

# ADL

Audiohead (USA) – ADL A1

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## The ADL A1 Portable Headphone Amplifier- Review

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Portable headphone amplifiers are a hot category right now and Alpha Design Labs (ADL) has been on the move. A subsequent follow up to the Apple-friendly X1 we reviewed [here], the new A1 (\$599) follows suit with Android compatibility in addition to a few extra tricks and updates.

The A1 casing has kept much of the design elements from the original X1 with an aluminum top covered with a rubberized sides and back. The overall feel in your hand was lighter than I remembered the X1 to be, but when I rechecked the specs it was actually slightly heavier at 150g. In truth the A1 is very much on the light side compared to other portables that pack a battery within their casing. The topside indicator lights are a big plus in my book and this time around ADL even included up to 2X DSD playback. The deck-of-cards sized device includes a physical volume knob and a whole mess of ins and outs, much more than some of its close competition. If you are looking for something with the capability to cruise in and out of a wide array of rig situations, the A1 might suit you just fine. In addition to the given headphone output the A1 also features both optical and line level out *and* in. The rear combo jack can also be used to plug another headphone in, pushing the count up to two.

Now obviously the namesake A for Android is the main differentiating point for this unit over its predecessor, but as anyone familiar with the two platforms from an audiophile standpoint will attest, Android is a much different beast than iOS when it comes to connectivity. Perhaps one of biggest drawbacks to the Android open platform is its inconsistency from device to device. I have had some good luck utilizing eXtream Software's USB Audio Player PRO, which is high res capable and brings along its own USB driver to the party, but its

not always easy to implement correctly and can be downright messy to deal with. Utilizing the provided OTG cable and an old Samsung Galaxy 3, I was able to fire up the new lossless streaming service Tidal from the phone with nary an issue. Plug and play compatibility was a very nice change from my previous attempts to get things going with the phone. Even with the proper precautions ADL warns that it may not work with everything Android. Here is a quick rundown of what is currently compatible from the company site.

SONY Xperia Z, Xperia Z1 , Z1 Compact ( Xperia Z1f ), Xperia A (Xperia ZR), Xperia Tablet Z, Xperia V, SAMSUNG GALAXY Note3, GALAXY Note II, GALAXY S4, GALAXY S3, GALAXY S5, GALAXY S3 mini, GALAXY S5 mini, (not supported – GALAXY S4 mini) HTC (Android 4.2) J butterfly, J One.butterfly, New One, HTC One (M7) HTC (Android 4.3) HTC One (M8), HTC One X, SInFocus IN810

And unfortunately iDevices won't work with the A1, but most other modern phones should be well taken care of. The USB Mini jack in the back (which also charges the device) acts as a connection for high res playback from your computer and was also quite plug and play from my Macbook Air. Input switching is controlled from a small flush three way toggle located on the undercarriage of the unit. It is an interesting design choice (as opposed to the available sides) but no harm or accidental switching occurred from its placement within my usage. Overall the device looks and feels very well executed and thought out.

ADL's very forthcoming website states that digital duties are carried out by a Cirrus Logic CS4392K 24bit/192kHz DAC chip and a VT1736 32bit/192kHz 2.0 USB chip. For those who love a spec deep dive, analog amplification is provided via a TI TPA6130A2 head amp chip and LME49726 op amp. Cirrus Logic chips can sound really clean with the right implementation, but even more recent products are making way for the new ESS Sabre 9018 "M" version to hit the market. New chips and impressive specs do not guarantee good sound however. It's all about the implementation.

The A1 only has a single gain setting, but the volume control is set in such a way that sensitive IEMs can still be utilized while most other mid range demand headphones (including the Audeze LCD line) can be driven without issue.

While a feature-driven value pushes the A1 out of the gate first, it has the technical chops to push detail and dynamics in a positive direction. Eric Clapton's *Change the World* is a great example of a well-recorded piece of music that is balanced fairly throughout the frequency spectrum, but still has a killer low end. Never bloated or out of place, the bass guitar and bass drum thump are placed immaculately in the mix. Frequency response though both the A1's DAC and amp was spot on, with excellent low-end presentation and extension. The overall experience was very lively and acute, with non-fatiguing treble and well defined mids. Comparisons to my full-sized reference rig revealed a trade off in warmth for analytics.

While the demands of the \$600 price point does raise the bar a bit, as a standalone DAC and headphone amplifier the A1 derives its value from its massive feature set first. It carries capabilities that far exceed a good chunk of non-portable DACs. While the Android platform itself isn't perfect for audio playback, ADL does an amazing job of making due with what it's given. Comparisons to the standard headphone jack on your computer will undoubtedly result in a far more presentable soundstage and higher relative dynamics from your favorite tunes. If you are looking for something to partner with your A1 approved Android device, look no further. This compatibility plus DSD puts the device in a category with very few others, portable or not. There are a lot of options in the portable audio sector currently, and the A1 has clearly dug into its niche. Apple enthusiasts may opt in for the older (and less expensive) X1, which is still available [on amazon for \$485]. But for those looking for that intersection of the A1 "target", the little portable unit offers big payouts.

<http://audio-head.com/the-adl-a1-portable-headphone-amplifier-review/>