

# A portable DAC for < £100? James Palmer tries Nu Force's uDAC3.

BY JAMES PALMER ON 05/01/2016

As some of you may remember, I reviewed the Chord Hugo about a year ago. This was my my first adventure with DSD files, and portable DACs. The idea seemed a little odd to me, but having now lived with the Hugo (on my desk at work, working as a headphone amp while I perform the more everyday tasks of my job) I really wouldn't be without one. Especially as I can throw it in my lap top bag and enjoy it's benefits while stuck in the Premier Inn on the East-Lancs road.

The Hugo, however, is an expensive treat. And infrequent users would struggle to justify the cost.. So what is available at the entry level, and is it worthwhile?



This offering from Nu Force is the third iteration of a now well established product, but entirely new to me.

Out of the box, my first thought was "is that it?" it's absolutely tiny, no bigger than two boxes of matches.. not much bigger than one. This really is an ultra-portable DAC and yet manages to pack in a Coax out (to act as a SPDIF bridge) and analogue outputs at line level. There's a mini USB socket and a small volume knob on the front. Power comes in via the USB.



The DAC itself is a 24bit/96kHz converter with drivers available for your PC or MAC which will take your 24/192 AIFF or WAV files squeeze them into a PCM suitable for the uDAC. So the high-res claims are to be taken with something of a pinch of salt in terms of output. On the upside, you won't need to re-rip to lower res to get the best out of the uDAC.

The DAC works extremely reliably in all sorts of applications, from simple plug and play with my lap top and

PC to using it along side my FIO X3. It never caused me any technical problems. It just works. Such a rare thing in Computer audio I find, and not to be underestimated given the trouble some items have caused me in the past.

Sound quality was really rather good at this price point, and above. I listened to it back-to-back with the Chord Hugo, using my B&W P7 headphones and some Hi-Res Wavs I have here for such duties. Steely Dan's Aja being the main source for this review. I think the comparison of a £1300.00 Chord Hugo and a £99.00 nu-force DAC maybe unfair to some, but it did highlight some real strengths of the uDAC , in that the uDAC was never that far behind.. It did make me question the £1200.00 price difference at times.

At it's best the uDAC is a punchy and engaging listen, which doesn't quite deliver the tonality in the bass that the Hugo delivers and doesn't quite grab as much detail, but still makes a very worthwhile upgrade to a laptop or PC. The over-all sound is very enjoyable, on the peppy side of smooth, yet still refined. You do feel that this is a quality product which is an engaging listen and given it's price and portability it felt like a massive bargain.

Where the Hugo wins (as it should in this unfair contest) is the over-all depth of detail and control it offers. You feel there is more power available to the drivers (there may well be) from the much bigger unit. However, turn the neat little volume knob up a touch on the uDAC and the differences become far less obvious. With a bit of grunt behind it, it really sings. The opening of Black Cow on Aja has real punch and presence, it set me off in a good mood. And while I felt the bass could have smoother I was extremely pleased. A nice sparkle in the upper range and honest tonality to the mids, which belies everything about it. When compared to plugging the cans directly into the laptop the difference was (cliché alert) night and day.



Will I be selling the Hugo, buying a uDAC and enjoying the £1200 difference in another way? Maybe.. it's certainly a thought I've entertained more than once during this review. It's more portable, less fiddly, and the differences in SQ are small.. the law of diminishing returns has been highlighted well by the uDAC3. Well built, well thought out and very enjoyable to listen to. All up a cracking product.

If you listen to music at work or at home using cans directly into your PC or laptop, then you absolutely MUST buy the uDAC3. For £99.00 you get a big boost in sound quality. And if you are looking to downsize or just for something to have as a travel companion, then you can honestly look no further. At £100.00 it's almost an impulse buy, and one you won't regret!

There's more blurb and tech info here <http://www.optoma.co.uk/soundproduct/uDAC3> plus the opportunity to buy online. If you do and you hate it, I'll buy you a beer at Scalford! That's how confident I am in this bargain.