



## The true Swiss Army knife DAC/amp from iFi Audio

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Posted 8/31/16

### Review Details:



Purchased on: 08/14/16

Price paid: \$499.00



**Pros:** A lot of possibilities for adjustments, powerful, clean sounding

**Cons:** Slightly too large to be truly portable, may lack some richness in the sound



The iFi Audio Micro iDSD was sent to me by iFi with help from their Norwegian distributor Audioaktøren for the purpose of doing this review and including it in my recently started \$250+ amp/DAC comparison thread. It's a loaner unit and will be returned to Audioaktøren after my review is published. I would like to say thank you to Karina as well as Terje and Hallvar for making this review happen, thank you very much!



iFi Audio is a UK based company.

This is what they say about themselves on their website:

“iFi is a brand new line of electronics with trickle-down technology licensed from AMR and aimed primarily at the future, Computer Audio generation. All iFi products boast Class A analogue circuitry with no DSP and the signal stays ‘Bit Perfect’ throughout. How a product looks and performs matters, but so does its impact on the environment. That’s why nearly every iFi product and its packaging are made from highly recyclable materials like aluminum, paper, recycled plastic and why we refuse to use harmful toxins in our components. We do this to ensure that every product we release meets our environmental standards.”

#### **About me:**

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#### **Built, accessories and functionality:**

The iFi Audio Micro iDSD is a solid state headphone amplifier and DAC combo.

The Micro iDSD is available in only one variation AFAIK: silver color.

I’ve got to be honest and admit that when I’ve seen pictures of and read about the Micro iDSD I’ve almost been intimidated by its huge amount of options and buttons. At the same time I’ve also been very fascinated about in so naturally I was thrilled at the opportunity to try it out for myself.

Output power is rated to 950mW @ 32Ohm when running in Normal mode and from the numbers it should be somewhere around 2W in Turbo mode (more about the different modes later). Output impedance is rated at less than 1Ohm.

The Micro iDSD has a sturdy housing that feels very durable. The physical controls available on it do feel reliable. Speaking of physical controls there sure is an impressive number of them and they’re present on almost every side of the unit. On the front you’ll find the volume control that also is the on/off switch accompanied by the on/off buttons for bass boosts (XBass) and crossfeed (3D). The volume control seems quite sturdy but like most other devices with an analogue volume control there’s channel imbalance at low listening levels (very low to be fair). The number of settings to adjust the power from the iDSD to suit your IEM’s/headphones makes this pretty much a no issue though. Underneath the unit there’s a switch for choosing between pre-amp or DAC direct output from the RCA output. You’ll also find the “IEM match” switch here which you can use to fine tune the noise floor/gain with sensitive IEM’s. There are three settings available: High Sensitivity, Ultra Sensitivity or Off. I’m not sure that I’m that thrilled about the placement on these buttons since I more than once managed to change the IEM match level by incident by moving the unit, adding some rubber feet that’s high enough should

eliminate this though. On the left side (facing from the front) you'll find a red switch for setting the "Power Mode" and you can choose between Eco, Normal or Turbo. In addition you'll also find the switch for changing the polarity and choose which digital filter you'd like to use ((bit perfect, minimum or standard are available). On top of the unit as well as on the right side there are no switches at all, so still room for more in the next revision ;). Puh, that's it when it comes to options to make the iDSD work as good as possible with your preferences and/or IEM's/headphones. Although the Micro iDSD doesn't feel very heavy the overall build still feels solid enough for a desktop unit.

The Micro iDSD offers one male USB A digital audio input and one separate female USB A charging port to take advantage of the fact that the iDSD is also able to act as a powerbank and charge your phone or other devices. It's the first time I've come across a device like this with a male USB input but I can surely see why iFi has chosen this solution, the USB connection is very sturdy and much more so than I've experienced on any device with the regular female input. Also located on the back you'll find a combined optical in/coax in or out combined connection (this socket will work as a coaxial out when USB audio in is connected) as well as the RCA output. Further there's a 3.5mm input on the front for line in together with the 6.3mm headphone output socket.

As you can tell there's almost no limit to the ways you can make the iDSD suit you or your equipment the best way. Only thing I can actually think of that I miss is a balanced output. Apart from that this is a very complete and versatile unit, probably the best I've come across so far in this aspect.

The Micro iDSD works very well with Android when connected with an OTG cable and using USB Audio Player Pro (UAPP) as music player. Although Android and sound does not have a great reputation the Micro iDSD have worked with every Android device I've tried it with (sometimes with the help of UAPP). Battery drain is quite low when running on battery and from testing with my LG G3 it seems to be 10-15% per hour. To make sure you do run it on battery turn on the iDSD **before** you connect it to your Android device, if not it'll take its power from the device draining it very fast.

The Micro iDSD uses an Xmos USB receiver that is supposed to work with Apple devices using the Camera Connection Kit (CCK) but unfortunately I haven't been able to test this myself.

The Micro iDSD support all popular file formats for audio up to DSD512 and 32bit/768kHz files.



