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Audiohead (USA) – ADL Esprit

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HIFI AUDIO REVIEWS

February 2013

Alpha Design Labs Esprit USB DAC

BY AUDIOHEAD – FEBRUARY 22, 2013



Alpha Design Labs (ADL) by Furutech currently has a four-product lineup focused primarily on desktop DAC and headphone amplification. The Stride and the Cruise fill out the more portable side of things, while the GT40 and the Esprit come equipped with a larger feature set. They also are working on a new headphone called the H118 that should be released into the wild some time in the near future. The current flagship Esprit (\$1k) enters into the component landscape right around the point where you expect to see something special. Audio DACs continue to pop up from almost every hifi company at nearly every \$100 increment. So what can things sound like around the 10x mark?

The Esprit has a few more ins and outs that your standard audiophile DAC, it actually contains an analog to digital converter, should you be so inclined. The USB port serves as an input as well as an output and there are two ports (one in, one out) for optical S/PDIF. On top of that, you still get two analog inputs and a digital coaxial. The analog out is a variable output, so you can connect it directly to an amplifier and use the Esprit as a pre amp. The main volume knob controls both the headphone jack and the rear-facing outputs.



The build is delightfully refined. While the oversized brushed metal front faceplate is somewhat typical of high(er) end styling, the knobs are a definite cut above. They feel extraordinarily solid and well built. I also really liked the included feet. At first glance I thought they were metal spikes but they are actually comprised of a fairly tall, rubber-like shock absorption material. The RCA connectors on the back look and feel serious; they are not your typical off-the-shelf type of parts. The Espire includes an odd switch between the two highest resolutions (24/96k & 24/192) for optimal use with its optical and coaxial S/PDIF. The idea strikes me as a bit unusual considering most DACs don't suffer the same chore, but it didn't notice any substantial drawbacks in my dealings with the review unit. The unit recognizes when the USB port is attached to a computer by illuminating the front power light, however any amplification requires the use of a separate wall wart for use.



The volume pot was a little jumpy with my sensitive JH16 In Ear Monitors, but still useable at normal volume

levels. The background was pure black even with the efficient IEM. Loud listening levels came in around 50% with a pair of Audeze LCD-3s. The sound was as detailed and provided a nice wide soundstage compared to much of what I have heard at this price range. However, the quality that stood out the most to me was how smooth sounding the DAC was. The Esprit delivered all the nuance and focus of high fidelity with less of the hard edge that can accompany a lesser DAC. Indeed, one of the standout qualities of this DAC wasn't the micro-details (which it has), but rather its ease of listening. Vocals float organically across a very lifelike, focused soundstage to your ears. The overall presentation sandpapers the bristled edges of digital auditory conversion without feeling smudged or smeared.

I compared the Esprit to the CEntrance DACMini CX, which shares a similar footprint and input selection. The analog outs sounded fairly comparable to each other when I inserted them into the chain of my reference loudspeaker setup. The two DACs also delivered similar power output to their respective headphone sections. The end result is probably not enough to effectively drive the power hungry HE-6, but does justice to most headphone combinations including the popular Audeze flagship. Using the Oppo BDP-105 as a source, I also compared the 3 digital inputs to each other. While it may not be a surprise to some, I did find that the coaxial input delivered a fuller sound than its optical counterpart. While the USB input to my Macbook Air via Audirvana Plus yielded my overall preference, I've found the software plays a big part in the liveliness of that connection. Running the Oppo's dedicated analog outs into the Esprit's headphone section (bypassing the Esprit's internal DAC) delivered a familiar tonal signature from the Oppo's DAC that I have heard before though other headphone amps I have tested in such a manner. The analog output from the Oppo 105 is quite rich and can hold its own against many of the dedicated DACs I have heard.

## The Summary

The ADL Esprit DAC delivers a very smooth, detailed sonic presentation that makes it very easy to listen to. Check it out if natural, more organic sounding signatures are your preference. The capable, desktop-sized minimalist unit is a solid package for soup-to-nuts headphone listening from your computer that can also double as a pre amp or simple digital complement for your full sized rig.

<http://audio-head.com/alpha-design-labs-esprit-usb-dac/>