

EQUIPMENT REPORT



Micromega MyDAC USB DAC

The \$399 Miracle

Robert Harley

The term “USB DAC” is starting to become redundant the way “cell phone,” “digital camera,” and “flat-panel television” are anachronisms to one generation and “ink pen” is to those of us two (or more) generations further removed. Those under twenty years old may never have been in the market for a DAC that didn’t offer a USB input, just as they may never have bought a film camera or a CRT television. But to the more, shall we say “seasoned” music lovers, USB is a new-fangled contraption.

As USB DACs (er, DACs) proliferate prices have come way down, performance has gone way up, and products have gotten smaller. This welcome trend is exemplified by the new \$399 MyDAC from Micromega. The French company has a long history in digital audio, pioneering several cutting-edge products back in the early 1990s. Now with founder Daniel Schar back in the designer’s chair, Micromega is again on a roll, producing an outstanding integrated amp/DAC with wireless streaming (the AS-400 reviewed by Neil Gader in Issue 222) among other forward-looking items. The new MyDAC represents by far the lowest-priced component the company has yet marketed, and is one of a full line of entry-level products.

MyDAC looks very much like an Apple AirPort Extreme (not by coincidence, I presume), with its white plastic chassis (black is available) and 5.5" nearly square and 1.4" high form factor. A front-panel wheel, reminiscent of the tuning wheel on 1970s-era Marantz tuners, selects between the S/PDIF coaxial, TosLink optical, and USB inputs. An LED associated with each input blinks when that input is selected but not locked to the source. The LED turns solid when lock is achieved. Output is via a single stereo pair of RCA jacks. While many products of this size employ a wall-wart power supply, MyDAC’s power supply is inside the chassis. An AC cord plugs into a small socket on

the rear panel. In Standby, MyDAC consumes only 100mW of power.

We’re right at the transition point when the USB interface is able to pass audio data with sampling frequencies higher than 96kHz—some products already have this capability. Surprisingly, so does MyDAC; it can be driven natively with sampling frequencies up to 192kHz with 24-bit resolution. Moreover, MyDAC’s USB interface is asynchronous for lower jitter and better sound. Other technical details include dual master clocks, one for the 44.1kHz family of frequencies (44.1kHz, 88.2kHz, and 176.4kHz) and the other for the 48kHz family of frequencies (48kHz, 96kHz, 192kHz).

For Mac users, MyDAC requires no drivers or downloads. PC users need to download a driver from the Micromega Web site. I connected MyDAC to a Mac with no problems, and operation was simple. The only minor glitch was a faint high-pitched whistle emanating from the unit itself (not from the audio output) when the unit was turned on. This whistle was only audible when no music was playing and I was standing next to the unit.

LISTENING

It’s often said that the true test of high-end design talent is how much sound-quality the designer can squeeze out of the slimmest of parts-budgets. If that’s the measure, then designer Daniel Schar is a genius. MyDAC knocks it out of the ballpark sonically, with spaciousness, bloom, ease, smoothness, and resolution that are good by any standard, but unbelievable from a \$399 product.

The main sonic quality that distinguishes MyDAC from the competition and makes it so musically compelling is its three-dimensionality. Inexpensive digital usually has a flat sound, with instruments sounding like cardboard cutouts stuck to one another on a flat soundstage. MyDAC somehow avoids this,



instead conveying a real sense of body with instruments and a wonderful bloom around instrumental outlines, all presented within a spacious and well-defined soundstage. Although tonal balance and purity of timbre are very high sonic priorities, the ability to foster the impression of instruments in real space goes a long way toward musical realism. In this regard, MyDAC sounds like it should cost quite a bit more money.

MyDAC is also exceptionally clean and smooth in timbre, with very little grain and only a hint of hardness in the treble. Strings lack the steely edge often heard at this price level, and cymbals have a delicacy that you just don't get from entry-level digital. These qualities, combined with spaciousness and bloom, make MyDAC easygoing, pleasant, and non-fatiguing.

The bass is well defined and fairly deep, but this is the area in which MyDAC's budget orientation is revealed. The bottom end is full and satisfying, but not the overachievement that MyDAC's soundstaging, bloom, and timbral liquidity are. Bass lines aren't precisely defined, sounding just a bit soft and compressed. It seems churlish to criticize a product because in one respect it's not quite up to the lofty standards set it sets everywhere else. Nonetheless, I would be remiss in not mentioning it.

Compared with the \$249 AudioQuest DragonFly I reviewed in our last issue, the Micromega is smoother and more dimensional, but the DragonFly has a little tighter bass and is a bit more incisive rhythmically. The Micromega is more refined and resolved, sounding like a much more expensive product than it is. Although these products are very different functionally and don't directly compete with each other—the AudioQuest is portable, has a volume control, and can drive headphones or powered speakers directly—the sonic comparison shows just how good entry-level digital can sound nowadays.

To give you an idea of how exceptional the Micromega is I'll relate an incident. I turned on my music server to listen to music after having done some comparisons the night before between MyDAC and the \$4999 Berkeley Alpha DAC Series 2, which I've used as a reference for many years. I sat down and began listening, marveling at how good the sound was through the Magico Q7. After about 15 minutes I happened to look at the display on the Jeff Rowland Corus preamplifier and realized that I had been listening to the Micromega and not the Berkeley. This isn't to say that the two are equal by any means; the Alpha DAC is considerably more spacious and dynamic, better resolved, and purer in timbre, with much deeper and fuller bass. But the ability to enjoy the music, and to consciously think about how good the system sounded, without realizing that MyDAC was at the front of the chain speaks volumes about this little product's amazing value.

CONCLUSION

Every so often in high-end audio a product comes along that shatters the price-to-performance ratio we've come to expect in a category. Think of the NAD 3020 integrated amplifier in the 1970s, the Adcom GFA amplifier in the 1980s, the PSB Alpha speaker in the 1990s, and the Cambridge Audio 840C CD player in the 2000s. You can add another future legend to that list: the \$399 Micromega MyDAC.

It's worth an audition even if you were planning on spending quite a bit more. You might find, as I did, that this level of performance for four-hundred dollars qualifies as a miracle. **tas**

SPECS & PRICING

<p>Inputs: USB, TosLink, S/PDIF on RCA jack</p> <p>Resolution supported: 32kHz-192kHz, up to 24 bits (USB and S/PDIF inputs)</p> <p>Output level: 2V</p> <p>Dimensions: 5.5" x 1.37" x 5.5"</p> <p>Weight: 300 grams</p> <p>Price: \$399</p>	<p>AUDIO PLUS SERVICES</p> <p>156 Lawrence Paquette Industrial Drive Champlain, NY 12919 (800) 663- 9352 audioplusservices.com micromega-hifi.com</p>
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