

Ideon Audio IΩN+ DAC and preamp

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The Ideon Audio Absolute ε range of products is an unparalleled collection of digital audio products (tested in Issue 215) that can stand toe-to-toe with the best of them. The Absolute ε DAC (itself tested in issue 201) has recently received a 'Meta' upgrade and will be the subject of a review later. But, as the name suggests, 'Absolute' has a large price tag. For those who can't quite reach to Absolute levels, there's IΩN. The IΩN DAC (with optional preamp, which is known as the 'IΩN+') shares much with the Absolute model at a considerably more attainable level.

Like its bigger brother, the IΩN DAC uses an ESS chip (the ES9028A PRO converter chip in this case, the ES9038 PRO in the Absolute ε), with dedicated software written in-house out of Ideon Audio's Athens design studio. This software is firmware-upgradable should the need arise. This is met by an ESS ES9080 PRO chip for the USB audio input module, which is once again subject to a lot of in-house custom coding. Both Ideon DACs process PCM signals up to 32 bit/384 kHz, plus DSD64 to DSD512 natively.

No bristling

The IΩN does not bristle with digital inputs. You can choose from USB Type B, as well as coaxial S/PDIF via BNC or RCA, and that's it. The inputs are galvanically insulated, however. It outputs to XLR and RCA, and the topology of the circuit is fully balanced. Stepping up to the IΩN+ adds two analogue inputs (XLR and RCA... once again, it's a fully balanced circuit), with one stereo set of XLR and RCA outputs. The preamp also includes an internal connection for the DAC of course; even the most hair-shirted audiophiles would (probably) object to having to use external cables to connect the IΩN to itself.

The fact Ideon Audio can so easily change the IΩN from a high-performance DAC to a high-performance DAC-meets-preamp is a heavy clue about the internal architecture of the product. It uses a discrete, low-noise, low-interference linear power supply, and not switch-mode. The toroidal transformer is flanked by lots of high quality capacitors, and the presence of that transformer is made abundantly clear when you try to lift the IΩN+ out of its flight case. And yes, inside the cardboard box is a flight >>





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» case making the IQN+ capable of withstanding the rigours of local delivery drivers who never learned the meaning of the word 'fragile'. OK, that is not meant as a 'challenge accepted' moment especially I know of at least one local courier who could reduce this DAC and its flight case to atoms 60 seconds into the delivery. Regardless of flight case, 13kg is a meaty figure for a DAC and a preamp combined. Not all of that is thick aluminium front and side plates.

Ideon Audio does not compromise component quality. The IQN and IQN+ use the same high precision femto clocks as their big brother and give each a power supply, which is claimed to guarantee extremely low jitter. Two of these clocks sit on the USB board (one for multiples of 44.1kHz sampling frequency and one for multiples of 48 kHz) and another on the actual converter board.

Even before the digital stream is tied to that clock, that if it passes through USB, the signal is fed through the company's proprietary three-stage noise-busting circuit, which is – yet again – a technology drawn down from the Absolute ε. The datastream is fed through that HyperStream eight-channel digital architecture, into Ideon's own capacitorless output stage... and it all seems remarkably familiar to anyone who has seen the Absolute ε design. It invites the question; so much has trickled down from the top line, what remains to justify the big hitter DAC? The chonky Absolute ε has a larger multistage power supply that dwarves that of the IQN, it runs a more selected range of chips and components and that gives a still greater signal-to-noise ratio, and it's even more tank-like in build!

Having heard both (albeit with some time between them and not the latest 'Meta' version of the Absolute ε), I can say with some certainty that you do get what you pay for in the bigger DAC, but the IQN comes extremely close in outright performance terms. What's more, unless you are playing at the absolute (pun intended) pinnacle of audio performance, the IQN is more than good enough.

Bass - now with added grip

What they share is an incredibly bold, powerful and organically 'grippy' bass. The IQN grabs hold of your speaker cones like a happy terrier and won't let go of them until it's satisfied with a spot of Rammstein or Infected Mushroom. That stupid smile breaks out across your face at that moment as you realise just how much precision the Ideon Audio is putting into that bass, and just how rewarding that sounds.

