

# Arcam irDAC2

*When little DACs Grow Up...*



# Arcam irDAC2

*When we reviewed the Arcam irDAC at the end of the summer of 2015, we knew that it had been on the market for quite some time. Arcam is not the kind of company that will launch a completely 'new and improved' product line every 8 months, but we figured that it would not take another couple of years before an successor would come. Still, when the new irDAC2 was announced early 2016, it came as a little surprise to us. The improvements and changes that Arcam implemented into the new model were another surprise. We received one of the first production samples to give it a very good look and - of course - an even better listen.*





# irDAC2 vs irDAC

Since we had an 'old' irDAC still in use in our listening room, the choice to do a side-by-side review was easily made. On the outside there have been some major changes. The minimal, if not somewhat subdued but nice design of the irDAC has been replaced with a more rounded, detailed and altogether fancier design. What we didn't mind at all, by the way, the irDAC2 is a stunner. On top of the small but sturdy casing are four little knobs for source select (+ and -) and volume (+ and -). On the front we find a small plate of high gloss aluminum in which the receiver for the IR-remote and the 3.5mm stereo headphone output are mounted. And no corners were cut there, the headphone output of the irDAC2 is connected to exactly the same amplifier circuit as the one in the Arcam A49 flagship integrated amplifier. The back panel also holds some surprises. The irDAC2 has a fixed and a variable analog output, so that you can connect it directly to a pair of active loudspeakers or a power amplifier. There are two coaxial digital inputs, two optical (Toslink) digital inputs and a USB input. Which is no longer switchable between USB 1.1 and 2.0 by the way, but considering the limitation of the former to a sampling rate of 48kHz, we understand that decision. Only



Windows 10 users need to download and install a new set of drivers, which is only a small price to pay for being an early adapter. Users of older Windows operating systems and OS X are okay. No additional drivers needed for USB. The last thing we noticed on the back was the socket for the antenna that is included in the accessory box. It is meant for the reception of (aptX®)Bluetooth signals, the new and exciting function that source-led on the far right of the curved faceplate.



# Listening to the irDAC2

For those who are really interested in the technical construction of the irDAC2; there is more than enough information on the Arcam website. The one thing, however, that we do need to address here is that the ESS Sabre DAC-chip of the irDAC2 receives a digital signal that has been thoroughly cleaned of jitter by a sophisticated buffering circuit that the Arcam engineers put a lot of effort into. Something that really shines through in the cleaner and more coherent sound. And with that we have reached what we think is the most interesting part: how will the irDAC2 compare to the irDAC - that received a very favorable review from us last year. To find out, we set up both converters side by side and added the appropriate iFi iPower power supply, an AudioQuest Carbon USB cable and AudioQuest Yukon interconnects. A small remark about the wall-wart: the one that comes with the

Arcam is quite good, but the iFi iPower still helps to make the sound more relaxed, with more resolution and spaciousness. So let's call that a meaningful upgrade for later, shall we?



We listened to two tracks that were quite different from each other. On one hand the stunningly beautiful and completely acoustical recording of 20.17, from the album *Trance Frenz* by Ólafur Arnalds and Nils Frahm (the 24/96 Master Version) and on the other hand *Portal Spillage*, from the album *Forward Escape* by Tipper. We first listened to the irDAC and it still managed to surprise us with its powerful and joyous sound, but when we switched to the irDAC2 it was clear that there were substantial differences. In favour of the irDAC2, that is. The very intimate session in which piano-giants Frahm and Arnalds improvised for one consecutive evening and night was recorded in its entirety, with just a minimal setup of microphones, and the best parts of those sessions were selected to make an album. The track title 20.17 is the time at which the recording was made, not the duration. The irDAC2 gave a much greater sense of being in the room with the musicians. The space around the instruments was a lot easier to hear, and to our pleasant surprise it turned out to be a lot bigger than we had imagined. Meanwhile, the focus of the instruments got sharper. The 'inner structure' of the sound of the two different piano's was really easy to distinguish. We

could hear the wood of the piano cabinets, but also the floor, footsteps, fingers on the keyboards, felt-tipped hammers against strings and the inner mechanics of the pianos. Dynamics became more nuanced, there were more levels between soft and loud, so to speak, and the sound as a whole became more liquid and a tad more neutral, with greatly improved realism as a result. In any case, it was pretty astounding to find out how much more information could still be found in the recording.



