



Back to the lab

Audiolab has a formidable reputation for making DACs and now it's returned to the category. **Ed Selley** sees how it fares

Some products are so innovative in what they do that they create a template that rival designs can't help but adhere to. Audiolab's M-DAC is a perfect case in point. It was one of the very first affordable DACs to combine a USB input supported by conventional electrical digital ins that possesses the means to be a pre and headphone amplifier. No less importantly, it was one of the first products to switch to ESS for its decoding and the effectiveness of the implementation was a key element in the take-up with other companies.

So successful was the M-DAC's spec, the basic premise of the D7 remains largely unchanged. It combines digital inputs with a volume control and headphone amp to become a serviceable digital preamp as well as a line-level device. Inputs are a USB-B connection for audio, USB-A to read sticks and small drives, with two coaxial and optical inputs alongside aptX Bluetooth. The decoded signal is made available to RCA and XLR

outputs on the back and a 6.35mm headphone socket on the front. Fairly unusual at the price is the fact that the Audiolab retains looped-though digital outputs as well.

Where the D7 differs from older devices is in its decoding hardware. Gone is the 9018-era ESS chip and in its place comes the newer ES9038Q2M that is also used in the 6000A MkII integrated amp. As there is a USB input present, sample rate handling is rather higher than it is on the 6000A MkII – limited to 24-bit/192kHz. The D7 by contrast will handle PCM to 768kHz and up to DSD512, which is more than sufficient for pretty much any commercially available music file. The coax and optical connections top out at 24-bit/192kHz, which should still be enough for most needs.

One of the reasons why Audiolab has enjoyed the success it has with ESS chipsets is the work it has put in around them, and the D7 is no exception. Proprietary clock and power supply circuitry are employed over the default options and the filter

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audiolab D7
ORIGIN
UK/China
TYPE
DAC/preamplifier
WEIGHT
1.42kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
208 x 56 x 180mm
FEATURES
• Supports, PCM to 768kHz and DSD512
• Inputs: 2x optical; USB-A; USB-B; 2x coaxial; Bluetooth
• Outputs: coaxial; optical; RCA; XLR
• 6.35mm headphone socket
DISTRIBUTOR
IAG UK
WEBSITE
audiolab.co.uk

is a completely separate undertaking that operates in Class A. This is adjustable and offers the scope to tweak the way the D7 responds to MQA. These MQA filters are also the location in which the Audiolab can have its internal upsampling adjusted – something of a mystery without the manual. There are independent, low-noise power supplies for the digital and analogue sections fed by a decent 12V wall-wart unit.

The Audiolab is built in a compact metal chassis that mimics the aesthetic of the 6000 and 7000 ranges. In some ways I preferred the slightly more angular styling of the M-DAC, but the D7 looks decent enough and is available in Silver or Black finishes. The basic layout is intuitive and the display – while pretty small – is easy to read at a distance. This being an Audiolab device, it goes without saying that the standard of build and finish is as good or better than anything else you'll find anywhere near the price and it's small enough that it's unlikely to be an issue finding space for it. I'm not terribly fond of the huge Bluetooth aerial and I think Audiolab has missed a trick not fitting a balanced headphone connection, but the inclusion of a remote control is a very nice touch.

Sound quality

Initially, I set the Audiolab up as a line-level DAC running into a Naim Supernait 3 and a pair of Neat Petite Classic standmounts (HFC 456 and 495 respectively). From the moment I start listening to Corduroy's *High Havoc*, the effort the company puts into the ESS DAC implementation makes itself felt. The D7 is everything



you would expect an ESS-equipped device to be. The title track is articulate and extremely detailed while the snappy bass guitar performance is delivered vividly.

What holds the attention and keeps you listening is that this detail and finesse is partnered with a refinement and sweetness able to help less-than-

It's as a desktop device that it really begins to highlight where its niche lies

perfectly recorded material stay musical even as the D7 gently points out any faults. *Ritual* by White Lies is given a little space and sweetness that helps to soften a very aggressive piece of mastering and allow the individual tracks to show their quality.

This presentation is something you have a degree of control over too. The filters are certainly worth experimenting with because they have a perceivable effect on what the D7 does with different types of material. They aren't tone controls, nor are they designed to be, but they will affect the overall presentation quite significantly. In fact, they seem to be far more influential on the overall performance than the upsampling – which is interesting because using Roon to externally



At around this price, the WiiM Ultra (HFC 522) sits like a small black hole, distorting the market around it. There is no question it does more for the asking price. There's on-board streaming, EQ, HDMI ARC and analogue inputs, inclusive of a phono stage. It does things that Audiolab has no answer to and if you need a self-contained digital front end, it has the D7 beat. The thing is though... if you don't need the 'everything but the kitchen sink' approach to spec, the Audiolab is better made, offers superior decoding, preamp and headphone amp – even over RCA with XLR offering a further step up in performance. The D7 is less of a Swiss army knife than the WiiM and the blade it offers is sharper.

upsample material has a more profound effect on performance.

Good as the D7 is as a line-level source, it faces some stiff competition. It's as a desktop device that it really begins to demonstrate where its niche lies. Connected to a Cambridge Audio MXW70 (HFC 531) power amp, it shows itself to be a fantastic preamp. The 78-increment volume control feels a little bit arbitrary, but it allows for the right level to be set and the result is a compact and extremely capable duo. Running with a pair of Neat IOTA II (HFC 530) standmounts, you have a trio of components that take up very little room, but sound bigger and far more authoritative than you might reasonably expect.

The D7 also shines as a headphone amplifier. In a perfect world it would have a 4.4mm connection, but listening to Eliza Shaddad's *The Woman You Want* via Focal's Clear MG feels a cut above what you might expect from a £400 product doing both decoding and amplification. Once again, it's the ability of the Audiolab to be exceptionally detailed and profoundly dynamic when needed, but then rein that in when a little more balance and refinement works to the benefit of the material being played that's a winner. You would need to look at something of the level of a Bluesound Node ICON (HFC 527) to find a meaningfully superior headphone performance.

Conclusion

This is another fine Audiolab DAC that continues a strong run of form dating all the way back to the 8000 Series. What I find most impressive about the D7 is that it builds on the design template established by the original M-DAC, the tweaks to the performance and how it functions keep it relevant in a market that maybe isn't consuming USB DACs with the vigour that it once was. The D7 is entirely able to work in an existing system as before, but it's supporting a Mac or PC with a power amp, active speakers or headphones where I see it excelling – and it is superbly well adapted for the role. This is a keenly priced and well-specified little DAC that is likely to win many people over ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
FEATURES
★★★★★
OVERALL
★★★★★

LIKE: Detailed yet refined sound; pre and headphone functionality
DISLIKE: No balanced headphone socket; large Bluetooth aerial
WE SAY: Audiolab continues its strong run of form for DACs with this compact but clever offering