



Impressions: The Alpha Design Labs Esprit Stereo 192/24 DAC/Digital Preamp

by David W. Robinson



[Images courtesy of Furutech/ADL]

The world of DACs is probably the most fertile sector in high-end audio these days. Just about every time I turn around, there seems to be a new company... or an established company...with a new converter for an increasingly digital audio world. The price range goes from a couple of hundred dollars up to mucho dinero, and just about everything in between. Naturally, you generally get what you pay for, although, as is true of higher performance in general, you hit the point of diminishing returns pretty rapidly as you look for that final 25% at the top o' the heap.

The high-end hot zone these days seems to be in the under-\$2500 price range, driven strongly by the surge in computer-based audio alternatives that we've seen over the past few years. This makes sense, since this is where you can get a sizeable portion of the quality section of the price-performance curve without busting the local piggy-b. You don't get the cost-no-object sonic results of, say, a Playback Designs, an mbl, a Burmester, or a dCS, but you can sure get down the road to some great sound. No regrets for what you can't afford... I can't do a Bugatti Veyron, either.

A number of these are compact designs, for all of the audio lovers who are looking for desktop solutions, or the fix for their computer-based music. Over the past 3-4 years, I've gotten a chance to hear a number of these little hotties, and have had a lot of fun along the way. One of these was the Alpha Design Labs GT40, as I reported back in Issue 57 a very nice basic analog/digital preamp/DAC. It was such a new piece of work, at a very attractive price, that I gave it one of my Brutus Awards for 2011 (see Issue 58).

Just this summer, Alpha Design Labs (a subsidiary operation of Furutech, and hereinafter ADL) announced a follow-up product to the GT40: the Esprit. I was given an opportunity to give the Esprit an audition, since I knew the GT40 quite well. Naturally, I took up this kind offer; I was curious to see how the Esprit would measure up to its earlier sibling, which was a compact killer item.

Product Description

The Esprit follows the general parameters of the GT40 with its compact design, large volume pot, and clean input/output layout, together with a standard ¼" stereo jack in front for headphones. What it adds are some key features that were missing in the GT40, including higher resolution than the 96kHz/24-bit of the earlier model.

The general look and feel was very familiar to me; in fact, at first glance it looks like a larger GT40. The model sent to me was in black, though; my GT40 is finished in silver. The Esprit is a trim 6" wide x 5.5" deep x 2.2" high, and tips the balance beam at about 2 pounds... fairly hefty for its size. As usual, the fit, finish, and feel of the ADL unit belied its very reasonable price... USD \$999 in this case. The folks at ADL are demonstrating a dedication to meticulous craftsmanship in the execution of their designs. The chassis is elegant looking, but sports some significant functionality.

Up front, and from left to right, the Esprit features a power button, an attenuation switch (0dB, -6dB, -12dB), clipping indicator LED, an input select with five positions (Line 1, Line 2, USB, Coax, Optical), a ¼" stereo jack for headphones (32-600 Ohms), and a large and very smooth volume pot. (If you like silky volume controls, you are going to really like this one.)

Rear-side and left-to-right, the Esprit has ports that include Line 1 and 2 analog left/right RCA inputs, RCA left/right line outputs, a toggle switch to shift from 192kHz mode to 96kHz mode (requires power off-power on to make this change), S/PDIF inputs in both TOSLINK optical and coax formats, TOSLINK optical output, a single USB 2.0 input/output, and its 15V power input.

Quite a spiffy, compact package! Excellent ergonomics, with a volume pot that is a sensual delight. The ADL pots remind me a bit of the Alps volume controls... firm, definite, and silky to operate. Very nice!

Setup for the Esprit is very simple. Your RCA, coax, and optical I/O work as usual with your typical sources. 192kHz/24-bit S/PDIF output from sources goes to S/PDIF input for conversion and analog output. (As always with S/PDIF on devices like this, there is no provision for recording in at 192/24 to USB.) If you're going to use USB with your computer, so that you can do tasks like sucking in your LPs to USB at 96kHz/24-bit for digitization on your computer or notebook, the process is easy. The Mac will auto-recognize the Esprit; just power it up and plug it in. For Windows, you load the supplied driver, then plug in your Esprit, power up, and make your USB connection. The Esprit's 96/24 Windows mode will be activated.

The I/O Matrix

For those of you needing to understand what the Esprit does, and does not do, here's the scoop.

Digital input from S/PDIF coax is supported from 32kHz out to 192kHz, at 16- or 24-bits. Ditto for TOSLINK.

Digital input from USB is supported out to 96kHz, 24-bits.

Digital output from either USB or TOSLINK is throttled at 96kHz, 24-bits. Note that up to 96/24 surround sound is supported via TOSLINK, including AC-3 and DTS.

There is no digital output via S/PDIF coax.

All other output is analog only.

There are two analog line inputs, to allow digitization via the USB or TOSLINK output (limited to 96kHz/24-bit).

Sooooooooooooooooo... you can do digital input up to 96/24 via any of the Esprit's digital ports, but out to 192/24 only on the S/PDIF coax and TOSLINK inputs.

What this means is that the Esprit adds 192/24 to the mix with certain I/O scenarios; otherwise, you're at 96/24 and below.

The Sound

Here's where the proverbial tire meets the track: how does the Esprit do sonically?

