



FLEXIBLE FRIEND

The Alpha Design Labs amp is equipped in such a way that some units may well find themselves happy homes in systems where the headphone socket is never used. Tested briefly as a phono stage with a Avid Ingenium (HFC 379) suggests the GT40a is a capable performer with moving magnet and moving coil cartridges. The noise floor is commendably low and while there are no loading settings for cartridges, it works very well in this regard. The USB input is also very good and running driverless into a Melco N1A 4TB NAS drive (HFC 397) is able to handle files up to 24/192kHz.

Testing the analogue-to-digital functions of the GT40a is beyond the scope of our *Group Test*, but when we looked at its capabilities back in HFC 399 we found that it performed extraordinarily well.



Alpha Design Labs GT40a £395

Made by Furutech, this multi-talented Alpha Design Labs model is the Swiss army knife of the pack

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Alpha Design Labs
GT40a

ORIGIN
Japan/Taiwan

TYPE
Headphone
amplifier with DAC/
ADC & phono stage

WEIGHT
650g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
150 x 57 x 111mm

FEATURES

- 6.35mm headphone socket
- Switchable MM/MC/line input
- Impedance range: 32-300ohm
- 24/192kHz USB input/output
- Line output

DISTRIBUTOR
Sound Foundations

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WEBSITE
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Describing the GT40a as a headphone amp rather undersells the impressive range of extra functions that it offers. As well as working as a headphone amp, the Alpha Design Labs is a USB DAC and a moving magnet and moving coil phono stage that will convert vinyl to 24/192kHz rips to send to a computer. Leaving these for a moment, the relevant details of the GT40a are a switchable input that offers either standard line input or phono stage as well as the 24/192-capable USB connection. It can also digitise up to 24/192 from its RCA input to the USB-B output, making it a useful device ideal for digitising analogue sources like vinyl at the highest resolution (see Flexible Friend box out above). These are then made available to a single headphone socket and a line-out connection.

Unlike a number of models here, the Alpha Design Labs has no adjustable gain options for the headphone socket but this doesn't seem to lead to any significant issues hitting the test level, and it still has plenty in reserve. The wall-wart power supply is a fairly

awkward shape and the control functions are a little more involved thanks to the amount of different functions that it performs, and this means that there are switches on the back and front of the unit.

While it is undoubtedly rather complex, this is an undeniably handsome-looking device. The volume knob is a minor work of art and the overall construction is excellent with high-quality metalwork used throughout and very substantial sockets and connections on the rear panels. It is also one of the smallest units here, making it easy to accommodate in most systems.

Sound quality

The GT40a is one of the more charismatic performers in the group and the good news is that these traits are largely positive. With all the test pieces, the GT40a sounds powerful and controlled. The piano in the Regina Spektor piece has a palpable weight to it and struck keys have a force that isn't present elsewhere. This is also present in Schumann's *Piano Concerto*, but it is matched with believable tonality and a decent sense of air and space around the performers. Compared with the best in the test, there isn't the delicacy with strings and vocals but the Alpha Design Labs offering is consistently satisfying to listen to.

With the more upbeat Satriani and Hot Chip tracks, this drive and energy is well suited to getting the best from them and the GT40a scores consistently well here. There is an

impressive sense of drive and timing to the presentation and it underpins this with deep and powerful bass. The guitar work in the Satriani piece is possessed of the same weight and drive that is evident elsewhere and this is one of the best headphone amplifiers here for sheer head-nodding entertainment. Once again, there is the slight sense that the very fine detail of the recordings is not as apparent as with some models here, but the likelihood is that you'll be enjoying yourself too much to be overly worried about that.

Viewed solely as a headphone amp (but of course the GT40a is so much more versatile than this), the Alpha Design Labs' performance isn't quite at the top of the class, but it has many likeable aspects. Taken in the wider context of its considerable abilities, this is a very clever and well thought out device that should appeal to a wide variety of users ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Punchy and entertaining sound; large feature set; excellent build

DISLIKE: Slight lack of delicacy and detail; interface a little fussy

WE SAY: Performs well as a headphone amp as well as offering much, much more

OVERALL