For non-bassheads, this also has a boon. It underpins the music in a way that gives instant solidity and authority to a piece of music. The final movement of Mahler's Eighth Symphony [Solti, Decca] is delivered with such force, you start to wonder if the music should come with minimum safe distance recommendations. Hell, the DAC unleashes such a powerful bass energy into your system, you could get a suntan from Pablo Cazals playing a few Bach Cello suites [Archiv]. Listen to the title track to *Night Train* by Oscar Peterson [Verve] or, better yet, 'Straight, No Chaser' from *Genius of Modern Music Vol 2* by Thelonious Monk [Blue Note]. In the former case, Peterson might play very laid back, but those vast hands of his were working that





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» piano surprisingly hard. And Monk, well... he was just 20 years ahead of everyone and remains so today, but his power and control over the instrument just shines here.

Good bass alone does not a DAC make. Fortunately, the rest of the performance is built on that solid foundation and is a joy to sit in front of. The level of detail and precision to that sound is only matched by its sheer musicality, very much in line with the IQN's bigger brother's handling of music. Play something small, lithe and acoustic, or big, syrupy and electronic and it just extracts the best from the performance, adding none of its own character or influence along the way. I went from Anna B Savage [*in|FLUX*, *City Slang*] to The Orb [*UForb*, *Big Life*] via everything from Albinoni to ZZ Top and it just brings out those little details (like finger squeaks on nylon-stringed guitars) without losing sight of the intent of the musicians.

Few DACs in the field are equally comfortable with expansive soundstaging and a orderly sense of rhythm. It's clearly a mission statement of Ideon Audio because the IQN nails both extremely well. I think this is the balance point; as other DACs in its class tip one way or other, even slightly.

We went with the DAC with the optional preamplifier. Mixing two things can either produce great things (like the guy who saw a steak and said, "I know what this needs... lobsters!") or terrible things (like the guy who saw a steak and said, "I know what this needs... Nutella!"). Adding a preamp section to a DAC has typically delivered 'variable' results. The skills required to make a good DAC differ from those that produce a great preamp. The IQN+ is one of the exceptions, and the preamp is more than just some afterthought or a convenient way to cut down on some shelf space. The IQN+ preamp stage perfectly matches the DAC, with that outstanding bass presentation, authoritative dynamic range and superb detail shining through. It also

has excellent soundstaging properties. It's not the most feature-packed or input-laden preamp on the market (with just two line XLR/RCA inputs and one XLR/RCA pair of preamp outputs alongside the DAC outputs), but in sonic terms, it's no slouch.

More inputs?

Shortcomings are very thin on the ground. That rotary control knob takes some getting used to. The RCA, BNC, and USB digital inputs should be joined by AES/EBU and other connections at this price. Some might also expect a clock input on a DAC at this level. And that's about it.

The Ideon Audio IQN DAC (and IQN+ with preamplifier) are a welcome addition for those after some proper high-end performance without the Absolute costs. Unless you are in the market for a pinnacle digital statement piece, the IQN really stands out among its rivals. That bass is so intrinsically 'right' that it single-handedly justifies the price of admission, in my opinion. If you set aside the sleek advertising and fancy front panels of some of the better-known big hitters and instead concentrate on what sounds fantastic, the Ideon Audio IQN DAC is the one to beat. +

Technical specifications

Type: DAC with optional preamplifier stage

Digital inputs: 1x RCA S/PDIF, 1x BNC S/PDIF, 1x USB Type B

Analogue inputs (IQN+ only) 2x RCA stereo line level input, 2x XLR line level inputs

Supported formats: 44.1kHz-384kHz PCM, up to 32 bits. Native DSD up to 8x DSD

THD (A-weighted, 20Hz-20kHz, DAC section): <-110dB

Channel Separation (IQN, IQN+): >130dB

Dynamic Range: 132dB (IQN), 121dB (IQN+ line inputs)

Finish: Black, Silver

Dimensions (WxHxD): 46x8x30cm

Weight: 13kg

Price: IQN £16,950, \$17,900, €16,900

IQN+ £19,950, \$22,000, €19,900

Manufacturer Ideon Audio

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