While I wasn't able to spend as much time with the Esprit as I would have liked...the supply is very limited, and the review sample had to get down the road... I did get a chance to check out both the USB 2.0 interface and the S/PDIF. We have a large and growing collection of computer-based music files here, plus my trusty Oppo BDP-95 universal player for high-rez optical formats via the S/PDIF. For playback via desktop speakers, I used the exceptional Bel Canto stack, including the Bel Canto DAC 3.5 VB MkII with the VBS1 power supply and REF 150S amplifier, digital and analog cables courtesy of the bloody brilliant Chris Sommovigo: Black Cat Silver Star S/PDIF cable, and the very tasty Morpheus analog RCA cables (price-performance killers!), piped to my trusty-rusty Nova USA Ovations two-way monitors via JENA Labs Trio speaker cables. Supertweeters by Townshend Audio... definitely opens things up. All of this adds up to a good price-point combination of components for the evaluation.

To check things out on the headphone front, I used my reference pair of Sennheiser HD-800s, cabled by Cardas Clear with balanced connectors, and a Cardas Clear balanced-to-¼" adapter. Lovely work all the way around... and George really knows how to build cables and connectors. The match with the Esprit was a good one; the HD-800s come in at 300 Ohms, down the middle of the 32-600 Ohm range for the 'phones jack.

Recordings varied. I have high-rez PCM (.WAV and .FLAC, mainly), SACDs, DVD-As, as well as DSD and Double DSD files available for projects like these. (Standard CDs/Red Book PCM was of no interest to me in this context.) I took a quick representative cross-reference of some files from my HDTracks downloads, and did listening tests via USB. Likewise, I ran some 96/24 and 192/24 recordings on disc via the Oppo BDP-95 and S/PDIF and tried that mode. Note that you have to manually switch the sampling rate from 96kHz to the 192kHz position if you do that

sampling rate, and then power off/power on the Esprit. Ditto on downshifting. I consider this to be a bit of a shortcoming in an otherwise very good design.

My earlier experience with the GT40 left me optimistic that the Esprit would be a classy listen. I'm glad to say that my expectation was fulfilled with the Esprit. The sound of the Esprit, regardless of source, and via both speakers and headphones, is a very pleasant experience: detailed, refined, and always musical. Unlike some price-performance DACs, the Esprit avoids the merely punchy and sometimes raw sound of lesser DACs. It isn't forward and Technicolor in its presentation of the music; instead, the Esprit delivers a rewarding sense of nuance. The timbral rightness of the music that I was hearing was not the sort of thing that you'll automatically get at this price point, so I admit to being pleased. (If I had not spent quite a lot of time with the GT40, I would have been surprised, too.)

Stereo soundstaging and imaging were solid and excellent for this price point. The Esprit did a solid job of image placement, and produced a vivid impression of the music in a quiet field. Listening via both the HD-800s and the Ovations confirmed this impression, so 'phone junkies will really appreciate the presentation of the sound just as much as the desktop audio warriors.

Dynamics were very fine, although as I said, the design of the Esprit is clearly not intended to deliver a "sock you in the jaw" experience. Personally, I was taken by the playback performance on both USB and S/PDIF inputs...clean, clear, and refined. I found that I could listen to the Esprit for long stretches without fatigue... and listener fatigue is a particularly pernicious problem with PCM sources. Not with analog or DSD sources, but definitely with PCM. The Esprit does well in ameliorating that problem, I'm glad to say.

So, 96/24 and above was smooth, detailed, and musical... thus, unfatiguing. Enough said.

The operation of recording at up to 96/24 is pretty much as I described last time with the GT40 (see my notes in Issue 57. You'll be throttled at 96/24 for recording, but you can get some good computer files at this rate. Take your favorite audio recording package and create files to your heart's content. The Esprit does a great job handling recording, as well as playback. Those of you who are looking to create 96/24 files of your favorite analog line-level sources will be pleased with the results here. Remember, though, that the analog inputs are line-level; those of you who prefer to make 96/24's of your LPs should look at the ADL GT40 instead.

Conclusion...

Overall, my time with the Esprit was well spent. I enjoy the quality of the sound and the craftsmanship of the design while it was here. It made lovely music on both the analog and digital side of the ledger.

Any nits?

Well, just three. First, this is a line-level DAC; you won't be using it for your local MC or MM turntable source. This product is really for people whose interest in a DAC is more along the lines of digital sources or line-level analog. The very reasonably priced ADL GT40 is there for those who are looking for an LP solution.

The second is the rather clumsy switching/powering option for shifting from 96/24 to 192/24. It's not the end of the

world to have to double-clutch to get the job done, but it is a bit of a kludge. The Bel Canto 3.5 DAC/preamp does such a shift at all PCM sampling rates with nary a nanosecond lost; it would be helpful if the Esprit were able to avoid procedures like this.

Finally, the Esprit does not support DSD playback at this time. Audiophile looking for a playback solution for DSD or Double DSD will have to look for alternative DACs... they are there.

Otherwise, the ADL Esprit is a great product. \$999 will buy you a great deal of functionality, with few compromises on the capabilities that it offers. If you're short on space and on a budget, what's not to like here?

If you have a few thousand more dollars, you can buy better, of course. But that's not the point. You don't have to own a Porsche, Ferrari, or Bugatti to have a heckuva good time on the road. Likewise, you don't need a high-end DAC to enjoy a goodly chunk of the digital mountain. Not all of it, and definitely not the peaks, but meat 'n potatoes are to be had aplenty in the current golden age of digital. The Esprit proves that good things can come in small packages. To have a preamp with both analog and digital capabilities on the input and output sides of the ledger, a very solid mini-preamp, and headphone amp in a tight form factor...well, this could be all that a desktop audiobum or computer-based music junkie would need. Add a good set of 'phones, favorite analog sources, and your preferred PCM files, and down the road you go, in high compact style.

Enjoy the ride!

<http://www.positive-feedback.com/Issue63/espirit.htm>