inches long. The entire unit tips the scales at less than half an ounce. Its dinky size means having a single gold-plated minijack headphone port rather than including a further balanced output as you get with the GO bar and EarMen Sparrow (</uk/reviews/earmen-sparrow-dac-review>), for instance.



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iFi's S-Balanced configuration (https://ifi-audio.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/iFi-audio-xCAN-S_BAL-Tech-Note.pdf) is fitted, which is said to reduce noise and crosstalk whilst promising the benefits of balanced output from a single-ended connection. It supports both TRS and TRRS 3.5mm jacks. Claimed power output is 70mW into 32 ohms, and a maximum voltage output of 2.05V into 600 ohms. This should be enough to drive headphones and earphones likely to be paired with this handy dongle DAC.

A 32-bit ESS Technology Sabre ES9219MQ/Q chop handles number crunching. iFi says that its Quad DAC+ and Time Domain Jitter Eliminator tech, alongside dedicated clock circuitry, delivers "ultra-low distortion, excellent clarity and impressive dynamic range", no less. Additionally, you get adjustable analogue gain with what iFi dubs DRE (Dynamic Range Enhancement) plus technologies to minimise THD (Total Harmonic Distortion) and crosstalk. We're told that the iFi GO link clocks a THD+Noise reading of $\leq 0.004\%$ (1.27V @ 32 Ω) and is capable of a near ruler-flat 10Hz-80kHz (-0.5dB) frequency response.



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The DAC can process PCM streams up to 32-bit/384kHz, and DSD to 11.2MHz (DSD256), as well as offering full support for the MQA format while it is still out there (/uk/news/mqa-formats-future-uncertain). Even on a unit this compact, an LED is fitted to indicate the audio stream being processed. It shines green for PCM 44.1/48/88.2/96kHz, cyan for DSD 64/128, yellow for PCM 176.4/192/352.8/384kHz, blue for DSD256, and magenta for MQA.

iFi Audio is usually generous regarding bundled goodies with its products; even the modestly-priced GO link is shipped with a USB-C to USB-A adapter and USB-C to Lightning connector. The USB-C connector cleared the edges of my Pixel's Spigen case, but other designs might not be as generous regarding the aperture, and this item's USB-C side has rather broad shoulders.



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Adding the GO link to my daily portable system didn't bring any inconvenience besides re-introducing cables to my commute. I may have been overly cautious with my cable management as I've been pretty much Bluetooth now for several years, most recently rocking the Mark Levinson No.5909 (</uk/reviews/mark-levinson-5909-noise-cancelling-headphones-review>) and Bowers & Wilkins Px8 (</uk/reviews/bowers-wilkins-px8-wireless-headphones-review>). Given just how good aptX HD et al are getting, it's worth considering just how much benefit you expect from a cabled connection now, compared with the convenience and quality offered by current wireless options. However, if you've already shelled out for some decent wired cans or earphones, the price of the iFi GO link will likely be much more attractive than stumping out the readies for a great pair of wireless headphones.

THE LISTENING

Heading out with Roon ARC (</uk/news/roon-2.0-roon-arc-your-library-everywhere>) and dedicated Qobuz (</uk/brands/qobuz>) and TIDAL (</uk/brands/tidal>) apps loaded onto my Google Pixel 6 Pro, with the GO link connected via the phone's USB-C port, I selected a variety of ear pleasers to partner with this set-up. These included a set of Noble Savanna IEMs tricked out with an ORB balanced cable, the Ultrason Edition 15 Veritas (</uk/reviews/ultrasone-edition-15-veritas-headphones-review>) and a set of Sivga's SV021. Even my venerable Oppo PM-1s had a rare jaunt outside.



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The compact nature of the GO link means you don't get the boosting capabilities of the more feature-packed offerings, such as iFi's excellent GO bar (</uk/reviews/ifi-audio-go-bar-review>). That said, I was mightily impressed by what the GO link could do, especially at its modest price point. For instance, *Moments in Love* by **Art of Noise** was presented with so much more space through my Ultrasones than with the THX Onyx (</uk/reviews/thx-onyx-dac-headphone-amp-review>), which became one of my go-to devices for this kind of work until EarMen's Sparrow knocked it off its perch. While the Onyx did offer a richer-sounding acoustic through the same headphones, I got the sensation of better detail retrieval through the iFi. This is not to be sniffed at, given the £100 price difference...

To my ears, the now three-year-old EarMen Sparrow ticked more boxes than the GO link in both form factor and the sound stakes, especially when using the balanced cable with my IEMs. However, removing the balanced output from the equation, and iFi's GO link wasn't trailing behind as much as you might think it should, given it was up against a DAC costing over £100 more. iFi definitely has somebody working their voodoo to make such keenly priced offerings sound better than they have any right to.



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Similarly, when pitted against its own iFi GO stablemate, the difference in performance was less night-and-day than you'd expect – when the GO bar was parked in its default settings, and you ignored the additional controls. There were aspects of its sound that did nose ahead, such as a fuller bass and a marked improvement regarding dynamics. However, bopping along the streets of Tottenham Hale to the strains of **Steel Pulse's** *Handsworth Revolution*, the GO link sported a snappy and enjoyable acoustic when going into my Savannas. Are the aforementioned dongles better? Yes. Are they worth the extra outlay? That's for the listener to determine at the end of the day. Suffice it to say the GO link did a more than respectable job with the material at hand.

Clicking the GO blu (</uk/reviews/ifi-go-blu-wireless-dac-headphone-amp-review>) to the end of the Elite 15 Veritas, I was once again wireless (kind of), and all the little Bluetooth link's positive traits came flooding back. But the GO blu is three times the price of the GO link...



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Testing the GO link with my high-end Oppo PM-1 planar-magnetic headphones, I found them too much to ask of the diminutive dongle – based chiefly on bass response and a veiled presentation. It was still listenable, but important details were missing. I then had to ask how often would I be driving PM-1s in this situation? I couldn't answer myself honestly beyond this review. You see, the GO link is designed to be portable - for listening on the move. If I was looking for a DAC to use with a laptop or desk station, I would definitely consider something more potent, especially as weight would be less of an issue. That would open the door to using headphone DACs such as the E30 (</uk/reviews/topping-e30-dac-review>) or E50 (</uk/reviews/topping-audio-e50-pa5-review>) from Topping, the EarMen Tradutto (</uk/reviews/earmen-tradutto-dac-review>), or even iFi's own ZEN Air (</uk/reviews/ifi-zen-air-separates-review>) separates, and all still without breaking the bank.

THE VERDICT

It's tempting to compare the little GO link with considerably higher-priced rivals, such as its consummate quality. In short, iFi's diddy dongle does so much right that you end up asking too much of it – it's almost a victim of its own success! Only the FiiO KA2 springs to mind as being a direct price competitor for it – and even that costs a little more. To my ears then, this is the best pocketable DAC/amp solution at its price. It performs well, is flexible enough not to be annoying in your pocket, comes from a trusted brand and allows your wired headphones to see daylight once again. What's not to love about that?



Visit iFi Audio for more information ([/uk/brands/ifi-audio](https://www.stereonet.com/uk/brands/ifi-audio))

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