The accessories included are:

- 1 USB A female to USB B female cable
- 1 USB A female to USB A male cable
- 1 USB A to USB B adapter
- 2 rubber bands (to attach it to a phone or other transport)
- 4 small rubber feet (to attach the main body to the floor)
- 1 rubber sheet (to place between the iDSD and another device)
- 1 RCA to RCA cable
- 1 Optical to 3.5 mm optical adapter
- 1 3.5 mm to 3.5 mm cable

- 1 3.5 to 6.3 mm adapter
- 1 pouch (to store it in when not in use or travelling)



**The specs:**

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I've used the Micro iDSD for the last couple of weeks and my unit has played for well over 100 hours.

**Demo list:**

[Click to show!](#) (Click to show)

**Sound impression:**

The first thing that I thought when I started to listen to the iFi Micro iDSD was that it reminded me quite a bit of the spacious and airy presentation that I've heard with the Mojo not too long ago.

Bass extension and quality is very good and I don't feel as if there's any noticeable roll off in the lower frequencies. Mid- and upper-bass is also well controlled contributing to the sense of space and airiness that the iFi Micro iDSD produces. Despite the very good quality and quite good bass presence I can't help feeling that the iDSD lacks some richness through the whole frequency range.

The midrange is liquid and smooth with plenty of details. The iFi Micro iDSD sounds very linear through all frequencies and the midrange is no exception. Nothing stands out and it sounds natural and makes a relaxing listening experience. If anything I'd say it's a bit on the dry side.

The treble is well extended, airy and smooth. Once again I find myself wishing for a touch more substance and body but the overall impression is still that the iDSD has a very nice and non-fatiguing treble presentation.

The overall presentation has great soundstage width and a very nice balance from the lowest to the highest notes. Despite this I still feel that there's some richness and timbre lacking making the sound a bit on the dry side. To me this makes the iDSD work very well with headphones and IEM's that's rich and full in their character.

As already mentioned the iDSD does also offer a lot of tuning options for those interested in that. This is really not my thing and to be honest I can't hear much difference between the different digital filter options (this is the case with most of my amp/DAC's that has got this so I won't hold it against the iDSD). When it comes to the 3D setting I personally find it a bit artificial sounding and had it off for most of the time. The Xbass on the other hand is actually quite nice in its implementation and I enjoyed it when using earbuds but kept it off otherwise. I do know that other people enjoy these kinds of features a lot more than I do so I won't hold it against the iDSD but rather add it as a positive thing for giving the user more choices which I really appreciate and value.

### **Comparison:**

Please note that the comments in the comparison section are not in absolute terms but in comparison between subject A and B. This means (as an example) that if subject A is found to be brighter than subject B it does not necessarily mean that subject A is bright sounding in absolute terms. I hope this makes sense.

In these comparisons I've been listening through my AKG Q701's.

I've been using the USB input when doing these comparisons. Both units have been hooked up to two different laptops both running Windows 7 with the same settings and I use MediaMonkey as my player of choice.

Both units was connected to a simple switch box through their respectively headphone outputs. This way it's very easy to switch between the sources in minimal time. I also use a simple Android app to volume match the amplifiers so although maybe not perfectly scientifically the result should still be pretty correct.

### **Burson Audio Conductor V2+ (1,499) vs IFI Micro iDSD:**

The V2+ is the heart of my main system and I really love both its features and sound. It's expensive and it's big and heavy (7 kg) but to me it's also a very complete unit that doesn't makes me miss anything in either sound nor features so I'll include it as one of the comparison units for all my \$250+ amp/DAC combo reviews. I'm also very familiar with it.

These two share a lot of treats like a similar amount of air and an equally wide soundstage presentation. Compared to the iFi Micro iDSD the V2+ has a touch richer sound through the whole frequency range, this makes quite a difference to the overall presentation, resulting in the V2+ sounding more dynamic and with better timbre to the notes. It's not a huge difference but an important one in making the V2+ sounding more natural and pair better with a wider variety of headphones. The deepest bass may also be a touch more well-defined on the V2+.

The V2+ of course has some other advantages such as significantly higher power output (4W @32Ohms which is about the double compared to the iDSD), two analogue RCA inputs. In addition it also has a great quality remote control. The iDSD on the other hand has internal battery, is more portable and a much better match for most IEM's.

### **Audinst HUD-DX1 (with Burson Audio V5i op amps, \$469) vs IFI Micro iDSD:**

Compared to the iFi Micro iDSD the Audinst has a more dynamic and slightly less laid back sound. The Audinst is the fuller sounding of the two but its bass is also slightly looser and less well defined. The iDSD is a bit thinner and but also more airy in its presentation. The iDSD does also have a wider presentation while the Audinst has better depth and an overall richer sound.



Feature wise both of these are equipped with a lot of in- and outputs but the iDSD does offer a lot more adjustments such as bass boost, 3D switch, and multiple gain and hiss (reducing) settings. When I reviewed the Audinst HUD DX1 I called it a “Swiss Army knife” offering, the iFi Micro iDSD is actually even more so, not necessarily when it comes to in- and outputs but definitely when it comes to settings and tweaks to make it sound as good as possible with the IEM’s/headphones that you use.

