

Micromega MyDac digital to analogue converter

By Alan Sircom

One of the great perks of being an audio reviewer is discovery. Not just the day-to-day discovery of new products every month, but those occasional superstars. And, when those superstars are keenly priced, so much the better. So it is with the Micromega MyDac, a superstar performer at a very decent price.

The MyDAC is a small, lightweight ABS box in black or white with a digital converter inside. With the rounded corners and the simple layout, it's almost impossible not to think 'Apple' (in white, it looks like a scaled-down Airport Extreme), although the French converter is lighter in overall build. It has precisely two moving parts; a thumbwheel on the front to switch the DAC's inputs and put it into standby, and a mini toggle switch at the back to flip between USB Class 1.0 and 2.0 audio. As explained in the manual, Class 1.0 audio brickwalls the USB output of the host computer at 24 bit, 192kHz precision and to get beyond this means either buying a Mac or downloading software from Micromega's own site.

Alongside USB, the DAC also includes independent coaxial and optical S/PDIF inputs. A figure-eight power socket and a pair of gold phonos, a power light and a trio of white lights on the front panel complete the line-up.

There isn't much of a manual to speak of, but there isn't much need for a manual either. The thumbwheel at the front selects the source, which flashes until it locks onto a signal. But don't let 'simple' deceive you; this is a full-blooded DAC in spec and sound. The USB, for example, is asynchronous using the fast-becoming ubiquitous XMOS chipset, while the S/PDIF interfaces use a Wolfson application. Both sync to one of two clocks depending on the signal, one set at 22.5792MHz for multiples of 44.1kHz sampling and one set at 24.5760MHz for multiples of 48kHz. The relocked datastream then passes to a Cirrus Logic CS4531 converter chip. This not only allows full 24-bit, 192kHz processing, but also delivers a large enough output to feed directly to the output terminals, although Micromega buffers this off-the-chip output.



The two big feathers in the MyDac's cap are that it's the only DAC at the price that has its own custom designed switch-mode power supply (no wall-wart plug-tops here) and that it is both designed and built in France. We have become so used to 'designed locally, built globally' – especially at this price – that something made in the EU and doesn't cost as much as a small car is astonishing. Here's the thing, manufacturers – if Micromega can do this, why can't you?

The easy way of looking at the MyDac is thinking of it as just another budget DAC and set it accordingly. And, under such conditions, the MyDac acquits itself extremely well. But, there's a lot more to the DAC that comes if you ignore the price and the plastic casing, and start thinking of it as a barnstormer of a converter that delivers a good taste of true high-end performance.

How this works is simple. You play something with a touch of meat to it; Mahler, for example. And it sets out a detailed, layered presentation of what an orchestra is supposed to sound like; not accented or curtailed or melded together, just the energy and flow of an orchestra. As it should sound, and in many respects as the rest of the system lets it sound.

In a way, where it makes its lack of high-end credentials is in the observance, not the breach. Many high-end converters are seemingly designed to sing siren-sweet with the right music, and sound less promising with anything else. The MyDac makes no such limited claims, and sounds all the better for it. I doubt many MyDacs will end up playing "I'm So Lonely" from the Team America soundtrack just after a swift round of Beethoven piano sonatas, but if they did, their owners wouldn't find the Micromega stressing one over the other. Ultimately, no DAC should behave this way, but sadly many surprisingly expensive ones do. The true top team players in this game don't favour one genre over another, and the MyDac shows its colours there.

This means you can end up with seemingly absurd systems where the DAC costs one-tenth the price of the cables it's used with... but if it works, it works.

In many a budget system, the MyDac's expansive presentation and detail can be masked and the one potential flaw in the presentation – a lack of 'full fat' upper bass – can be highlighted. However, when you move up a notch or six, that lack of upper bass richness becomes tonal honesty (because it's not trying to add body to a budget system) and that

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separation of instruments and detail presents as all the things many want from a good high-end system.

I don't want to overstate this, because it's easy to accidentally kill off half the product's potential audience, and it's not fair to the product or its potential owners to do that. Those with a good, but inexpensive system will find the DAC not only an excellent introduction to the joys of high-end sound with all the resolution and spaciousness that comes with the upper echelon, but also an introduction that stays with the listener as the system improves. A good product like the MyDac has both staying power and the potential to raise the game of the listeners using it; listening to the sound of the MyDac is both satisfying and ear-opening. Those on the first rungs on the ladder will not only hear what a good DAC sounds like, but begin to see there's more to audio than those lower rungs offer. They will find the MyDac offers them a glimpse into a world of exceptional audio performance and musical enjoyment that they might never have otherwise discovered. Chances are, those who go down this route will end up keeping the MyDac until it becomes the longest standing – and likely cheapest – part of their system.

Nevertheless, uprooted from the entry level, the MyDac does offer much more than at a point where its similarly priced rivals begin to show their limitations. There is a second in-between system I use, comprising a Sugden A21se, a pair of old ProAc Studio 140, with Crystal Cable Standard Diamond signal cables and an AudioQuest Diamond USB. Normally, an Arcam rDAC does the digital conversion and does it well. But the MyDac left it for dead. The additional refinement to the sound it gave made BB King's *Live at the Regal* that bit more live sounding and gave extra articulation and clarity to his voice. It's also extended without sounding extended, as in 'edgy', 'bright', 'etched', 'hyperdetailed' or all the other potential woes that beset inexpensive digital.

That's possibly the key thing about the MyDac's performance. It doesn't sound cheap. Quite the reverse in ▶



► fact; in the right context, it sounds very, very expensive. Back to that system; swapping out the MyDac for the Primare in that system was telling; the Primare was better in terms of bass extension and precision, but the difference between the two was not as clear cut as might be expected, given the differential in price. OK, so ultimately the Primare won out, but based on the presentation alone, you could easily be mistaken for thinking these were two rival high-end DACs with different presentations.

I've got to say, this is perhaps one of the most exciting products I've encountered in years. Of course, it's great to have the astonishing products, the dCS and Metronome players or Light Harmonic converters that show what can be wrung out of digital data files, but without products like the MyDac showing just how good audio can sound at lower altitudes, there will be ever fewer people starting small, and working up to those true reference class products.

Let's not get carried away with this. It's a good DAC at a very fine price, but it's not the second coming. Such a product is always welcome, but while it keeps its cool in the presence of some extremely lofty company, it's not a £2,000 DAC, in either build or sound. That it comes extremely close in the latter department is why the MyDac deserves all its plaudits. Best of all, it's only the start of a set of MyProducts; we're in for some classy French fancies. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Digital inputs: 1x Coaxial, 1x Toslink S/PDIF, 1x USB input (Class 1.0/2.)

Analogue outputs: stereo phono pair

S/PDIF sampling frequency range: 32 kHz – 192 kHz

USB sampling frequency range: 44.1 kHz – 192 kHz

Resolution: 16 – 24 bits

Bandwidth (± 0.2 dB): 5 Hz – 100 kHz

Linearity (-100 dB): 0.1 dB

Signal to noise ratio: A weighted (20Hz – 20kHz) > 110 dB

THD + noise (1 kHz): < 0.002%

Output level: 2 V rms

Output impedance: 600 Ω

Dimensions (WxDxH): 14x14x3.6cm

Weight: 0.36kg

Price: £259

Manufactured by: Micromega

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