



£399

**A**s well as enhancing your smartphone's sound, portable DACs can boost your laptop's performance away from a mains outlet, or be quickly and conveniently swapped into a hi-fi set-up. Thanks in part to its extensive file support, iFi's neat-looking and solidly constructed xDSD laps up all of the above.

Via its USB input, the xDSD can play PCM files up to 768kHz, and support for DSD goes all the way up to DSD512. Through its 3.5mm coaxial/optical combination input, the ceiling is 192kHz. And there's also aptX Bluetooth for wirelessly sending music to the xDSD from a smartphone or laptop, too.

### Close to the ridge

The xDSD is about the size of a pack of cards, and with its ridged chassis it resembles a sort of pocket-sized, electronic güiro. But while it's tempting to run your fingers over that surface, that temptation is curbed by a metallic finish easily blemished with finger marks.

In the box is a USB-to-USB Type B dongle, as well as an optical-to-3.5mm adapter that fits into the rear combined coaxial/optical input - the only other physical input apart from USB. The micro-USB on the back panel is there simply for charging purposes.

The xDSD can be plugged in, but for portable use or simply to cut down on wires, there's a built-in rechargeable 2200mAh battery that, iFi claims, delivers six to eight hours of playback from a single charge. We clock six hours in testing at fairly high volumes.

Below the micro-USB socket is an LED that indicates battery levels and, like the Chord Mojo, the xDSD uses various colour indicators for file type and size, volume, input and Bluetooth pairing.

The centre of the rotary volume dial is a multi-function control and the small 'input' LED next to it displays current source selection by changing colour.

The rest of the front panel is taken up by a 'settings' button that, when pressed, cycles between 3D+, Xbass+ and 3D+/Xbass+ modes. 3D+ and Xbass+ modes help create a more immersive soundstage and more prominent bass.

### Family resemblance

We've reviewed enough iFi DACs to expect a clean, refined, tonally balanced performance from the xDSD, and there are few surprises in that respect.

Its instantly accessible delivery makes every song in our multi-genre playlist enjoyable. As we play Darius's *Colourblind*, the xDSD laps up the glossy, over-produced presentation, the densely populated midrange open and detailed, and the trebly synth sparkling with a measured enthusiasm.

Not only even-handed from head to toe but also comfortably spacious and reasonably well organised, the iFi is the DAC embodiment of a Sunday afternoon listen to your favourite band.

LCD Soundsystem's *pulse (v.1)* is a synth sonata that relies on a wide, organised canvas and a revealing midrange, and the xDSD keeps everything well tracked and interesting throughout the track's 13-minute duration.

It offers a significant step up from the quality we get sticking headphones straight into our Macbook Air and Macbook Pro's 3.5mm headphone jacks. In a system environment, connected to a stereo amplifier via a 3.5mm-to-RCA cable, the iFi demonstrates a similar character - it's radiantly clean, organised and articulate.

But it could be better. Considering the generally consistent sonic character of iFi's DAC range, it's perhaps not surprising that the xDSD shares the same weakness in rhythmic precision as the company's flagship Pro iDSD.

### Drive and timing

With The National's *Bloodbuzz Ohio*, the drive behind the signature drum pattern is a little off, as is the coordination between it and the sideline cymbals and dripping piano line. Play Rival Consoles' *Phantom Grip* and the instrumental's complex cadence is coherent but not crystalline. The flaw is emphasised only when you compare it with the class-leading Chord Mojo's precise rendition.

Playing Thom Yorke's *Susprium*, there's fluidity, clarity and distinct ends to the piano notes playing through the xDSD. Yorke's haunting vocal has the transparency to transport you to the eerie atmosphere of the horror film the song scores, too.

But once again the Mojo's interpretation is more fluid, with greater dynamic attention on the burden on each piano stroke, and tighter timing between the notes.

The iFi xDSD isn't the only portable DAC to come up against the Chord Mojo's supremacy, and probably won't be the last. But its own triumphs - vast file support, portability and a generally agreeable sound - make it a commendable DAC at this price point, whichever configuration you use it in.

iFi xDSD

## WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

### SOUND

★★★★★

### FEATURES

★★★★★

### BUILD

★★★★★

### FOR

- Vast file support
- Bluetooth input
- Decent battery life
- Clean, well balanced sound

### AGAINST

- Needs greater rhythmic precision
- Lacks class-leading insight

### VERDICT

The iFi xDSD has everything a portable DAC should have, but its sound isn't class-leading