

## Zodiac Silver DAC by Antelope Audio – Classic Review

BY AUDIOHEAD – MARCH 28, 2013



The Antelope Audio Zoidac Silver DAC (\$1,900) is perhaps one of the most costly all-in-one combinations I have reviewed as of late, and it's not even the flagship unit of the family. But it is a true DAC-meets-headphone-amplifier desktop solution. While the design no doubt drives a DAC first, amp second mentality, the inclusion of a separate volume knob just for the headphone output lets us know there is a little more intent at play here.

Antelope is known almost exclusively for their consumer and professional D/A and A/D converters and clocks. I even caught a glimpse of the new flagship piece at [last year's RMAF], the Rubicon Atomic AD/DA Preamp. Antelope has a great eye for unique design when the situation merits it. The Zodiac silver is the least expensive of the series of three DACs focused a little tighter on the enthusiast crowd. Move further up the line and you do see some notable inclusions, especially in the connection department. The silver version does feature almost everything an average audiophile would need with the exception of digital outputs and analog inputs. The former allows you to have the Zodiac act as a USB to S/PDIF converter, and the latter would allow you to isolate the headphone amplification section or increase versatility in pre amp situations. Both connections are available in the step up "Black" version in addition to an AES/EBU digital input. It is noteworthy to mention that each of the plentiful digital inputs on the Zodiac silver reach up to 24/192 resolutions.

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All-in-all the Zodiac behaves like a real piece of audiophile equipment from this price range. The unit emits the familiar "physical click" sound when the input signal is changed. The on board lights and display are very appealing and the overall construction feels first rate. Even the status light blinks white whenever it enters standby mode, all nice pieces of product "polish". I really enjoy a visible readout of input resolutions, the information is soothing in a slightly neurotic way. Throughout the review process I was even subjected to a few surprises from source material via the revealing little red on black display. The Zodiac features variable outputs to both balanced and unbalanced connections should you want to drive powered speakers or even go straight to a power amplifier, in which case the display also doubles as a reference for volume levels. A solid large knob controls the output of the analog feed, while a separate smaller knob determines the headphone power. The headphone amplifier proved to be enough to drive a pair of Audeze LCD-3s to sufficient ranges. With some softer recordings I was able to get up near the upper registers of the dial, however the output should deliver optimal results for everything but the most hard-to-drive cans. The almost perfectly square design of the casing conserves on the overall real estate it takes up on your desk. While it doesn't make it ideal for rack mounting, it does stand out among the throngs of traditional DVD-player shapes out there. Did I mention I like the display?



Aesthetics aside, how does she sound in three words? Focused, precise and colorless. Utilizing a variety of different amplifiers and setups, I found the Zodiac does deliver on its promise of clear resolving sound. The headphone amplifier was a real delight and was able to go toe-to-toe with many of the separates I had on hand. ALO's new portable [International] headphone amp combined with the balanced output of the [AlgoRhythm Solo-dB] delivers quite an appealing offering to computer audio. Even though the pair still top out at a lower total cost, I was impressed with how the Zodiac kept up with the both of them. While the International may have a slight extension on the very lowest edge of frequency response, the upper end air and grain-free presentation of the Zodiac headphone output was undeniable, a very pleasant surprise indeed. The Antelope headphone out was an excellent representation of how detailed and nuanced the DAC section of the unit turned out to be. If anything, I would say the headphone output leaned slightly towards the analytical compared the sonic smoothness of the internal chip. Connected into a myriad of situations, the Zodiac kept up with everything I threw at it with style and grace.

While it offered outstanding results through the optical digital input from the [Oppo BDP-105] as a source, once again I noticed even better output from the coaxial connection within the same relationship. The Oppos analog outputs present a slightly different signature that is somewhat unique to them. The Zodiac translation reigns in along the more colorless, further complimenting its transparency and even-handed presentation.

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Is the rule of diminishing returns at play here? Sure. At some level on that non-linear curve the changes and improvements reach the point where they no longer beg for your attention, you have to beg for theirs. You have to listen to what to listen for. Variations cease to jump out at you and you have to hunker down and focus. But if you can hone your sound across all components in the chain, then the benefits really start to take hold, if even in only more nuanced ways.

The Zodiac is fancy; it even comes with decent complementary cables to get you started. But fancy does cost money, and those funds aren't always relative to sonic improvement. Not that all aspects of product development don't have their place, mind you. It's just more of a precursor to the inevitable knee jerk response of "How can a DAC cost almost \$2k?" While enthusiasts with the means may not bat an eye at the price tag, the Zodiac silver does start to tread around the evolving line between the loudspeaker high end and head-fi sensibilities. Zodiac has a top performer on its hands with this little square unit, both in terms of DAC output and desktop audio headphone solutions. If you are in the market for a product in this range, an audition with the Antelope should be one of your top priorities.

On Amazon: <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00A92Y528>

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**Steven** · a year ago

Hi. So are you saying the Clas Solo -dB + ALO amp combo edges out the Zodiac Silver straight headphone out? Putting aside different target markets and uses, desktop v transportable, connections etc etc.

As my audio savings fund edges towards completion my precise thought has been that the Clas Solo -dB+ amp triple stack plan = a combined desktop dac + amp in cost, circa £1k mark such as the Zodiac Silver

Thanks

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**AudioHead**  Steven · a year ago

My personal preference is the Zodiac out to the International in this case, but there are a lot of things to consider as this is not really an apples to apples comparison, especially when you consider what headphone you are using. But yes, generally speaking, the cost of the combination of the two competes with the Zodiac combination, with the DAC in the Zodiac being my preference by a small margin, and the International being my amp preference by a small margin. But the -dB also does balanced, as does the International i mentioned, that opens up some fun for experimentation as well. I recommend the balanced output from the -dB when possible.

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