

FURUTECH

HiFi World (UK) – ADL Cruise

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SOUNDBITES



FURUTECH CRUISE HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER £375

Why a portable headphone amp? This one relies on extracting the digital signal of a portable or laptop via USB to process it through its better quality internal Digital-to-Analogue Converter. This strategy avoids the cheap, low quality DACs common in laptops and portables. For those players lacking a USB output there is a Line level input too and this is connected either into a line output or a headphone socket. Furutech suggest volume in the portable is then turned up to maximum and left there, but quite often this will result in output overload and distortion, so their advice here needs to be treated with caution; half volume is likely to be safest.

Easily hidden in a pocket – the Cruise spans just 65x120x28mm and weighs a mere 198g. In fact, although it is rather deeper, the Cruise is as long as my iPhone and just a touch wider.

If there's one thing that you can lay at the doorstep of the Furutech house, it's the fact that it certainly knows how to present a piece of hi-fi kit. Resplendent in a tasteful mixture of carbon fibre and polished steel, the sculptured lines of the Cruise looks, feels and handles like a piece of expensive jewellery; possibly a cigarette case that Cary Grant might lift from his jacket pocket in the film, 'Breakfast At Tiffany's'. Grant might, in this case, be rather bemused to find that his cigarette container also features a mini-USB which doubles as a charge port, a tiny on/off switch, a variable resistor rotary volume control plus a 3.5mm line socket and a 3.5mm headphone port.

Sound tests were conducted with a pair of Sennheiser HD650 headphones.

I plugged the Cruise into the USB port of my bog-standard dual-core PC laptop, running a WAV version of Gabrielle's 'Sunshine' (from the album, 'Rise'), extracted via Exact Audio Copy. It was now placed upon a wider, richer soundstage, bass was noticeably punchier with a large amount of bloom removed while new, low frequency, elements were introduced into the presentation.

The upper midrange was intriguing. Gabrielle's vocal was now lighter and bouncier than before with a more confident, floaty aspect to the delivery while organic instruments, like the introductory acoustic guitar, was more characterful.

Of course, with these revelatory sonic improvements, the PC's own, inherent, sonic problems were also exposed. The Cruise is unforgiving in its level of transparency, showing you just how thin and clanky the upper midrange can be on a standard PC rig, and as for that splashy treble? Don't get me started.

Moving to my 64GB, iPhone 4S, playing a WAV version of Jazzman, Geoff Keezer's 'Stompin' At The Savoy' from his 'Turn up The Quiet' album and the Cruise managed to drag a heap of detail to the fore giving my iPhone's headphone output an unfamiliar, and pleasantly surprising, degree of musicality. Most jazz tends to live in the upper midrange and the Cruise managed to clear a large amount of distortion from the chain allowing the

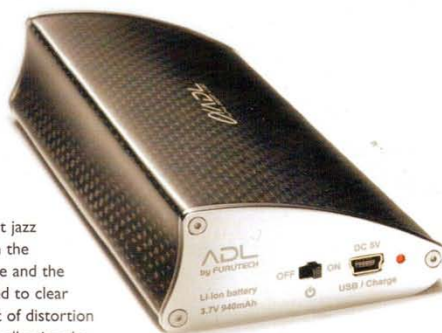
piano to gain an extra degree of coherence while the saxophone to sounded a whole lot reedier than before. The double bass played a necessary supporting role but, via the Cruise, this instrument also added drive to the track for the first time as well as revealing more of its own inherent personality by introducing more vibrational resonance into the mix.

While this Japanese miniature performed well on established digital sources, I felt that the Cruise was capable of a lot more so I turned towards a more generous analogue source and hooked up the line level of the Cruise to the headphone socket of my Sony WM-D6C – the best sounding portable sound source this side of the Alpha Nebula. I inserted a Maxell METAL-CD tape featuring Madness' 'One Step Beyond', transferred from a relatively recent 10" vinyl reissue via a Nakamichi Dragon.

With the Cruise in full flow, the Walkman sounded more confident and slightly less strident. In its original guise, the Walkman did display a slight upper midrange hardening that gave the electric guitars a somewhat brash tinge. This was removed with the Cruise connected while distortion was reduced to reveal more top-end detail. Meanwhile the Cruise also succeeded in lifting the bass a little to give the lower frequencies more heft.

The Furutech Cruise is not just a pretty face. By shouldering the headphone amplification duties in a portable environment, you are easing the burden on your sound source, giving the sonics space and room to breathe. While it can be a little ruthless in revealing a sound source's inadequacies, the Cruise offers undoubted quality, providing a level of maturity in sound presentation that will please all mobile audiophiles. **PR**

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