Tipper is a very different kind of music. Completely electronic and filled to the brim with effects. With this music, the original irDAC was very enjoyable. The kickdrum that 'drops' 22 seconds into the first track was fast and colorful, surprisingly deep and with a lot of oomph. The small percussive sounds that whirl in and out of the sound image gave a nice semi-3D illusion. But with the irDAC2, the spaciousness got bigger and the low end became a lot cleaner. While the irDAC sounded really 'nice' in that respect, we found that the irDAC2 was a lot more 'grown up'. The accuracy of the timing got better as well, and that made the music even more transparent and especially more 3D.



So...

Our friends at Arcam have taken a big step forward with the irDAC2. It has - while mostly in character - really grown. The sound has become more mature, compared to the (still pretty good) irDAC. More refined, more neutral, but with the same scrumptious drive that can make listening to music such a great pastime. When you think of it for a while, you have to reach the conclusion that the sound quality you can expect from a modern da-converter in this price range is quite baffling. On top of that, the new bluetooth functionality makes it a breeze to connect most of your portable devices to your hifi. And that will only add to the joy of using the irDAC2. Small size, great performance? Can we say that? Because we truly think so...





# Extra information

For more information about the Arcam irDAC2 usb da-converter and headphone amp, please visit our art`s excellence webstore:

Arcam irDAC2 usb da-converter

Spotify

Nils Frahm en Ólafur Arnalds - Trance Frendz

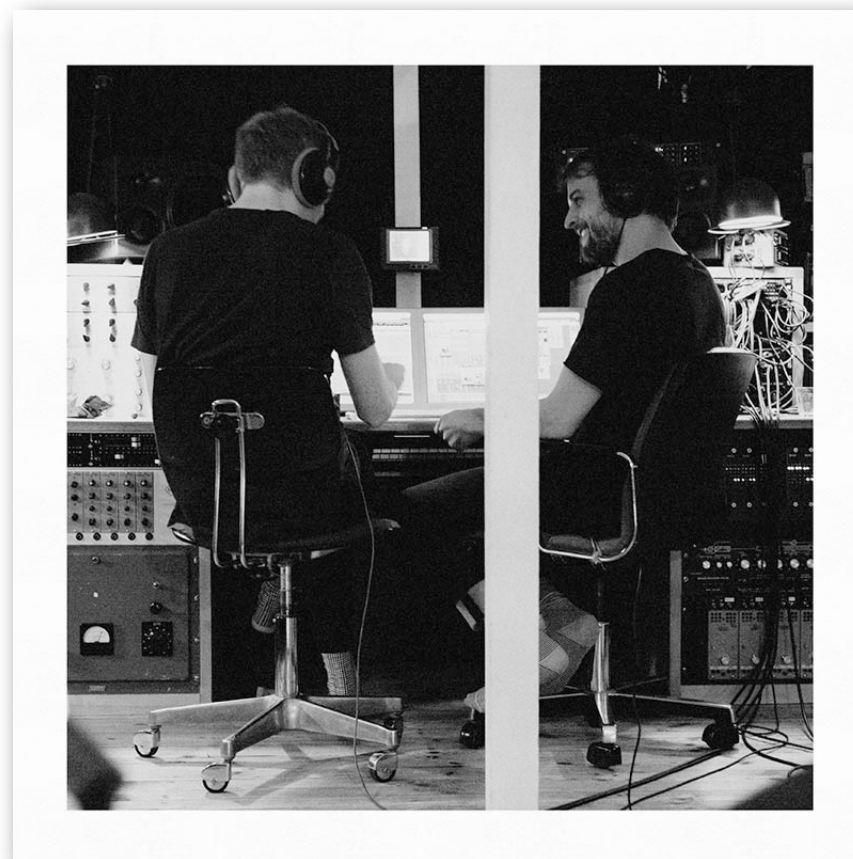
Tipper - Forward Escape

iTunes

Tipper - Forward Escape

Tidal

Nils Frahm en Ólafur Arnalds - Trance Frendz



# art`s excellence

© 2016 art`s excellence - [www.artsexcellence.com](http://www.artsexcellence.com)

This document belongs to art`s excellence and may not be published without our permission.