

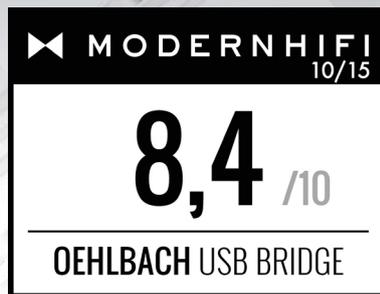
MODERNHIFI



Oehlbach® USB Bridge

„Mobile D/A converter: high-end audio for people on the move“

Recommended by Modern HiFi 10/2015



- + Plug'n'Play-enabled
- + Reasonably priced
- + USB asynchronous
- + Transparent sound



High-end audio for people on the move, the Oehlbach USB Bridge promises nothing less. For €149, the mobile D/A converter and headphone amplifier in USB stick format is pitting itself against standard sound cards. Our Oehlbach USB Bridge test will tell you if it is up to the challenge.

Compact D/A converters are currently conquering the market. The idea behind them is very simple: you take a headphone amplifier and a DAC and pack them into an enclosure no bigger than a USB stick. The skill involved is to achieve a gain in sound quality that substantially exceeds that of a laptop. Oehlbach has taken on this challenge and, with the Oehlbach USB Bridge, presents its most mobile D/A converter so far. The Oehlbach USB Bridge is currently one of the few dozen D/A converters on the market that literally do fit in any pocket. Once unpacked, the compact DAC and headphone amplifier could easily be confused with a USB stick. Rather than provide data, however, the USB Bridge prefers to record them and also ensure the best sound enjoyment for those on the move.

If you now ask yourself who on earth needs such a device, then our answer is: Audiophile frequent travellers! Now you no longer have to sacrifice good sound when working in the train or nearest café. The Oehlbach USB Bridge hardly takes up any space in your pocket and transforms your workplace in a mobile hi-fi system.

As the external D/A converter does not decode music files, the question of supported playback formats doesn't even arise. The Oehlbach USB Bridge accepts just about everything a computer understands. Just about everything? Well yes, because the compact converter cannot handle HighRes files over 24 bits and 96 kHz.

The quality level offered here should be sufficient for mobile playback in most cases. Although the Apogee Groove and Meridian Explorer 2, also D/A converters about the size of a cigarette lighter, do offer somewhat greater resolution, this is also reflected in the cost. In terms of resolution

capability and the price of €149, the Oehlbach USB Bridge compares with the Audioquest DragonFly V1.2. However, 24 bits / 96 kHz also means that the Oehlbach USB Bridge does not need an additional audio driver for the conversion. Plug and play is the motto here.

TECHNOLOGY

Working inside the Oehlbach USB Bridge are an AKM upsampling converter and an AKM AK4396 D/A converter chip, which obtain their data asynchronously, refreshing the computer clock and converting up to 24 bits depending on the source material. The headphone amplifier electronics come from Texas Instruments. We were not able to find out the names of the other chips used.

WORKMANSHIP

In terms of finish, the Oehlbach USB Bridge



is very clearly intended for mobile use.

The main enclosure is made of aluminium and is rubberised at the ends. The USB Type A connector is 24 carat gold-plated, typical for Oehlbach. Located on the opposite side is a 3.5 mm jack plug socket, advertised with an impedance of 10 ohms. The USB Bridge is designed to support headphones with impedances between 12 ohms and 10,000 ohms.

An LED in the Oehlbach logo indicates when the DAC is powered. There is unfortunately no description of the incoming sample rate. On the MacBook, we select „Oehlbach USB DAC“ from the list of audio output devices and we're ready for the listening test. We do then notice a small flaw.

At 13.5 mm, the stick is relatively wide. This means that neighbouring ports on the laptop are partially covered. Nor were we able to plug in the battery cable next to the Oehlbach USB Bridge on the MacBook, meaning that we had to put the DAC on the other side.

SOUND

There was a clear difference in the sound right from the start compared with the on-board sound card of the MacBook Air. The Oehlbach USB Bridge delivers more power and level, which is a particularly huge advantage when travelling in loud places. Even with compressed files from Spotify, the basses sound more contoured and receive more pulse power. The mid-tone range sounds somewhat more crisp and the treble range reveals even more nuances. Oehlbach USB Bridge really gets going with 24 bit/96 kHz high-resolution audio files. This seems to lift a curtain, particularly in the treble ranges, with details coming through to an even greater extent and opening up a wider soundscape. Instruments are much better defined in the arrangement and better reveal the three-dimensionality of the recordings. Compared with the Audioquest DragonFly, the Oehlbach USB Bridge pursues a more neutral sound approach. While the der DragonFly relies mainly on dynamism and vitality, the USB Bridge pays great attention to transparency of sound.

SUMMARY

With the Oehlbach USB Bridge, the German cable manufacturer is going in an entirely new direction bringing it in contact with the modern audiophile. For a mere €150, you get very good transparent sound that no standard sound card can keep pace with. Keep it up, Oehlbach!

- + Plug'n'Play-enabled
- + Reasonably priced
- + USB asynchronous
- + Transparent sound

Workmanship: 9
Configuration: 9
Sound: 8
Price: 8.5