



Black Label: The Signature Sound Of ifi



Review Details:

Audio Quality

Design

Quality

Value

By [jinxy245](#) Posted 2/6/17

Pros: clarity, power, versatility, build quality

Cons: crowded front panel, questionable filters

It is with great pleasure that I can say that I have been selected to take part in the iFi Micro iDSD Black Label listening tour. My thanks to Lawrence from iFi for helping to organize the USA East leg of the tour. What this means, is that I have 1 week to listen to & evaluate the iFi Micro iDSD Black Label, which is a DAC utilizing a dual core Burr-Brown DSD512/PCM768/2xDXD chip and headphone amplifier. Although I am very grateful to be able to participate in this tour, I receive no compensation other than the joy of listening in the comfort of my own home, and the following review is my honest opinion. This is my 1st ever review of a DAC/amp, so please bear with me as I try to hit all the pertinent points.

I'll start with a little about myself. I'm pushing 50 and have less than perfect hearing (50 is pushing back). I've been a music lover for as long as I can remember, and I learned to listen a little more critically during the few years I sold audio equipment (and the more I listen, the more I learn). My fascination/infatuation with headphones began about 4 years ago, and has only gotten stronger. I've only recently taken a more serious look at the hardware end of the audio equation, and I'm enjoying the journey. I've never had the opportunity to hear the original iDSD, so I'm particularly glad to spend some time with the Black Label. The majority of my listening was done listening to FLAC, WAV & various MP3s with my Shanling M2, Fiio x3 (1st gen.), Samsung Galaxy S7, or through my HP all in one PC as a source for the iDSD BL. My tastes are fairly eclectic, but my listening centered on classic rock, folk, jazz, classical and various genres of EDM.

First, let's get a couple of ergonomic niggles out of the way. When using the iDSD BL as an amp only, the front panel gets awfully crowded, (especially if you're using a 1/4" to 1/8") adapter making it difficult to adjust the volume or activate/deactivate the Xbass+ or 3D+. Perhaps changing these 2 filters to the right side would alleviate this issue, especially since I didn't find myself using them a whole lot. Occasionally, I found the selectors on the bottom of the unit to change positions during normal movement of the unit from one place to another. In fact, at one point one of the plastic knobs fell off of the selector switch it was attached to (giving me a slight heart attack since I don't own the unit)



Fortunately I found and reattached it without further incident. A set of raised feet would likely prevent this from happening. I also found the volume pot can use a bit more resistance. It was too easy to turn, and although I give kudos for the orange font on the bottom, a volume indicator line that's not black on black would be much more useful (and greatly appreciated).

The iDSD BL came with a generous amount of accessories. There are 2 of the usual rubber bands for stacking, RCA cables for preamplifier use, a storage pouch, USB A to USB B cable, 3.5mm (male x male, for use with the line in) adapter, 3.5mm x 6.35mm adapter (the front panel has a 1/4" headphone out only), an optical by RCA adapter, USB A (female to male) adapter, and a rubber mat. There's really not much more I could say I'd like to see included.

There are so many things this little beast can do I feel a bit overwhelmed trying to cover it all. On the front panel from left to right, you have a 1/4" headphone input jack, Xbass+ control (on/off), 3.5mm audio input jack, "3D+" control (a filter said to create a larger soundstage, also on/off), and the volume control dial.



The right side is bare, except a USB Type 'A' Female connection for charging other devices.



Around the rear there is an “Intelligent In/Out SPDIF Digital Optical/Coax” connection that automatically configures to Coaxial or Optical use, a left & right female RCA output, and a USB Type 'A' male digital input.



Moving along to the left side, there is one portion of the gain control (Eco/Normal/Turbo), a polarity switch (+/-) and filter control (Bit Perfect/Minimum Phase/Standard).



On the bottom of the unit, there are markings to identify all the controls on the sides and back (orange on black is very legible, thank you!)

as well as the other portion of the gain control called IE Match (Off/High Sensitivity/Ultra Sensitivity) and control for the rear RCA outs (Preamplifier/Direct). As I said there is a lot the iDSD BL can do, and given I was only able to spend a week with it, I'll concentrate on what I did use.



There are five power output modes, Eco, Normal and Turbo, High Sensitivity, Ultra Sensitivity. Their website states that the micro iDSD BL is able to have the power and gain dialed-in to "perfectly suit all headphones". In truth, everything from my 64 Audio U6 to my Sennheiser HD600, the ifi easily delivered whatever power was needed. It had copious amounts of power when called for, never needing to go over 11:00 on Normal gain with the HD600, and more often closer to 9:00. I am not the best judge of hiss due to persistent (and tenacious) tinnitus, however without music playing using my U6 on Eco gain, there was no discernible noise whatsoever (YMMV). Obviously, when using the High Sensitivity or Ultra Sensitivity settings, there would

be even less noise. I'll note that I'm not sure what "type" of amp the iDSD BL utilizes, but it never felt more than warm to the touch, even during heavy usage.

I'm a firm believer that amplifiers for the most part (at least amps of the solid state variety) should be the proverbial "Wire with Gain" in that they shouldn't impart much "color" onto the sound. That being said, in reality I think there is always some sonic coloration passed along when creating an audio chain and an amplifier is no different. I'll admit that there is the possibility that I haven't acquired the skill of breaking the sonic influence into bass/mids/treble/soundstage, but I believe that these influences are much more subtle than that. I would go so far as to call an amp full, thin, warm etc. but not much more, especially without having equipment to back up my claims. I find the amp section of the IDSD to fall on the warm side of neutral without sounding thick or muddy in any way. When comparing to other amps I have on hand, my ALO National or the RHA Dacamp1 (On loan for a listening tour, comparing amp only here) I find there to be more similarities than differences. Because they are all so close in fidelity, without volume matching, it'd be impossible to comment on detail retrieval and the like, but the overall impression I had was that they are all warm-ish amps: everything I played sounded full bodied and satisfying.



