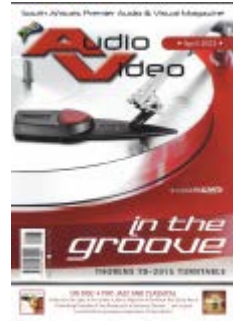


# FURUTECH

Audio Video Magazine South Africa  
ADL Cruise Review

April 2012



PORTABLE HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS  
Furutech ADL Cruise

## A moving music

The original, cassette-based Sony Walkman may have pioneered the concept of portable audio, but music on the move has come a long way since then.

Today, music files are stored in the digital domain, in a variety of formats, and stored on portable music devices such as the ubiquitous Apple iPod, or on flash drives and external hard drives that can be plugged into notebook computers. Even crossover devices such as the iPhone or the iPad can serve as digital music file repositories and, therefore, music sources.

Of course, the ultimate playback quality of these digital sound files is heavily reliant on the encoding quality (low-resolution MP3 versus lossless or uncompressed files), and the quality of the digital-to-analogue conversion process.

Using an iPod Classic as a primary source of music while on the move can be a satisfying experience from an audio enthusiast's perspective, especially if the device is populated with well-ripped lossless or uncompressed files.

It also helps if you upgrade the standard Apple earbud-style earphones with better-quality earphones (the quite brilliant B&W C5s come to mind here), or larger but often more comfortable headphones.

But none of these measures addresses the fact that you're still relying on the internal DAC of your iPod for the critical D/A conversion process. And while the iPod Classic, for instance, sounds reasonable, it's certainly not top league.

Alpha Design Labs (or ADL) is a division of Japanese high-end cable and accessories maker Furutech and makes some pretty nifty components, among them the nifty GT40 DAC/phono stage/headphone amp.

The ADL Cruise is a compact, portable headphone amplifier with a twist: it not only accepts line-level analogue stereo signals via its 3.5 mm stereo input jack, but also a digital signal via its mini-USB port operating at up to 96 kHz/24-bit resolutions.

An internal DAC, utilising a Wolfson

WM8716 conversion chip, offers upsampling up to 192 kHz at 24-bit word lengths.

It's a thing of beauty with an unusual, curved shape executed in a mix of polished metal and glossy carbon fibre. There's a volume control, minijack line input and minijack headphone output at the one end, and the Type B mini-USB input, as well as an on/off switch, at the other.

The Cruise's internal battery can be charged using the supplied charger, but will also be replenished via the USB port when connected to a computer. A LED indicator light turns from blue to red to indicate a low battery level. Battery life is around eight hours, depending on usage.

I ran the ADL Cruise in conjunction with my trusty iPod Classic 160 GB, playing a mix of 320 kbs MP3 and Apple lossless files. In this role, the Cruise was running in analogue mode, operating as a conventional headphone amp, and powered by the battery only.

I also linked the Cruise to my MacBook



# experience

Pro, this time using a supplied Furutech GT2 USB cable, and listened to a variety of material on my hard disc, and on a connected external hard drive.

Given the unit's portability, I did much of my listening using the B&W C5s, but I also employed Sennheiser's PX310 Bluetooth-capable headphones, using both a BT-D300 Bluetooth adapter for the Cruise, and a direct cable connection.

Selections included a sublime recording of violinist Stephane Grappelli playing Cole Porter standards, on the Gitanes jazz label, a rich and detailed recording of Dave Grusin performing a tribute to Duke Ellington, Sara K's atmospheric 'Hell Or High Water' on the Stockfish label, and Bernard Haitink's riveting renditions of Beethoven's Symphonies No. 1 and 7, conducting the London Symphony Orchestra, and captured here in 24-bit FLAC lossless format.

The Cruise needed a little time to settle in, and initially sounded both constrained and too clinical. But after the first 20 hours or so, it seemed to open up, with the music assuming smooth and natural flow, and the staging becoming more expansive, and more accessible.

Even so, the Cruise is less benign than I expected, given that it will have to cope with a broad range of files, often captured at lower than ideal resolutions, from signals received at line level in the analogue domain.

