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Oehlbach® XXL DAC Ultra

Headphone amplifier
with integrated D/A converter
AREA DVD 7/2014 recommendation

TEST: Oehlbach XXL DAC Ultra – headphone amplifier with integrated D/A converter

The compact case of the matt-black XXL DAC Ultra headphone amplifier by Oehlbach is home to top quality Burr Brown converters, which are responsible for the high purity of the signals that the complex digital / analogue conversion delivers. The amplifier allows two headphones with 6.3 mm jacks to be connected simultaneously. In-ear or headband headphones – the XXL DAC Ultra claims that it harmonises perfectly with anything it connects to. The versatile connecting block promises flexibility by allowing Oehlbach's DAC to be connected directly to PCs via USB ports and would appear particularly interesting as it would circumvent the often weak PC and notebook D/A converters. The recommended price for the XXL DAC Ultra is 299 EUR.

The black aluminium front with large volume control and a smaller one to select sources makes the XXL DAC Ultra look classic and noble. Two sockets for 6.3 mm jacks have been integrated into the burnished aluminium front and are located to the left of the control. A midnight-blue status LED, which lights up when the system is in use, has been accommodated under the power button. The control for selecting the coaxial, optical, USB and analogue sources is stepped and has a solid feel to it. The volume control knob also has a smooth and clean feel to it. Overall, there's nothing to criticise about the workmanship on this headphone amplifier. The other parts of the case are metal and have been securely screwed together, which makes the unit feel a little more weightier. The interior possesses a clear layout in which the various functions have been distinctly assigned to separate areas. Four quite generous rubber feet on the bottom of the unit provide a good grip. The back doesn't only present an extensive range of connections with analogue cinch inputs and outputs, digital optical, coaxial and USB but also high-quality and sturdy slots that make a good impression in regard to long-term durability.

Sound

In order to enable the XXL DAC Ultra to develop its full potential, we supplied digital signals to the headphone amplifier for the high-quality Burr Brown 32-bit / 384 kHz D/A converters to convert digital signals into analogue signals. Signals may be supplied through coaxial or optical or USB cables – we chose the latter. We output the signals to our Masterpiece Edition 12 headphones by Ultrasone. But, before we were able to use the headphone amplifier as an „external

sound card“, it was necessary to install the device using the supplied drivers. This is only required on Windows computers. Installation is fully automatic on Macs.

The installation itself is entirely unproblematic. All you have to do is insert the driver CD or download the current driver from www.oehlbach.com, follow the instructions provided by the installation wizard and then complete the process. After rebooting the computer, the headphone amplifier may then be defined as the default in the list of sound devices (right-clicking the loudspeaker in the task bar).

We then started „Foobar2000“ and played a track, which was flawlessly reproduced by our Ultrasone headphone connected to Oehlbach's XXL Ultra DAC. We started our playback with FLAC in CD quality and chose Simon Viklund's „The Mark“ for our ears to enjoy. Oehlbach's headphone amplifier started with a marked spatiality and a wide-ranging impression of the stage. The bass beats that came in about a minute later were absolutely dry and very precise – just as we had hoped for with this track. Oehlbach's XXL DAC Ultra delivered power and emphasis in spite of the dry bass line. We felt embedded and enveloped in the sound events. It's levels were stable and it reproduced an absolutely confident sound backdrop even when the levels were turned up a little. The limiting factor here is clearly the human ear. We didn't want to expose ourselves to even higher levels even though the headphone amplifier and headphones hadn't even begun to reach their limits. Things got lively, dynamic and thrilling towards the end of the song when the guitars came in. The implied left-right changes succeeded outstandingly and presented a broad and dense stage. The individual elements were clearly and cleanly differentiated, we experienced no overlay or even elimination of the finer details. Clarity and transparency revealed the clear distinction between a mediocre and outstanding acoustic performance. In conjunction with a very good headphone (of course), Oehlbach's XXL DAC Ultra develops great potential and impresses with structure, spatiality and the clear distinction of individual sound elements.

We chose Diana Krall's „Stop this World“ to demonstrate this. The jazz sounds in the high-resolution FLAC format were somewhat calmer but no less demanding. It was immediately apparent from the soft, pleasant and fine character that the headphone handles the reproduction of voices outstandingly. Even the complex acoustic backdrop with piano and drums brought the voice to the fore and it was reproduced in all its facets. The instruments were captured simultaneously

with a similar dedication to detail. Particularly the contributions from the piano, which are often difficult to catch, appeared perfectly positioned in the room and very authentic. The drums' individual percussion elements were also successfully reproduced – in a clean, exact and precise manner. The bass foundation completed the stage to create an enclosed and naturally coherent whole.

Finally, we supplied the amplifier with material that was somewhat weaker but still solid at MP3 320 kbps. However, we chose Joe Bonamassa's Vienna Tour with „Jockey Full of Bourbon“ so things didn't get any easier. The piano at the beginning of the song sounded a little sharper here but we had expected that from the Blu-ray and it was also due to the room's acoustic properties. The start was immediately vibrant and dynamic, the bass drum had a slight echo effect which was also heard on the track on other high-quality devices. Each individual instrument and, of course, Bonamassa's voice possessed a clear presence and were captured excellently. It was possible to perceive guitar's steel strings as such and they developed a clear goose-bump feeling during the solo in the second third of the song. The voice was also reproduced at a high quality, Joe pushed himself a little further into the foreground than was the case with Diana Krall. But the excellent distinction and structure of the acoustic backdrop was maintained and produced a lively and thrilling experience of sound.

Conclusion

Compact format but still acoustically extremely powerful. What sounds a little like a loudspeaker manufacturer's dream has come true with Oehlbach's XXL DAC Ultra. The case volume is by far not as important for a headphone amplifier as it is for loudspeakers, but Oehlbach's component does develop an acoustic potential that is surprising for the size and price and it impresses with its transparency, resolution and dynamics. The quality of its build is very good and the unit also constitutes a visual treat with its brushed aluminium front in matt black. The two headphone outputs demonstrate that flexibility was not only important where the connection of source devices was concerned. Well-made, acoustically very powerful headphone amplifier with USB DAC at a fair price.

- + Solid workmanship
- + Chic aluminium front
- + Flexible connection section
- + Possible to connect two headphones
- + Great acoustic potential
- + Easily connected to Mac & PC