If you're using a PC and you want to use the iDSD BL as a DAC, you need to download the driver from their website (<http://ifi-audio.com/micro-idsd-ifi-xmos-firmware/>). If you're a MAC lover, it is supposed to be plug-n-play, I believe. Downloading and installing the appropriate driver was more of a challenge than I expected (IOS users, this is your cue to laugh). Every time I downloaded the driver to install, it would literally disappear after a few seconds. It was there, and then it wasn't. To say I was perplexed would be an understatement. I assumed that there must be an explanation, so I read a bit online until I came across one post noting that you may have to turn off your anti-virus. How a driver could look like malware is beyond my computer knowledge, but someone figured it out, and I'm glad they did. I turned off my Norton, and we were back in business. Once the driver was downloaded, and the ifi took over DAC duties, the synergy of the DAC/amp combo became readily apparent.

Since the front panel does get crowded once the line in is being used, I mostly opted to use it through the Coaxial input or as a DAC/amp. The coax from my Fiio or Shanling sounded terrific, with plenty of detail and space, definitely a step up from the line out IMO. The iDSD BL is unwieldy, but is indeed portable enough to move from room to room, or to take with you for listening while writing in a coffee shop or other stationary activity. This was quite welcome if I didn't feel like being tied to my computer to listen, or wanted to continue my listening session elsewhere if it was getting noisy. The iDSD BL did pair easily to my Samsung Galaxy S7, and though there was no faulting the sound quality, it was awkward at best given the size difference. Again, if being used while stationary, it wouldn't be a big issue, but it's not really a portable solution.



I do think most people will opt to use this primarily as a DAC/amp, either on a desktop, or portably with a laptop. If I were to do a blind test, I would be very hard pressed indeed to distinguish between the coax & the USB, at least with my current sources, and I think that's a very good thing since I enjoyed the iDSD BL so much either way. Again, without a proper A/B test I don't feel confident enough to give a definitive answer as to which one is better, but I am inclined to say the DAC in the iDSD BL would be the superior choice. It definitely has a synergy with the amp section, and benefited from being fed higher bitrate files without being too unforgiving of MP3s. I could (and did) listen to this for hours, enjoying every minute.

Moving on to the filters, I'll start by saying, I'm not a huge fan. When testing the polarity switch and filter control, I heard no appreciable difference at all, regardless of the position, so I left them in positive & Bit Perfect respectively. There is a possibility that they would have a greater effect on speakers if the DAC was used through the line out, but I never got the chance to test it that way. I don't know if the Xbass+ and 3D+ switches are considered filters, but even though I didn't use them much, I did hear an effect on the audio when using them. The Xbass+ seemed to have an effect primarily on the sub bass, whereas the 3D+ is intended to be a spatializer of sorts, to widen the perceived soundstage. I found the 3D+ to effect the treble mostly and added some "grain" up top. I mostly left these off, but did occasionally find them helpful when used together as a sort of loudness control, adding a bit of clarity for low level listening. My personal

preference (and recommendation to RHA) would be for the iDSD BL to have an adjustable treble and bass control, +/- 5 or so, which seems to me would be a more universally useful tool.

Since fortune smiled upon me and I happened to have the RHA Dacamp L1 (also priced \$549 USD) on hand at the same time, it seems only appropriate that I give my impressions of both. Build quality between the two is about on par, with the RHA being just a tad more robust overall IMO. The RHA also has the smaller more portable form factor: it's smaller in every dimension. The RHA has a balanced headphone output as well, but it's a 4 pin mini XLR input, which seems to only be compatible with their own headphone the CL1 Ceramic (at least I don't know of any other headphone using that connection). Furthermore, the benefits of using that connection was not readily apparent...it sounded just about the same when used single ended or balanced (reviewer Brooko did record measurements that seem to back this up). The RHA does have bass/treble controls (+9/-3 for both) and 3 gain levels, but the iDSD BL has 5 gain levels, Xbass+, 3D+ and a preamp output. They both can be used to charge a dying cellphone, have about the same battery life/charge time and have digital inputs (coaxial and optical for the ifi, optical for the RHA). I'd say all the bells and whistles come down to a matter of preference, and I'd give RHA a slight advantage being more portable. Ergonomically, there isn't too much to complain about in either case. The biggest problem with the ifi is a somewhat crowded front panel, on the other hand the volume wheel RHA chose, while having better resistance than the ifi, is much harder to control...it steps up in volume more rapidly and is awkward to turn. Sound quality is where the rubber meets the road, as they say, and sonically I'd say it would be a matter of preference. Power output seems comparable overall, with the ifi being more versatile (at least 5 different gain levels). While I find both of these to be on the warm side, I'd say that the ifi is more on the analytical side of warm, while the RHA sounds a touch smoother. These are not night and day differences, and there was no clear sonic winner for me. I'd honestly be more than happy to have either of these in my audio chain. I lean slightly toward the ifi, simply because my DAPs utilize coaxial outputs and I could see myself using that often, but that could easily change with a DAP upgrade.

I am truly sorry to see the iDSD BL leave. In my opinion, except for some small niggles, ifi has done a great job with the iDSD BL. It's well built, very versatile, has plenty of power on tap, and sounds fantastic. The price is a bit high, but you do get a lot for your money. My thanks again go to Lawrence and ifi. After spending a week with the iDSD, I can definitely recommend checking it out if you're in the market for a DAC/amp. It is definitely worth a listen.