



# Audiolab M-DAC+ £800



It's the least costly DAC on test, but you'd be wrong to assume that it skimps on features or cutting-edge tech

## DETAILS

- PRODUCT**  
Audiolab M-DAC+
- ORIGIN**  
UK/China
- TYPE**  
32-bit/384kHz PCM & DSD256-capable DAC/preamp
- WEIGHT**  
3.7kg
- DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
247 x 114 x 292mm
- FEATURES**
  - Inputs: 1x AES/EBU; 1x USB-A; 1x USB-B; 2x coaxial; 2x optical
  - Outputs: stereo RCAs; stereo balanced XLRs
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
IAG Ltd.
- TELEPHONE**  
01480 447700
- WEBSITE**  
audiolab.co.uk

If the Audiolab M-DAC+ is half as good as it appears to be on paper, then the more expensive DACs in this group have some questions to answer.

Based on the well-liked smaller original M-DAC, it continues to use the ES9018 Sabre Reference 32-bit DAC chipset, which is still generally considered to be one of the best off-the-shelf components out there. But, as any DAC designer will tell you, it's all about the implementation – and Audiolab passes the test.

Supporting circuitry includes a proprietary, discrete master clock to minimise jitter, extensive time-domain isolation and a JFET Class A output stage. The upgraded power supply now goes inside the unit's chassis, hence the taller and deeper casework, and consists of a precision-wound toroidal transformer with multiple windings to feed separate analogue and digital rectification stages. From there, multiple power supply sections feed the necessary voltages to each

area of the DAC, keeping any crossover interference to a minimum.

Physically, the Audiolab is a class act with aluminium casing, clean and simple ergonomics, and a clear OLED display. Rear digital inputs include an AES/EBU socket and an additional USB-A input alongside the existing USB-B connection. PCM runs up to 32-bit/384kHz via USB and DSD support up to DSD256 – so there's plenty of futureproofing headroom. And to round things off, there are user-selectable digital filters to finesse the sound to personal taste – seven for PCM and four for DSD.

## Sound quality

This is one assured, red-blooded and full-bodied-sounding DAC with not the merest hint of digital 'edge'. There's a welcome weight and warmth to the presentation that's instantly inviting and doesn't favour one musical genre. Nor does it seem to be notably input biased: USB unlocks its potential, but coaxial and optical aren't far behind.

## PLUS POINTS

It was never going to be easy for Audiolab to improve on one of the strongest products it has ever released. When it came out, the original M-DAC (HFC 359) had no real rivals at its £600 price point.

Indeed, the M-DAC got off to a good start because it was essentially the digital converter section of the 8200A CD player, itself one of the best silver disc-spinners under £1,500, thanks to designer John Westlake's prodigious talent. It was also one of the first DACs to use the then new and highly regarded ESS Sabre 9018 DAC chips.

The '+' version is considerably larger than the original, mainly on account of the fact the power supply has been brought inside the unit. As a package, the M-DAC+ feels far more like a piece of budget esoterica than its predecessor.

The Audiolab projects an expansive soundstage with solid, three-dimensional images that allows the dreamy, free-flowing grace of *Brasilia* the space to breathe without feeling sapped of spirit. It also portrays Joe Sample's jazz-funk stylings in a manner that's less obviously busy than some of the models on test. This is very much in keeping with an unflappable nature that isn't forensic, but is good at balancing competing elements – in this case, silky synth pads and quicksilver keyboard runs.

There are DACs in this group that dive deeper into a recording – the Mytek Brooklyn DAC+ for example – but that doesn't necessarily square with greater musical enjoyment. What's so likeable about the M-DAC+ is its poise, control and command of the bigger musical picture. With a grasp of flow and tempo that's as good as any in the group, the M-DAC+ is in synch with the musical message ●



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Inviting, full-bodied sound quality; great features and build quality
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Nothing to flag at the price
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WESAY:** All the DAC you'll ever need at a bargain price
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL

