

iFi Micro iDSD

Portable High End



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Earlier this year, when I was reviewing the tiny Nano iDSD by iFi, I got so excited about the musical capabilities of that very affordable digital trinket that I ordered one for myself. Not necessarily because I needed it, but because 'I wanted it'. When the early announcement came of a bigger (a relative when it comes to iFi) Micro iDSD some three months ago, I got very curious because it would undoubtedly sound even better and have even cooler features.

*Now that I have listened intensively to the **iFi Micro iDSD** for almost a week, I can see my piggy-bank getting nervous...*



Layout and Connections

The iFi Micro iDSD is actually five appliances in one. In no particular order: it is a very comprehensive (portable) headphone amplifier, a USB to S/PDIF converter (coaxial and optical), a preamplifier, a USB da-converter that can handle a staggeringly high resolution for both PCM and DSD and last but not least a portable charger for your smartphone or tablet. All combined in a compact, perfectly finished aluminum housing. For the full specifications, please refer to the [iFi website](#), where you can download the full manual and lots of relevant software.

Fitting so many functions (and more...) in one device requires a lot of skill from the design-team. First of all, everything should fit in there, but secondly it should be easy and intuitively to operate by the user. And iFi did very well on that. The iFi Micro iDSD has most of its connectors on one side (except for the 6,3 mm headphone output and the 3,5 mm mini-jack input) and the control buttons on the other side. That makes it a lot easier to place in a hifi rack than the Nano iDSD, which has an 'in-line' design with the input on one side, and the output on the other. On the back of the Micro iDSD

you find the combined electrical/optical digital in/out connector (the software in the iDSD detects what gets connected and switches accordingly), the analog stereo outputs and the USB input. This is where iFi has made a surprising choice. Just about every USB da-converter that I know uses the square-shaped USB B input (a printer connection) but iFi uses USB A, probably to emphasize the portable nature of the Micro iDSD. You need an Apple CCK (Camera Connection Kit) or an Android OTG (On-The-Go) connector to connect your phones and tablets to the iFi Micro iDSD. These connectors are not included in the package, but a lot of other adapter cables, plugs and even a USB B adapter that you need when you already have a good quality USB cable for home use, are.



As a Headphone Amp

To start the review, I use the Micro iDSD to listen to some headphones. To get a good impression, I use both my Ultimate Ears Triple-Fi in-ears, as well as my 'big' AKG K 701. The iDSD's ability to adapt to almost any pair of headphones is extensive. On the side of the cabinet, you'll find a red slider-button with three positions: one for high and one for medium sensitive headphones (called 'eco' and 'normal') and one for the hungriest of hungry among headphones ('turbo') like some planar models. The built-in battery will last you 14, 10 and 6 hours respectively, with each of these settings. At the bottom of the cabinet, there's another button for fine-tuning the most sensitive in-ears, that brings down the volume another 6dB. Both my Ultimate ears and my AKG sounded best with the slider on the side set to 'eco' and the one on the bottom to 'normal'. With these settings, the range of the volume control was nice and wide, and the music loud enough. The sound you get is powerful and deep, with a lot of dynamics and detail. The effect of the X-Bass switch is reassuringly subtle and with most modern music I preferred not to use it at all. But 'your mileage may vary' depending on your taste in music and the headphones you use. The 3D Holographic Sound ac-

tually puts the music more 'outside' of my head, making it sound as if I was listening to a good set of hifi loudspeakers.



If you want to use the iFi Micro iDSD 'on the road' you'll need the appropriate USB adapter (Apple CCK or Android OTG) to connect your phone or tablet to the Micro iDSD. When you have an iPhone running iOS7, you can also listen to Hi-res music, even DSD. The first thing you have to do is download the [Onkyo HF Player](#) from the App Store and then buy the in-App HD extension (€8,99). When you're done, open iTunes to load all kinds of music onto your iPhone. DSD has to be in separate .dsf files; the Onkyo Player will not play ISO files. Finally, you set the output format of the Onkyo Player to DoP (DSD over PCM) from the settings menu and you're ready! The sound quality of the Bach Cantatas Vol. 43 by the Bach Collegium, conducted by Masaaki Suzuki is nothing short of spectacular. Even when the Micro iDSD is connected to the big sound system in my living room.