### **Burson Audio Conductor Air (\$499) vs IFI Micro iDSD:**

This two are similar in the way that they both works best when connected to a computer or laptop in my opinion but they can also be used portable (the Air maybe more so) or with your phone or tablet (the iDSD maybe more so) if needed. Compared to the iDSD the Air has a thicker sound while maintaining the same level of details. Layering is noticeable better on the Air while the iDSD has a touch more airiness and wider soundstage. The Air does also have better depth and timbre to the notes and the iDSD does actually feel a bit thin and dry in comparison. In short the Air has more drive while the iDSD is more laid back.

Feature wise the Air loses out by a fair bit though. With its two micro USB inputs (one for digital audio in and one for power) and two outputs (line out and headphones out) it’s no match for the number of inputs and outputs the iDSD offers. The iDSD does also have an internal battery.

For even further comparisons feel free to visit this thread for breakdown between more \$250+ amp/DAC units (this is a work in progress and several other units will follow in the near future).

[http://www.head-fi.org/t/816410/peter123s-250-amp-dac-combo-comparison-thread#post\\_12771442](http://www.head-fi.org/t/816410/peter123s-250-amp-dac-combo-comparison-thread#post_12771442)

### **Matching:**

The output impedance of the headphone out on the Micro iDSD is rated to less than 1Ohm. This means that it should work well with pretty much all low and high impedance headphones and IEM’s available out there.

In this section I’ve tested how some of my favorite headphones but also one earbud and one pair of IEM’s pairs up with the Micro iDSD.

### **AKG Q701 (\$300):**

The Q’s aren’t the best pairing with the iFi Micro iDSD in my opinion. The slightly thin sound on the iDSD makes male vocals lack some weight to sound perfectly natural. After having thoroughly enjoying the Mojo with the Q’s I’d expected the iDSD to work really well with them as well but I’d guess the Mojo is also richer sounding than I remember it .The iDSD has no problem at all to power the Q’s to louder listening levels.

### **Philips Fidelio X2 (\$300):**

The X2's, being quite warm and full by itself, is a great match with the iDSD. It balances the full mid-bass on the X2's in a great way making it sound excellent. The smooth and dry presentation seem to work great with the X2's and although it's not necessarily the best pairing I've heard with the X2's it's definitely one of the better.

**VE Zen 2.0 (\$138):**

The Zen 2.0 is a 300Ohm earbud that I like a lot and tend to use instead of closed headphones. It's also a reliable travel partner for me when I stay in hotels and don't have any full size cans around.

The soft and smooth signature from the Zen 2.0 works OK with the iDSD but nothing more. This pairing lacks some dynamics and richness to be really good for me. A fuller more dynamic signature does suit the Zen's better for my preference. Turning the bass boost on the iDSD helps though and it sounds quite good this way.

**Aurisonics ASG-1PLUS (\$500):**

The ASG-1PLUS is an 110Ohm hybrid IEM (1 DD + 1 BA).

Once again an OK pairing and I like it better than what I did with the Mojo from memory. A bit too relaxed and lacking some depth but still quite an enjoyable listening. Once again I feel that I could have enjoyed a bit better timbre as well as some more dynamics. I'm aware that this is also the nature of the 1PLUS shining through but it's more easily noticed here than with some other pairings.

**Super Audio 6 (\$250):**

The Super Audio 6 (SA6) is a six BA driver Chinese DIY offering. It has a warm, smooth, intimate and mid-centric overall presentation.

The combination of the iDSD and SA 6 is really nice to listen too. The SA6 is very rich sounding by itself and this works really well with the iDSD. The overall sound in this pairing is very enjoyable and once again the iDSD sounds great with a rich sounding pair of IEM's/headphones.

To round off the matching section the signature of the iFi Audio Micro iDSD does make it work better with some headphones and IEM's than others. To me there's no doubt that it sounds the best with rich sounding IEM's and headphones that has great timbre by themselves. That being said it doesn't sound bad with anything I've tried it with (and that's quite a lot). The very low amount of hiss as well as enough power for all my full sized headphones, and not to mention all the available settings, does make it very versatile in practical use.

**Summary:**

The iFi Audio Micro iDSD is truly a remarkable device. It offers more settings and tuning availability and is more usable with a wide range of headphones and IEM's than any other device of this kind that I've come across so far. It also has a great number of connection options combined with a quite neutral and very enjoyable sound signature. I do find it to perform its best with richer sounding headphones and IEM's but that being said I have not come across any pairing where it sounds bad.

Although it's kind of big for being truly portable I'd still recommend anyone looking for a DAC/amp to use in their main system (both head-fi and/or hi-fi), around the house, in hotel rooms or in the office to check out the iFi Audio Micro iDSD .

Audio Quality: 4.5

Design: 4

Quality: 4.5

Value: 5

Features: 5