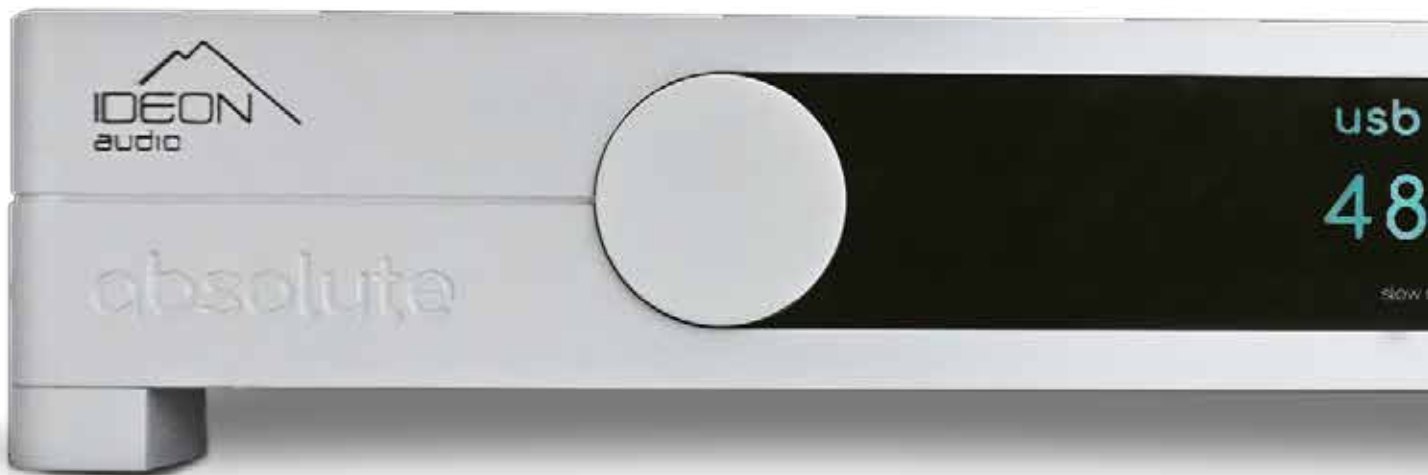


Ideon Audio Absolute DAC

ABSOLUTE DIGITS

REVIEW BY:
HXOS PLUS



A SUPERLATIVE DEVICE CONVERTING DIGITAL FILES TO ANALOGUE RAISES THE BAR FOR SONIC QUALITY TO NEW HEIGHTS! THE 'ABSOLUTE' IS IMMUNE TO THE USUAL INADEQUACIES, ITS PERFORMANCE THREATENS THE CURRENT CHAMPIONS OF THE ULTRA HI-END SCENE!

Ideon Audio launched in 2015 with the affordable Ayazi DAC and put its technology weight to the task reducing USB noise through implementations such as the 3R, with amazing results as we saw in the recent review of the 3R Master Time. This time around we have in for review the Absolute DAC, the company's the top DAC converter, which shows minor changes relative to its original version. The BNC input has been replaced by AES / EBU and there are many more reservoir capacitors in the power supply. The chassis inscriptions are now engraved as befits a product in this supreme price category, and the central control knob is larger and no longer recessed into the chassis. The settings menu has been simplified, e.g. the oversampling option is missing while seven filters for PCM are available. When the source is selected and playing, the activated filter appears at the bottom of the screen; one can change between filters while listening without going into the menu, simply by pressing on the control knob and rotating the knob to reveal the choices. One needs to pay attention in accessing the menu where pressure is required for 2-3s but no more, otherwise the device reverts to stand-by. Moreover, navigating the menu is done with successive pressure on the button while rotation takes you back or forward to other menu choices — which simplifies the process but needs getting used to as the job is usually done the other way around (rotate navigation, pressure selection). Generally speaking, the Absolute gives the impression of having advanced ergonomics and reveals the designer's intent to make

