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# Audioquest DragonFly Cobalt

£269

## WHAT HI-FI?

★★★★★

lo-fi, purposefully screeching treble remains uncensored and grisly riffs still drag their knuckles along the floor.

You could spend your time analysing the music if you like - the Cobalt makes that easy with its wide-open soundstage and impressive clarity - but Audioquest has not lost itself entirely in the detail, offering still a keen sense of rhythm and expressive dynamic range.

In both senses there is measurable progress. Timing is greatly improved, with beats locking in like puzzle pieces, so much so that it can sometimes leave the DragonFly Red feeling a tad lazy. The Cobalt's hard work is also heard as it belts out grand dynamic shifts before donning its reading glasses to contour those more diminutive quivers.

### A serious performer

The only reason some people might be put off is that the DragonFly Cobalt is a serious performer. It improves on almost every aspect of its older sibling's Award-winning presentation, but with that added insight and maturity comes a slight loss of the fluidity that made the DragonFly Red sound so human.

That doesn't counteract any of the sonic improvements you're getting for your premium outlay, but some people may favour the DragonFly Red's more relaxed temperament.

Our only real complaint is nothing to do with the sound, only the quality of the DragonTail adaptor. However, the sonic return is such that those wishing to use the Cobalt with their USB-C smartphone should still get one and fork out for a new adaptor instead.

If you loved the Audioquest DragonFly Red as much as we did, and you're looking to make the next step up in performance without compromising on size or form, the Cobalt represents something of a no-brainer.

Our only reservation is with the quality of the DragonTail adaptor. It struggles to remain connected to any of the phones we try it with, a combination of loose fitting and the weight of the Cobalt dragging it out when we move.

The most substantial upgrade, though, is evident only when you plug the DragonFly Cobalt in; it's in the performance. Once attached to your laptop or smartphone, and selected as the means of audio output, the DAC's LED will shine one of six colours to indicate sampling rate: red for standby, green for 44.1kHz, blue for 48kHz, yellow for 88.2 kHz, light blue for 96kHz or purple when decoding MQA.

### Cleaning up operation

The Cobalt does wonders in cleaning up our laptop's performance, no matter what kind of file we feed it or whether it's streaming from YouTube, Spotify, Tidal or playing from our hi-res library.

Audioquest claims its new DAC 'strips away fuzz and fog that weren't even noticeable until removed', and we'd have to agree. It is such an incredibly precise rendering that we almost feel duty bound to play our highest resolution recordings through it.

Lines are indelibly drawn round the edges of each instrument, with granular detail on offer to complement the cleanliness and military precision. The Cobalt isn't necessarily concerned with polishing your music, only the lens through which it can be seen: bedroom recordings can still sound intimately

"The Cobalt improves on almost every aspect of its sibling's presentation"

## WHAT HI-FI?

## RATING ★★★★★

### SOUND

★★★★★

### FEATURES

★★★★★

### BUILD

★★★★★

### FOR

- Clean and precise presentation
- Spot on timing and dynamics
- Wide file support

### AGAINST

- Not the most relaxed nature
- DragonTail adaptor fits poorly

### VERDICT

Price has been an attractive feature of DragonFly DACs, but the Cobalt easily justifies the increased cost

**T**he Audioquest DragonFly Cobalt enters the market at a new premium price point for the company's range of portable digital-to-analogue converters, but has the tidiest, clearest and most dynamic presentation we've heard from a unit this small.

The Cobalt is the first DragonFly since 2015, when Audioquest introduced its Black and Red models, and with them Android and iOS smartphone compatibility. In terms of fundamental functionality, we're pleased to report little has changed since then.

These are products whose beauty is born of their simplicity, and whose plug-in-and-play approach to cleaning up the sound from your computer, or (with the included dongle) a smartphone or tablet, is much of the allure. But that isn't to say Audioquest has simply repackaged its cheaper DACs in a different coloured, slightly smoother edged new chassis.

### Significant upgrades

There are elements shared with the multiple *What Hi-Fi?* Award-winning DragonFly Red, including the 2.1v headphone output, bit-perfect digital volume control and MQA renderer, but there have also been a number of significant upgrades.

It begins with a new, more advanced ESS ES9038Q2M DAC chip, with which Audioquest promises not only a clearer but more natural sound, while the PIC32MX274 microprocessor draws less current and increases processing speed by 33 per cent. The improved power supply filtering, meanwhile, is said to increase immunity to wi-fi, Bluetooth and cellular noise.

There are a couple of practical improvements too, namely the 10 per cent smaller enclosure and included DragonTail USB-A (female) to USB-C (male) adaptor for use with the growing number of electronics with connectivity for the latter.