

# FURUTECH

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ADL Esprit Review

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PRE-AMP DAC



## ADL Esprit

**A**lpha Design Labs (ADL) is a division of high-end cable and accessories brand Furutech, and produces a line of niche electronics, including mobile headphone amps and USB DACs – and more recently a stereo headphone model.

The ADL Esprit is the brand's most recent USB DAC, but that designation falls a long way short of describing the full scope of what it actually is, and what it does. Despite a diminutive footprint, this little box of tricks has a long list of functions.

Yes, it is a USB DAC, offering a latest-generation asynchronous USB input with a 96 kHz/24-bit capability. But the Tenor chip-controlled USB type B port can operate as either an input or an output.

Thus, in addition to being able to receive digital data from, typically, a computer, and then converting that data to analogue (or pass it on digitally via Toslink optical), the USB port can also

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output digital data to a computer, having used its Cirrus Logic analogue-to-digital converter chip to digitise incoming, analogue signals.

That capability means that the Esprit can be used to digitise analogue source material such as vinyl records, in conjunction with software such as the almost ubiquitous VinylStudio (offered in both Windows and Mac versions, and easily the best of its kind for the roughly US\$30 asking price).

Of course, the Esprit also offers more conventional DAC capabilities. Its Wolfson DAC receives incoming digital signals of up to 192 kHz/24-bit resolution via coaxial or optical interfaces. And it is able to up-sample in two steps, either 96 kHz/24-bit or 192 kHz/24-bit, selectable via a toggle switch on the rear panel.

As the precision-crafted rotary level control and source selector on the front panel prove, the Esprit can be employed as a fully fledged pre-amp. The selector allows the user to choose between two



analogue input sets, as well as the USB socket, and the optical and coaxial digital inputs.

Line-level RCA outputs allow the Esprit to control a pair of active speakers, or a power amp with passive speakers. There's also an optical digital output, although as indicated, it only operates in conjunction with the USB input, and only up to 96 kHz.

Finally, the 6.3 mm headphone socket on the front panel confirms that the Esprit is a useful headphone amp. It utilises a Texas Instruments TPA6120A2 current feedback design that allows broad impedance compatibility of between 30 and 600 ohm, and a dynamic range claimed to exceed 120 dB.

Build quality is quite superb. The all-metal casing with its anodised aluminium faceplate looks and feels sophisticated, while the Furutech-sourced, gold-plated and Teflon-isolated RCAs on the rear panel are as beautifully engineered as anything you'll find on even the most high-end component. In fact, that's true of the Esprit's construction as a whole.

Internals mirror the same, almost obsessive commitment to quality, as evidenced by the use of Elna ROB and

Elna RFS capacitors, as well as Burr-Brown OPA2134 op amps for the line-level and DAC stages, while the A/C converter stage is fitted with JCR NJM5532 op amps. The Esprit is supplied with an external, wall wart-type power supply.

As the lack of a supplied remote control suggests that the Esprit has been primarily designed for desktop applications, the unit was mostly operated in conjunction with my MacBook Pro as the primary source.

This allowed me to source material via the MacBook's USB output, as well as from its optical digital output, utilising the Esprit's USB port and optical digital input respectively. I also used the Esprit's USB-based ADC capabilities to digitise vinyl records by connecting a Linn LP12 via a Valve Audio Whisper phono stage to the Esprit's analogue inputs, and capturing the digitised signal on the

Digital to analogue conversion .....	192 kHz/24-bit Wolfson WM8716 DAC
Analogue to digital conversion .....	192 kHz/24-bit Cirrus Logic CS3561
Frequency response .....	10 Hz – 20 kHz (-0.1 dB max)
Signal-to-noise ratio .....	>119 dB, A-weighted
Digital inputs .....	Asynchronous USB, coaxial, Toslink optical
Digital outputs .....	Asynchronous USB, Toslink optical
Analogue inputs .....	2x stereo RCA
Analogue outputs .....	1x stereo RCA, 6.3 mm headphone jack
Dimensions (WxHxD) .....	100 x 57 x 141 mm
Weight .....	970 g

PRICE..... R8 750

#### VERDICT

Superb build underscored by precise and clearly resolved rendition of digital sources. Honest, transparent treatment of analogue sources. An excellent headphone amp – and an admirable tool for transcribing analogue sources to digital, too. Doesn't support USB Class 2 Audio, and there's no remote control.

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OUR RATING: 85 / 100



MacBook using VinylStudio software.

Much of the listening was done using Sennheiser HD800 reference headphones, but a pair of B&W P3s was also employed as a counterpoint. I also paired the Esprit with a pair of Marantz MA22 monoblocks, driving B&W PM1 monitors, to check out its pre-amp capabilities.

In sonic terms, the Esprit is best described as a clean, accurate and incisive device, almost regardless of the mode in which it is operated. It articulates all manner of musical fare with a fastidiousness that doesn't allow even the finest sliver of detail, or the most subtle of nuances, to slip past.

At the same time, it has no problem getting to grips with the core essence of the music, allowing an all-pervading sense of integrity and musical totality to

come to the fore.

The recordings on Sting's *Ten Summoner's Tales* are sweeping sonic vistas, painted with bold strokes, but coloured in with finer, tonal hues. The Esprit easily acknowledged both the intent and the execution of these performances, from the melancholy 'The Shape Of My Heart', with its acoustic delicacies, to the jazzy, uptempo 'Heavy Cloud, No Rain', with its richer arrangement and airy, open stage.

That open, expansive accessibility is also a consistent highlight of the Buena Vista Social Club's live performance at Carnegie Hall, and the Esprit allowed the generosity of the soundstage, and the electricity of the performances, to shine through with conviction.