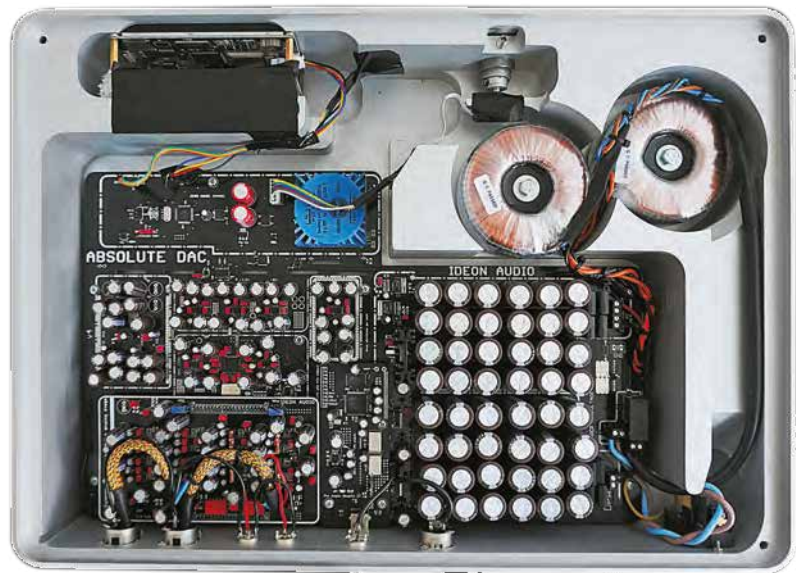
things simpler and more efficient. The same is true for the DAC's internal construction, where the exotic image of components layout is indicative of (the designer's) relentless war on noise — rather than just a showcase for hi-end technology in nice colours. Indeed, it is a real joy to see a Greek company pit its designs against the acknowledged giants in this field such as MSB, dCS, and Totaldac. At this price level it is unimportant whether a device uses Sabre technology or custom R2R implementations, the clients are clearly interested only in what they are going to hear and how much they appreciate the machine's aesthetics and ergonomics. Such rare hobbyists whose systems price run in the tens or hundreds of thousands of euro, have outstanding rigs capable of revealing the most minute details and their digital sources must be able to stand up against top-end exotic turntables. To date, speaking through our experience with ultra-high-end class DACs, we cannot single out one device out there that clearly outclasses and leads the rest, hence there is easily room for more choices and alternative proposals. Sound wise, we could perhaps choose the Totaldac from France as being the most organic, the dCS from Great Britain as the most detailed and dynamic, and the MSB from the US as a very interesting proposition falling in between the other two. On the other hand, in designing the Absolute Ideon Audio opted for the Saber 9038PRO, a seemingly commercial choice compared R2R and custom DSP, but one that wedges the Ideon approach in-between the others and indicates that what counts is the circuit



Tweet This

Ideon Audio has declared war on noise no matter where it is coming from! Its top of the range DAC achieves astronomical dynamic performance and linearity, as befits its equally astronomical price.

- ✓ Femto Clocks
- ✓ 17 power supplies
- ✓ Modular design



implementation as a whole, not only the conversion “motor”.

It uses four Sabre channels in dual weighted topology that leads up to the analog output, thereby achieving very low distortion and a dynamic range flirting with 140dB! Naturally, the Absolute’s three inputs are electrically isolated with extra care taken for the always noisy USB, where a proprietary three-stage “purifying” circuit is employed.

THE POWER SUPPLY THAT DESERVES A PRIZE

The Absolute chassis is made of thick aluminum block with bold, curved, edges and a mass of 22 kg! The finish is excellent, and the machine sits on four feet made out of aluminium block which continue the main chassis’ rounded edges, a pleasant addition to the design. As it is, the device’s interface with the shelf is a hard surface; one can experiment placing mats, or similar, we used small pieces of thick cork and we observed subtle differences in micro dynamics and the soundstage. The DAC is 47cm wide, i.e. wider than standard, and only just fit onto our shelf.

The three power transformers add onto the weight and the Absolute’s total mass of 26 kg requires careful and sturdy positioning and support.

Ideon’s top device has what it takes in the looks department for its category — it exudes self-confidence, a clear sense of purpose, and luxury. The lid has etched lines running along the sides, and the dividing line in the middle of the chassis runs all around the device. The inputs are recessed into the chassis and the front is minimalist,

with a big screen that tapers out softly into the big control knob on its left. On-off is operated by a led switch on the back where the IEC socket is located and continued pressure of 2-3 seconds on the control knob switches the device to standby.

No less than seventeen (17) independent power supplies or power “lines” and voltage stabilisers operate inside the Absolute; for reasons of speed, ac smoothing is done using 48 small-size Elna Silmic capacitors.

Three of these independent power lines are dedicated to high precision-Crystek crystal oscillators, reducing jitter to femtosecond levels (1 femto= 1 quadrillionth). Finally, this digital conversion factory with its spectacular power supply is modular, hence, ready to receive future upgrades easily. At functional level, we cannot blame it for omissions such as Bluetooth and Wi-Fi, since its design clearly aims at top-class performance with conventional wired connections. On the other hand, it provides a total of eleven filters (7 for PCM, 4 for DSD), lock range settings, and de-emphasis activation. Jitter & dither controls are not available.

