

QNKTC

AB-1.2 USB DAC

THIS CATCHILY ENTITLED

'Quantisation Noise Killed The Cat' DAC is the hardware embodiment of an open-source Audio Widget project, started by a group of tech geeks who wanted to make an excellent, but affordable way to play hi-res files. The Norwegian designer Børge Strand-Bergesen assures people that it has nothing to do with eighties fop popsters Curiosity Killed The Cat!

It's interesting then, inasmuch as it is a hi-fi product that has its roots in the computer world. We're seeing this more, as mainstream audio gets progressively more 'digital' and music itself gets ever closer to computers in the way that it is sold.

The AB-1.2 USB has the third version of the analogue board, and plays hi-res audio (up to 24/192) from Windows, Linux and OS X computers. Inside are good basic building blocks for a budget DAC – the very respectable Asahi Kasei AKM4430 DAC (the excellent £3,650 LongDog DAC – *HFC 377* – uses similar), Gollodge crystal oscillators running at 22.5792 and 24.576MHz (giving multiples of 44.1 and 48kHz), and an Atmel AVR32 general-purpose MCU programmed in open source C. Rather like the Raspberry Pi PC, this DAC has been designed with experimentation in mind, so you're effectively buying a whole world of fun if you're that way inclined!

You got the look

It's very nicely finished, considering the modest £110 price. A single LED tells you it's on, and round the back you get decent quality gold-plated phono sockets, but they're a little recessed – which may present problems with chunky RCA plugs. The unit is powered from the computer's USB feed, which isn't ideal, but the maker says there is the option of modifying the power supply. Oh, and you bring your own USB cable; it needs to be USB 2.0 mini-B type. It has built-in drivers for USB Audio Class 1 mode (UAC1, up to 24/48), but if you want the full 24/192 smash (in UAC2) then



you'll have to download drivers for Windows; Mac and Linux are supported. The LED glows green for UAC1, red for UAC2, and there's a rear switch to toggle between modes.

Hooked up to a MacBook Pro running the latest version of Audirvana and feeding a Creek Destiny 2 and MAD MyClapton speakers, the QNKTC makes a surprisingly nice noise. With a product of unknown provenance such as this, I am expecting the grinding, searing sound of cheap components remorselessly nailing themselves to my cranium, as I bravely try to endure a few minutes of music before retreating to the kitchen for glass of water and an Aspirin. Actually, things couldn't be more different, as I find myself rather mesmerised by Art of Noise's beautiful *Moments In Love*. There's no point getting a hi-res version of this, as it was recorded on a mid-eighties Sony digital recorder running at 44.056kHz, but you wouldn't know it. The sound is best described as clean – but not in a sterile, antiseptic way. Rather, it is smooth, spacious and well textured, and this is completely unexpected given its very modest price.

Compared to the Audiolab M-DAC (at almost six times the price, *HFC 368*), there's a slight lack of low-level detail and it doesn't give you the last few percent of the song's dynamics.

But on the other hand, the Audiolab doesn't quite have the tonal smoothness and sweetness; in an attempt to render every last bit of data off the file, it sometimes sounds more gravelly than the rather suave QNKTC. Still, Herbie Hancock's *Rock It* at 24/96 shows that the Norwegian DAC is tonally quite 'well lit'; it's never harsh, but you get the sense of a crisp autumn morning with brilliant sunshine throwing everything into sharp relief. If you match it with forward ancillaries, it's not going to sound as balanced as the bassier, punchier Audiolab.

Contrast and compare

Compared to the likes of Musical Fidelity's V90-DAC (*HFC 374*, £199), the QNKTC stands up very well; if anything it is more open and less processed sounding, with a nice fluid rhythmic gait and a sense that it steps back from the music, letting it flow through your computer and out to your speakers. Again, it's not a completely comparable product, as it doesn't have coaxial or optical digital inputs; the MF is a more versatile, jack-of-all-trades. Overall then, if USB is your only game in town and you're on a tight budget, the QNKTC DAC is an excellent product to consider – a perfect example of how tweakiness and geekiness can raise hi-fi's game. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£110
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OUR VERDICT

★★★★★