The shimmer and sheen of the piano, the age-burnished charm of the vocals,



# Committing vinyl to hard disc

Digitising a vinyl record collection onto computer hard disc is not an enterprise to be taken lightly. Nor should you be in a hurry. It takes a fair amount of time, and there are no shortcuts. Oh yes, and you'll need a device such as the ADL Esprit.

The Esprit's analogue-to-digital converter accepts the analogue input signal from a phono stage (the latter used to step up the low-level signal to line-level standards), and then transforms it into a 96 kHz/24-bit digital signal.

It outputs this signal from its USB port, to the USB port of computer (such as the MacBook Pro employed here). A software programme such as VinylSoft is then needed to capture the signal, and to allow post-processing. This will include dividing the signal into individual tracks, clean-

ing any surface noise or other artefacts, and finally adding metadata.

The process is time consuming and requires meticulousness throughout, including proper prepping and cleaning of the vinyl record before recording, and ensuring that the turntable to be used is perfectly set up.

However, the reward is a set of perfect, digital copies of your favourite vinyl albums, and the ability to stream them from your computer or NAS to other devices with access to the network.

Will they sound as good? Well, they will sound pretty close to the original, but the A/D conversion process does have an influence on the overall sound, as does the playback system. And besides, without the vinyl playback ritual, it's never quite the same - but a lot more convenient!

the gentle but insistent pitter-patter of the percussion, the amicable rumble of the bass – the Esprit made it all sound real and involving.

Diana Krall has never sounded sassier, and more confident, than under the watchful eye of producer T-Bone Burnett on *Glad Rag Doll*. The guitars have fizz, the drums are slapped and tickled with real intent, and Krall seems to revel in the burlesque pleasure of it all. The Esprit captured both the energy and the intimacy of this set with a sense of precision, yet managed to retain the spark and magic that makes this recording particularly special.

The RCA Red Seal box set of Beethoven's symphonies, performed by the NDR Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Günter Wand is notable not only for its flawless recording, but also for Wand's insightful reading, which is not as frenetic and energised as the Van Karajan recordings, and all the better for it.

I like the smooth flow and the expressive performances, and the Esprit confidently

captured the full majesty of the orchestra and its dynamic swings. The crescendos were delivered with gusto, and the quieter passages were treated with precision and deference.

The slow-fuse blues and electric guitar wizardry of Joe Bonamassa is gritty and compelling on *Dust Bowl* and especially so on 'The Last Matador of Bayonne', which starts slow, but builds up gradually and insistently, until it showcases Bonamassa's considerable skills in grand, arresting style. The Esprit expressed every detail, every searing riff, and also managed to dig into the emotive appeal of the music.

Comparing the USB interface to the SPDIF inputs, I found that the Esprit sounded slightly meatier in the case of the former, with a more tactile treatment of finer textures and nuances. Fed the same music files via SPDIF, there seemed to be slightly less grain in the upper treble reaches, but the overall delivery was drier and a little more clinical.

I didn't care much for the Esprit's SPDIF upsampling functionality, which will

upscale native resolutions to a maximum of 192 kHz/24-bit. The sound was consistently smoother and more accessible in the default 96/24 setting – even when playing high-res 192 kHz files.

I would have preferred a 'native' setting to be included, which would have, for instance, left original Red Book 44.1 kHz/16-bit files as is, with upsampling a completely selectable option, rather than the 96/24 default.

The Esprit is a fine tool for digitising vinyl. Its A/D conversion talents are impressive for a unit at this price point, with an inherent truthfulness that warrants employing the best possible front end for this task. The LP12/Iltok/Cadenza Black deck delivered a superb source signal, and after some touching up via VinylStudio, the results were excellent: truthful, accurate and musically satisfying.

The Esprit is a versatile piece of kit with a wide range of applications. It's a more than useful USB DAC, with a penchant for finding a satisfying balance

between sonic and musical accuracy. It sounds neither too clean nor too saturated, and there is a sense of honesty and attention to contextual detail that makes for involving and enjoyable listening.

Those qualities also extend to the Esprit's role as a versatile headphone amp and pre-amp, with its choice of digital and analogue inputs catering for almost every possible application.

The lack of a remote is really only a shortcoming if the Esprit is to be used away from its intended desktop purpose. Even then, the simplicity and precise execution of the volume control would almost certainly be compromised by any measure of motorisation or remote switching.

The added advantage of the ADC component, and the ability to use the Esprit as a conduit for digitising analogue source material is a bonus, and will further extend this little box of trick's considerable appeal.

Deon Schoeman

## Associated Equipment

MacBook Pro, 17 dual-core processor, 2.5 GHz, 4 Gb RAM  
Naim UnitiServe SSD, Synology Diskstation 213+ NAS  
Audirvana Plus 1.4.5  
Marantz SC22/MA22 pre/power  
B&W PM1 Speakers  
Linn LP12/Iltok/Ortofon Cadenza Black/Cardas tonearm cable  
Valve Audio Whisper phono stage  
Tellurium Blue RCA interlinks and speaker cables  
Furutech GT2 USB cables

## Software

Sting – *Ten Summoner's Tales* (A&M CD and Digi)  
Buena Vista Social Club – *At Carnegie Hall* (Nonesuch CD and Digi)  
Diana Krall – *Glad Rag Doll* (Verve CD and Digi)  
Joe Bonamassa – *Dust Bowl* (J&R Adventures CD and Digi)  
Beethoven – *Symphony No 4 – Wand/NDR Symphony* (RCA SACD and Digi)  
Mark Knopfler – *The Ragpicker's Dream* (Mercury CD and Digi)