Put it this way – linked to an iPod via a Furutech minijack-to-minijack cable, it easily eclipsed the sound provided by the iPod itself, offering a sound picture that was more expansive and more accurately dimensioned, and with closer attention to high frequency detail.

Using a pair of B&W C5 in-ear earphones, the sound was clean and transparent, but high frequencies could easily sound somewhat unforgiving – no fault of the Cruise, but proof of its commitment to clarity and tonal neutrality.

Apple Lossless files immediately sounded better: fuller, smoother and more complete, with extended bottom-end performance, and tops that while still clean, lost some of their

stridency. If ever there was an argument for steering clear of MP3s and opting for lossless formats instead, this was it!

But the Cruise really showed its class when connected to the MacBook Pro, and playing back WAV, AIFF and 24-bit FLAC files utilising VLC Player for Mac. This brought the ADL's own DAC into play, and the sonic performance took several strides forward.

The bass response reached down deeper, with greater sonority and timbre, adding an improved sense of authority and foundation to the music. The midrange assumed a richer, smoother character, creating a fuller and more realistic impression, while there was a far closer attention to fine detail, so that the sonic image seemed to snap into finer, clearer focus.

Imaging was more cohesive, too, and the soundstage was certainly both more expansive and dimensional, allowing far more absorbing and involving delivery.

So, the Cruise certainly takes its DAC role seriously enough, and combined with a headphone amp stage that offers more than ample volume scope, and isn't scared to tackle even difficult loads (ADL says it will drive cans with impedances of up to 600 ohm), it punches well above its weight.

While I didn't have the correct adapters on hand, I have a feeling that the Cruise, running on battery power alone, and coupled to a decent source on the one hand, together with a pair of top-end headphones such as my Sennheiser HD800s, would surprise more than a few audiophiles.

You'd need a 6.3-to-3.5 mm headphone plug adapter, and a decent stereo RCA-to-minijack patch cord, but given what I heard during the review period, it may well be worthwhile asking ADL and Furutech importer, AV Cables, to make up the latter, and source the former.

While on the subject of cables, using decent USB and analogue minijack-to-minijack cables with the Cruise is a must. I connected the Cruise directly to my MacBook Pro's USB socket using the Furutech GT2 cable supplied, and compared to running a generic USB cable,

**Frequency response**.....20 Hz – 20 kHz  
**Signal-to-noise ratio**.... 100 dB (line),  
96 dB (USB), A-weighted  
**Inputs**.....Mini-type B USB;  
3.5 mm stereo line input  
**Outputs**.....3.5 mm stereo  
headphone socket  
**Dimensions (WxDxH)**  
.....65x120x28 mm  
**Weight**.....198 g

## VERDICT

Beautifully executed headphone amp with in-built DAC transforms music on the move in an audiophile experience – if your recordings can stand up to the scrutiny!

**PRICE**.....R4 890

**SUPPLIED BY**.....AV Cables  
082 774-4831

**WEBSITE**.....www.avcables.co.za

the sound was crisper and more expansive, with an extended frequency range and no upper frequency glare.

The ADL ID-35 stereo analogue cable, terminated with male stereo 3.5 mm minijacks at either end, made the most of the iPod's analogue output, and again, showed gains in terms of resolution, linearity and tonal range. Both cables are essential extras, and should be considered must-haves when buying the Cruise.

I tried desperately to get hold of Apple's camera connection kit for the iPad2 during the review period, because in essence, this should allow music on an iPad to be fed to the Cruise in the digital domain, using the camera connection kit's USB port.

This would allow the iPad to benefit from the Cruise's superior DAC capability, and if you had a minijack-to-RCA patch cord as mentioned above, iPad-based music could even be played back via the Cruise and the stereo inputs of a mainstream stereo system.

The ADL Cruise is a fine piece of kit, thoughtfully engineered and exquisitely finished. It's an excellent, portable headphone amplifier, with enough battery power for a day's worth of listening.

But it's the Cruise's excellent DAC capabilities that extend its talents beyond the headphone norm, opening up an additional list of applications, and making it a very attractive proposition indeed.

**Deon Schoeman**