

Alpha Design Labs GT40a DAC/ADC

ALTHOUGH THERE ARE many devices on the market that you can use to digitally record analogue audio, they mostly only support resolutions close to CD quality at 16-bit/44.1kHz. Devices that support hi-res analogue-to-digital conversion at 24-bit/192kHz seem to be as rare as hen's teeth. At last, Alpha Design Labs has released the GT40a DAC and ADC that supports 24/192 as an upgraded version of the original GT40 by doubling the 96kHz sampling rate. The GT40a is supplied with a 15V DC 'wall-wart' power supply and a USB-A-to-USB-B interface cable for connecting to your PC (Windows 7 or later, Mac OS10 or later).

It measures 150 x 57 x 111mm (WxHxD) and only weighs 650g, but is a real heavyweight when it comes to features. Apart from being a DAC that can support up to 24/192 from its USB interface to produce an analogue signal at its RCA output sockets, it can also digitise up to 24/192 from its RCA inputs to the USB output – ideal for digitising your record collection at the highest resolution that vinyl deserves. The input is switchable from being either a line or a phono in that uses a built-in phono preamp with RIAA equalisation. The phono stage is also switchable to support MM or MC cartridges. And if that's not enough, it can function as a standalone headphone amp using any of the analogue or digital signals fed to it.

Up and running

In order to support the higher data rates, the GT40a requires the computer to have an ASIO (Asynchronous Input/Output) driver installed. Macs have this built in, but Windows PCs will require a driver to be installed. This is very straightforward and the instruction manual contains the link where the driver can be downloaded. Digital recording is all done by software and Audacity is an excellent free program that works brilliantly with the GT40a. I use it with my PC running Windows 8.1 and after



installing the driver, I set it as the default playback and recording device in the Windows control panel and I also set the default recording format to "2 channel, 24-bit, 192000Hz (Studio Quality)". By setting the GT40a as the default device, Windows will automatically switch over to it whenever it's plugged in. As all of the adjustment of recording levels is done by software, there is no way to alter the settings apart from a switchable attenuator to reduce the signal by either 6 or 12dB if a red 'clipping' LED on the front panel warns of an overload.

Considering it first as a headphone amp, I connect it to my hi-fi and listen to some vinyl on my Sennheiser HD600 headphones. Playing Elgar's *Enigma Variations* demonstrates a very pleasing sound that is refined and easy to listen to. I find I need to turn the volume control up to the two o'clock position for normal listening, so it is not the most powerful headphone amp, but it is more than adequate for monitoring and general listening. Connecting the GT40a directly to my moving coil cartridge results in a similarly great sound with excellent imaging, showing that the internal phono stage is also no slouch.

Next, I move over to my PC and connect it to a USB port and play a 24/192 FLAC of Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No.5 – The Emperor*

performed by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. The opening blast is superbly balanced with excellent spatial imaging and is in a completely different league to plugging the headphones into the computer's sound card. Next up is a 24/96 recording of James Vincent McMorrow singing *Cavalier*. The performance is crystal clear and captivating. The GT40a copes well with the solo vocals and doesn't shy away when the music livens up.

The vinyl countdown

Finally, I set up the GT40a to digitise some vinyl at 24/192 using Audacity and saving it as a FLAC file. I play the result on a Cambridge Audio Stream Magic 2 DMP (*HFC* Issue 393). I specifically choose something that I had previously recorded at 16/44 on a Xitel INport ADC – Branford Marsalis playing *Romances For Saxophone*. The result is staggering. Although the Xitel does a pretty decent job, the GT40a yields a sound that is so much closer to the original vinyl. Branford's rendition of Satie's *Gymnopédie No.3* is mournful and hugely emotional – something that is missing from the 16/44 copy.

The GT40a is outstanding value for money. It does many things really well but when it comes to digitising vinyl, it does extraordinarily well. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£395
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OUR VERDICT

