FURUTECH

Audio Video Magazine South Africa ADL GT40 Review

April 2011



Jack of all trades

apanese audiophile brand Furutech enjoys an established reputation for high-end signal and power cables, as well as some unusual accessories. But the company took us by surprise when it launched a new brand last year.

Alpha Design Labs (or ADL) is meant to be a second-tier brand with a more affordable range of products, while still delivering on the high quality standards established under the Furutech moniker. But if the GT40 USB DAC is anything to go by, Furutech's tradition of innovation will also be an ADL hallmark.

Describing the GT40 as a USB DAC doesn't begin to describe what this little box of tricks is capable of. Nor should one be fooled by its diminutive size. The GT40 is not only a USB DAC operating at 96 kHz/24-bit resolution. It also incorporates a MM/MC-compatible phono stage. And it can perform analogue-to-digital conversion at 96 kHz/24-bit resolutions, too.

In addition, it could be considered a line stage with enough impetus to drive a power amp directly. And it also includes a headphone amp. All of this from a beautifully turned out, all-metal enclosure measuring 150 mm wide.

The GT40 looks and feels like a top-class component. The finish is exemplary, and the rotary volume control on the front panel turns with smooth, oiled precision. Also on the fascia is a gold-plated headphone socket, a USB/RCA selector switch, and a power button.

The rear panel continues the quality and versatility message, offering a bi-directional USB Type B socket, together with a pair of gold-plated, Teflon-insulated RCA inputs, with a matching RCA output set. A tiny toggle switch allows the inputs to be adapted for Moving Coil phono, Moving Magnet phono or line-level analogue operation.

In short, the GT40 crams an awful lot of functionality into a small but superbly executed package. Which begs the question whether it can achieve satisfying performance levels on all fronts – especially since the exterior construction and workmanship creates high expectations.

The GT40's USB interface was linked to an Asus Aspire netbook containing bit-perfect WAV files extracted using dB PowerAmp ripping software. The selection of material included the new Eric Clapton release, 'Clapton', as well as Dick Hyman's superbly rendered 'From The Age Of Swing', Dave Grusin's richly recorded 'Homage To Duke', and the intricate guitar and the atmospheric opus 'As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls' by Pat Metheny and Lyle Mays.

Next, I used two turntables – a Rega 3 with Croak Audio-modded RB250 and Ortofon 2M Red MM cartridge, and an Avid Diva II/OL Encounter/Benz Micro Wood L – to feed the



in-built phono stage.

I then recorded a number of vinyl albums – Diana Krall's 'Live In Paris', Jennifer Warnes' 'The Hunter' and an immaculate DG recording of Wolfgang Schneiderhan performing the Beethoven Violin Concerto and Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 5 – using Vinyl Studio recording software, and employing both turntables for comparative purposes.

A long run of Monster M550 RCAterminated interconnects linked the GT40 directly to my Marantz MA200 monoblocks, driving Dynaudio Audience 52SE speakers. For the headphone amp appraisal, I used my sublime Sennheiser HD800 reference headphones.

Let's start with the G140 in its DAC role, playing back those WAV files off the Asus netbook. The sound was lively and energetic, with lots of air, expansive staging and no notable digital glare or noise.

The tops were clean and open, linked to a smooth, ample midrange, all underscored by a succinct and authoritative bass response. In fact, the ADL was particularly impressive in the lower registers, showing a penchant for fast, punchy and powerful low frequencies.

In short, the GT40 performed its D/A conversion duties with an assured aplomb.

In many ways, the ADL's analogue-to-digital conversion talents mirrored those of the DAC component, but with some caveats. The results achieved using the Ortofon 2M Red-equipped Rega 3 were excellent: a dark, silent backdrop, a broad tonal range, smooth but clean and defined treble, and a convincing sense of scale and dimension.

Again, the bass response was exceptional, and there was a tangibility to the sound that underscored the timbre and presence of instruments and voices. The delivery was agile and dynamic, with just the right amount of impetus to add further realism and believability to the listening experience.

The situation wasn't quite as favourable in the context of the Avid/Encounter Benz Micro Wood deck – and not because of anything that combo does wrong, but specifically because the GT40's phono stage

Vital Stats

Digital conversion......96 kHz/24-bit

VERDICT

A truly magic box of tricks, with versatile operation, great sound quality and ease of use on its side. Could be the desktop audiophile's ultimate accessory. Excellent value, too.

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makes no allowance for a revised impedance loading to accommodate MC cartridges.

Instead, it's fixed at 47 kOhm, which is pretty standard for MM cartridges, but generally too high for MCs. Given the attention to detail and overall excellence of the GT40's design, this seems to be an unusual oversight, and resulted in a sound that was duller and more midrange-biased, compared to the MM-sourced recordings.

Of course, the way around that would be to link a MC-equipped turntable to a phono stage, and then run the line-level outputs of the phono stage through the GT40's line-level inputs, and on to its ADC.

A quick experiment in this regard, using Musical Fidelity's highly affordable, but rather excellent V-LPS produced excellent results – and also showed that the Avid outclasses the Rega, with a more defined and smoothly graduated tonal range, improved low-register detail, a richer midrange and improved overall resolution.

Could the GT40 stand its ground as the only phono stage in a system? Yes, if the turntable has a MM cartridge.

What about its talents as a line-stage? The GT40 certainly had enough drive to feed my Marantz monoblocks directly, and that using long interlinks. The volume control operates with the smooth, measured precision of a far more expensive piece of kit, and is ultra-quiet, too.

Of course, input options are limited – you can only connect one analogue source up at a time, with the USB input allowing a second digital source, typically a PC or Mac-based music collection. But for this kind of money, who's complaining.

Let's not forget that the ADL G140 is also a headphone amp, and a fine one at that. It had no problem coping with the HD800s and didn't embarrass itself under their very close sonic scrutiny, either. Using the big Sennheisers really brings the performance of the GT40 into sharp relief, and that it is able to withstand such analysis is a further, impressive feather in this magic box's cap.

Key aspects – an absence of noise, ample verve and energy, open and transparent staging, fine stereo focus and pin-point imaging, a smoothly rendered tonal spread – were really brought to the fore while listening to the GT40 with the HD800s.

So, this really is a class act, and an uncommonly versatile one. As I said at the start, it's hard to believe that one small box can pull off so many different tasks with so much aplomb. But except for the load incompatibility with MC cartridges, the ADL GT40 exceeds every expectation.

If I was to nitpick, I'd ask why there isn't provision for an S/PDIF coaxial digital input to make use of the ADL's DAC circuitry. That way, I could link it up to my Wadia 170i and listen to the uncompressed audio files on my iPod ...

But as it stands, the GT40 is a stand-out product with very real bang for the buck. I'm keeping this one.

Deon Schoeman