

FURUTECH

AVGuide.com – ADL GT40 Review Part 1



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First Listen: Furutech/Alpha Design Labs GT40 USB DAC

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Posted by: **Chris Martens** at 10:10 am, May 11th, 2011

Let's get one point straight right up front. Calling the Furutech/Alpha Design Labs GT40 a "USB DAC" is like calling the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Carl Vincent "a nice secure place to store expensive airplanes." While the statement is true, it definitely does not convey the *whole* truth—if you see my point.

In the case of the GT40, we have what might arguably be the most versatile, performance-oriented desktop audio component any of us have yet seen. To appreciate what I mean by this statement, let's look at the many, many functions the GT40 supports.



GT40: The Swiss Army Knife of Desktop Audio

The Furutech/Alpha Design Labs GT40 can comfortably serve in any or all of the following capacities:

- A 24-bit/96kHz-capable USB DAC.
- A phonostage with switch selectable gain settings for moving magnet (MM) and moving coil (MC) phono cartridges.
- A solid-state headphone amplifier with three user selectable inputs:
 - The aforementioned 24/96 USB DAC.

- o The aforementioned MM/MC phonostage. Or...
- o A line-level stereo analog input.
- ... And now get ready for the really unusual part because—get this—the GT40 can also serve as a 24-bit/96kHz-capable digital recording interface, effectively digitizing analog signals from either its onboard phonostage or line-level analog inputs (can you say, “cool digital archiving tool?”).

Any way you look at it, the GT40 packs an awful lot of functionality into a chassis that’s not much larger than a medium-sized paperback book, and for the reasonable (*VERY* reasonable by Furutech standards) price of \$525.



What’s Up with Alpha Design Labs?

As many, though perhaps not all, *Playback* readers may know, Furutech is a venerable, Japanese high-end (some would probably say “*ultra* high-end”) audio company best known for its extremely high-quality audio cables, audio interface connectors, and specialized audio accessories.

I’ve have had the privilege of reviewing several consecutive series of Furutech cable products for our famous sister magazine *The Absolute Sound*, so that I’ve come to have some pretty clear-cut impressions of the Furutech “house sound.” Specifically, I’ve found Furutech’s “house sound” to be extremely revealing, transparent, and yet highly refined—a sound that doesn’t smack the listener over the head with any one spectacular quality, but rather offers a well-balanced combination of sonic virtues.

In my view, this balanced, revealing and oh-so-refined sound makes Furutech cables (and other components) a great choice whether one is listening for pure enjoyment, or for purposes of doing serious review work. The only catch, really, is that Furutech components tend as a rule to be purist designs that are inherently expensive to produce and to buy, which by definition means they aren’t for everyone. But, frankly, this is where Alpha Design Labs comes into the picture.

Of Alpha Design Labs, Furutech has this to say: “ADL was created by Furutech to imbue its Pure Transmission Technology into carefully engineered innovative designs that everyone can afford.” Translation: Alpha Design Labs = Furutech-like gear for those of us not made of cubic dollars.

Thus far, my sense is that there is no better expression for what ADL is all about than the \$525 GT40—a product that, if built using full-on, cost-no-object Furutech construction techniques, would probably cost ten times what it does now (no joke).

This is not, however, to suggest that ADL gear is in any sense “cheaply made.” Instead, think of ADL gear as being merely “excellent”—as opposed to being “surpassingly, obsessively, waaaaay-far-over-the-top excellent,” as would be the norm for

Furutech-branded products. As you'll quickly discern from the photos I'll provide of the GT40, the little DAC/amp/phonostage/digital recording device is beautifully and exquisitely made, which means prospective buyers can take real pride of ownership in the product, yet without dropping a small fortune to buy it. That's what makes the whole ADL concept so appealing.



So How Does the GT40 Sound?

Thus far I've focused on using the GT40 as a USB DAC and headphone amp, but have not yet sampled the capabilities of its phonostage section or digital recording interface. Based on the listening I've done thus far, let me offer first impressions of the GT40's "Sonic Character."

The sound of the GT40 is characterized by:

- A nicely balanced, ever-so-slightly midrange-forward sound that is full of openness and sonic nuance. The GT40 sounds slightly more lightly balanced and midrange centric than does, say, a well broken-in sample of the NuForce Icon HDP (which has a slightly darker presentation overall), though in terms of absolute clarity and transparency I would give the nod to the GT40.
- Bass is very good, too, though the GT40's low-end prowess hinges more on pitch definition and the ability to capture delicate (and in my experience often quite elusive) textural elements that nicely reveal the more expressive qualities of low-frequency instruments. In terms of bass power, the GT40 can arguably be equaled or even surpassed by similarly priced competitors (e.g., the NuForce Icon HDP, priced at \$449), but the GT40's textural refinement is a rare thing to behold (at least for products in this price class).
- Refinement: there is a certain suave, sophisticated quality to the GT40's overall presentation that creates the sense that music simply flows freely out of the little silver box in an effortless, unconstrained way (this in contrast to some moderately priced amp/DAC combos that sound—in subtle ways, of course—as if they are "working hard" to do the things that they do). The bottom line is that the GT40 offers up a quality of graceful ease that, to my way of thinking, is one of its most appealing aspects (it's a quality that, for my tastes at any rate, just makes me *want* to keep listening through the GT40).



Yes, But Is It Powerful?

In an absolute sense, the GT40 does not have the ultra-stout drive characteristics of, say, more costly headphone amps such as the Burson Audio HA-160, the Apex Peak/Volcano, or the Cavalli Audio Liquid Fire. But it comfortably holds its own with comparably priced competitors, offering plenty of output for moderately sensitive headphones (e.g., the delightful new Audio-Technica ATH-W1000X “Grandioso”) while holding enough power in reserve to drive such admittedly power-hungry headphones as the HiFiMAN HE-5LE’s. When you do plug in ‘phones that like power and lots of it, just be aware that you’ll need to turn the GT40’s gain knob up pretty far in order to get adequate output levels.



Stay Tuned...

The Furutech/Alpha Design Labs GT40 will become the subject of a full-length *Playback* review in the not-too-distant future, by which time we'll be able to give more in-depth comments on the GT40's phono section and capabilities as a digital recording interface. In the meantime, I hope this blog will encourage you to seek out this fascinating product and to give it a listen so that you can form your own impressions. It does an awful lot for a not unreasonable sum of money.

Until next time, happy listening.

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