



## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

### iFi Audio ZEN Blue Wireless Bluetooth DAC

By Future Shop



## Blue for You?

The new iFi Zen line currently consists of two alternatives with very different use cases. The Zen DAC reviewed elsewhere does exactly what it says on the tin, the more enigmatic Zen Blue is... a Bluetooth receiver. Not so enigmatic after all maybe, but like the Zen DAC it aims to be the best at what it does at a ridiculously competitive price point. It shares the attractive retro stylings of its partner with an even more uncluttered front panel, just bearing a connection button, a Bluetooth connection status indicator and a sample rate indicator.

So whereas the Zen DAC is all about being tethered to your computer (or even phone!), the Zen Blue is all about being unconnected to its musical source, but usefully connected to your musical playback system. As such it needs a power connection and a 5V switched mode wall-wart is included. You have the option of changing this for an iFi iPower or an iPower 2, which would always be the way to go for optimum fidelity. Also included is a pair of interconnects, and a white plastic antenna, which you really should use, sticking up vertically as per the on-box pictures.

*"the solidity of the Zen Blue, and the simplicity of its operation is a wonderful thing."*

### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

**Chipset:** Qualcomm QCC 5100 Series

**Input:** Bluetooth 5.0 with AAC, aptX, aptX HD, LDAC\*, HWA\* Codec (\* available via future update)

**Output:** Optical/Coaxial, Audio RCA L/R, 4.4 Balanced Lineout

**Power Source:** DC 5V

**Dimensions:** 158 (l) x 100 (w) x 35 (h) mm

**Weight:** 476g (1.05 lbs)

**Price:** £129.00

Accordingly, there is a healthy spread of connection options on the rear of the unit, enabling you to connect to old analogue systems or modern digital systems and AVRs. In common with the Zen DAC, we have the possibility of a 4.4mm balanced output for your XLR breakout cable. (There is strong advice in the getting started card included to NOT connect your balanced headphone setup to this balanced output for fear of damage). Then we have the standard analogue phono outputs, a mechanical switch for the choice of analogue or digital output and then the choice of Toslink or co-axial digital connection.



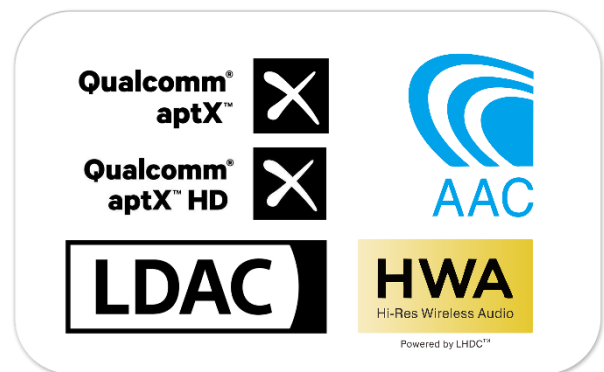
## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

### iFi Audio ZEN Blue Wireless Bluetooth DAC

By Future Shop

The real extent of the flexibility provided by the Zen Blue is in the wide variety of Bluetooth codecs it supports (or will shortly support). As you may well be aware there is frustration in the walled garden of Apple-dom with the limitations we are stuck with given Apple's current insistence on the aged aac Bluetooth codec. This stymies any pretence of getting near to lossless playback capability over Bluetooth. Thankfully other providers are more open and the Zen Blue accommodates the prevalent Apt-X and Apt-X HD options, and a soon-come firmware update will open us up to near-lossless with the possibilities of Sony's LDAC (capable of lossless CD resolution) and HWA (aka LHDC) codecs. At the top of the tree (for some reason) is SBC, which gets the green indicator in the iFi window.

# ZEN Blue



Having tried some of the more plastic Bluetooth receiver options the solidity of the Zen Blue, and the simplicity of its operation is a wonderful thing. On initial use, the sampling rate indicator will flash alternately blue and red until you make the first of your possible 7 different connections. Using an iPhone for that entry-level 'aac' connection is simply a matter of connecting to 'iFi Hi-Res Audio' in the phone's Bluetooth settings. From that point - keeping it simple at one sole connection - on rebooting the device we are greeted with the cheery tones (of, we suspect, the lovely victoria Pickles of iFi Marketing fame) announcing over the audio connection what is connected and via what transport mechanism (so 'aac' in our case).

The codec indicator glows at the entry-level yellow for aac, and the sampling rate indicator shows blue. (It is white for source sampling rates of 88.2 or 96 kHz). All of this stuff is great as there is nothing so annoying for us tweekers as not being told what 'strength' we're currently working at.

At this level of connection sticking on the aac train by using Apple Music can result in a bit of a drab sound. I tried 'A Farewell to Kings' by Rush but it wasn't as inspiring as it should be. Upping the game by selecting New Order's 'Regret' in the new-ish Amazon Music HD

'Ultra HD' format (24/96 to you and me) results in a much more musical rendition, with all of that guitar detail sitting on top of those magisterial bass swoops. The same version of the same track from Qobuz elicited similar results. I guess the moral is, despite the curtailing of the signal due to Apple's whims, higher-quality input results in better output nonetheless. Or if you're wiser than me, just don't use Apple.

**So just as the Zen DAC is the best in the business for cost-effective format coverage, the Zen Blue is a robust and broadly capable Bluetooth interface for your hi-fi that just works. Just what you need.**