Sonic differences between the filters are immediately evident and subtle at the same time; this is because the machine is so quiet

and linear that it effortlessly pinpoints exactly the area in which these changes take place in the treble and dynamic transients, without dramatically affecting everything else in the spectrum. The brickwall filter, for example, is not harsh and jarring, the slow roll off / minimum phase does not sound dull with truncated highs, etc. Everything works in a clear and pleasant manner.

CALM, IMPOSING, AND PENETRATING

We connected the Absolute DAC through USB and coaxial with Pioneer’s UDP- LX800 player set to function

as a transport, in order to audition CDs as well as hi-res DVD-ROMs files. The analogue out interconnect cable was Mamalos “The Epitome” plugged into a Naim Nait XS3, which drove a pair of KEF R11. As required by the amp, no external power filters were used, and so I made do the Absolute’s own highly adequate power cleaning at the power input.

With this system we got a good taste of what Ideon Audio’s top converter can do — at this price level however, a more appropriate system would have comprised something like KEF’s Reference series speakers driven by a pre-power combo from Naim.



Ideon Audio Absolute DAC

TECHNICAL CHARACTERISTICS

TYPE: Digital to Analog converter

DAC CHIP: Sabre ES9038PRO

INPUTS: USB-B, coaxial, AES/EBU

ANALOG OUTPUT: RCA (2,7Vrms), XLR (4,2Vrms)

REPRODUCTION: PCM up to 384KHz/32bit, DSD128-DoP (USB-B)

EXTRAS: fixed/variable, 4 filters IIR-DSD, 7-filters PCM, lock speed, De emphasis

DIMENSIONS (WXHXD): 470x130x350 mm.

WEIGHT: 26 kg



SUPREME CONSTRUCTION
VINYL LIFE-LIKE COHERENCE
DYNAMICS
SPEED



WIRELESS CONNECTIONS

MANUFACTURER: Ideon Audio

CONTACT: www.ideonaudio.com

RATING:

★★★★★ // 4.99

PRICE: €27.750



Even so, the difference in sound when we switched from the Pioneer's own converter to the Absolute was literally huge, no comparison to the improvements to be had from dacs in the 3k range. We are talking, first and foremost, of a huge soundstage with real-life imaging — from which we get an idea of what it means to have (the Absolute's) huge signal to noise ratio.

Beyond the realistic-scale reproduction of whatever is contained in our recordings (dynamics being the most pleasant element), however, the Absolute displayed great talent in rendering details in a coherent manner, with prize-winning correct timing (phase), an amazing continuity in transients, and a very expressive musical flow very reminiscent of a turntable. While its explosive dynamics are impressive, it is just as impressive to experience its ability to maintain consistency within musical peaks, where it effortlessly analyses in depth the sonic texture & character of the instruments, rendering these lifelike with excellent authority regardless of speed and dynamic envelope.

Simply put, nothing can destabilize and blur the Absolute's signal, no ambiguity or machine-like digital flavour seeps in to interfere with the flow of the music; ultimately what we get is a very much balanced, supremely analogue, colorful, non-metallic and silky sound, with all the harmonic wealth that gives life to the players in the soundstage. Forget the old-school PCM-itis with its lack of body & texture, its dark backgrounds without any air around the instruments, the aggressive (rather than dynamic) transients, and the narrow, single-point, imaging; here we have a plethora of organic sonic detail, down to the last molecule of air that vibrates around the musical instruments, angelically soft

transients and multilayered three-dimensional focus. The sound is authoritative but gentle, offering a large variety of high & mid-high frequencies. The tonal balance is smooth, of course, and there is no "beautifying" factor involved or necessary — albeit the treble sounds somewhat milder than a dCS or an MSB for example... closer to the gentle nature of a R2R with discrete converters.

Having said that, we chose the slow roll off / minimum phase filter in our audition; using other options lightly tones up the high frequencies range which, nevertheless, still maintains its civilized and non-aggressive sonic nature.

Indeed, this was the first time (in our experience) that the big Sabre chip sounded so calm, imposing and authoritative, multi-coloured, and clearly more analytic, solid, and dynamic than in other excellent devices such as the Auralic Vega G2 with its 'crazy' custom technology and its gorgeous sound. Comparing identical files in PCM (24/192) and DSD (2.8MHz) via USB-B on the Absolute, the midrange seems to be better in the latter while dynamics favour the former; the differences are subtle, however, it was more a matter of perspective than day & night: PCM offers colour and texture while DSD does not leave any hints of compressed dynamics or noise in the treble. They both sound better than usual, as did MQA which was exceptionally well rendered in 24/192 even though the Absolute doesn't roll out the entire package contained in such files.

If you belong to the lucky few looking for a top-level, cost-no-object, digital source to add to your exotic system, you must short-list Ideon Audio's Absolute DAC. Despite its humble origins, it performs on par with the rest of the international crème de la crème! ■