As a DA-Converter

By using it to play DSD files from my iPhone, the iFi Micro iDSD found its way to my big audio system as the 'resident da-converter'. It replaced my cherished Nano iDSD, which would shed an interesting light on the performance of both units. When you want to use the Micro iDSD as a stand-alone da-converter, and bypass its internal preamplifier, you can use a slider on the bottom of the housing to lock the output volume to normal line level. The volume control has a 'click' at the very beginning of its range, by which it doubles as an on/off switch. When you lock the output like I just did, it makes no difference to what volume position you set the rotary knob, it's either on or off. I used the supplied adapter to connect my MacBook Pro to the Micro iDSD with my Audioquest Carbon USB cable, and I used my Audioquest Sidney interconnect to hook up the iDSD to my amplifier. When you use the iDSD as a resident da-converter, be aware that there are two 'modes' to operate the Micro iDSD, depending on the start-up sequence. When the Micro iDSD is already switched on when you connect the USB cable, it runs on its internal battery. It will still recharge, by the way, so I doubt that this is a good thing to do, keeping the longevity of the battery in mind. When the Micro iDSD is switched on after you connect the USB cable, it runs on 5V USB power from the USB source. Now for all you audiophiles out there who think that it will sound better on battery power: it doesn't. When it runs on USB power, it sounds slightly more colorful and has more drive. Getting the start-up sequence right is especially important when you use an external power source like the iFi iUSB Power. You don't buy that just to recharge the iDSD's battery with very clean power, do you?

The sound quality I got from my MacBook (using JRiver as a Player) was phenomenal. I threw every Hi-Res file-format I could find at it (24/192 PCM, DSD64, DSD128 and DXD) and with all formats it performed at least two classes better than my Nano iDSD. Of course, that was to be expected, but it's always exciting to see (erm...hear...) whether there are certain family-resemblances. Well, they're there. The warm sound of the Nano iDSD, that seems to be tuned to timbre rather than resolution which made me fall in love with it in the first place, is there for sure. But the Micro iDSD takes it many steps further. Because the Micro iDSD basically has the iFi iPurifier built into it, the USB input is galvanically isolated. And that gives you a much more relaxed and at the same time authoritative sound, with 'more black between the instruments'. An album that is really good for determining sound quality is *When The World Was One* by Matthew Halsall & The Gondwana Orchestra. As far as I'm concerned, Halsall and his mini-Big Band have made the jazz-album of 2014. The remarkable arrangements contain a lot of 'exotic' instruments like all kinds of flutes and harp, and the recording quality (mine's the 24/88,2 version) is impeccable. Through the Micro iDSD, the instruments in the slow and brooding track *A Far Away Place* are firmly placed and clearly separated from each other, in a huge bubble of sound in which the acoustics of the recording space are clearly distinguishable. The timbre of each instrument is very life-like and natural, and there still is that sweetness in the sound that I really like. Listening fatigue is something that will not occur with the iFi Micro iDSD.



Filtering

A brief word about the switchable filter that's built into the Micro iDSD. For PCM replay, iFi recommends you use the Bit Perfect setting (with DSD, the setting is called 'Extreme') which lends a certain 'distinction' and an extreme neutrality to the sound. For sharp sounding and otherwise sub-standard recordings, this may well be the best setting, but overall I preferred the Minimum Phase setting (with DSD: 'Extended'). It made the sound more lively and colorful, with more drive. And since my Nano iDSD lacks the Bit Perfect setting anyway, I decided to use the Minimum Phase setting throughout the review. And that to really good fun, I can assure you!



Final Thoughts

If you just look at the price of 499 euros - at least within the iFi range - it's no small amount. And in the young and rapidly growing market for compact DSD da-converters, the competition is fierce. But if you take all the other brilliant features of the iFi Micro iDSD into consideration, the competition falls behind. As a portable da-converter annex headphone amplifier, the iFi Micro iDSD gives you true High-End performance. As a stand-alone da-converter, in a computer-audio setup or even a large hifi set, it's also worth every penny. A similarly priced DSD converter from an esteemed semi-professional brand (which I will not name here) got a run for its money, and completely lacks portability.

Compared to the Nano iDSD the Micro is better in every respect. Not by a mile, but not by a nose either. The extra cost is fully justified. But at the same time, you can also conclude that the iFi Nano iDSD is a pretty darn good little machine too. At least, that's what I have been constantly telling myself when I was listening to the Micro iDSD. The greediness I felt after the review of the iFi Nano iDSD has returned with the iFi Micro iDSD. Fortunately, I have to return it soon...



Music and information

Music link on Spotify

[Matthew Halsall - When The World Was One](#)

Webstore

For more information, visit our art's excellence webstore:

[iFi Micro iDSD usb da-converter](#)

YouTube

[iFi Micro iDSD - What is it?](#)

[How to add DSD files to your iPhone?](#)



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