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Audioengine D3 Premium 24-Bit DAC

● ● ● ● ● ○ EDITOR RATING: **EXCELLENT** 0 COMMENTS

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PROS

Bypasses computer's audio headphone output, pulling digital audio from USB port and increasing the signal. Upsamples lower bit-rate audio to 24-bits. Plays native sample rates up to 96kHz.

CONS

Can get quite hot.

BOTTOM LINE

The Audioengine D3 Premium 24-Bit DAC improves the fidelity of the headphone and speaker experience, bypassing the computer's headphone jack in favor of a digital stream from the USB port.

BY TIM GIDEON You may not need a digital-to-analog converter (DAC) for your laptop or computer, but Audioengine's D3 Premium 24-Bit DAC makes a strong case for it. At \$189 (direct), it costs as much as a quality pair of headphones or earphones (though the sky is the limit with the high-end audio realm). The listeners who will get the most out of the D3 are those who already have a solid pair of headphones or earphones (or speakers), but are typically listening via the headphone jack of their laptops and computers. The D3 uses the USB output of your computer to bypass its weak headphone jack and improves the experience, boosting the signal and bit-rate, and playing native sample rates of up to 96kHz.

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In other words, it plays tracks back at their fullest sonic fidelity level. Is this an improvement everyone will notice? No, not everyone—but if you got used to the D3 for a month or two and then eliminated it from your chain, you'd likely start to realize what you've been missing out on. Perhaps this is why Audioengine offers a 30-day audition period for the D3.

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Design

There's little to discuss here—the D3 [\\$189.00 at Amazon](#) is basically a USB dongle with a 3.5mm headphone jack on its far end. A 3.5mm to 1/4-inch headphone jack adapter is also included. On the face of the dongle, which has a brushed metallic surface, are two status LEDs—one tells you whether it's receiving power, and the other lights blue when you're receiving a signal with a sample rate higher than 48kHz. The D3 can be used with headphones and earphones with an impedance of 12 Ohms and up.

Set-up is a snap. It's pretty much plug-and-play, with no software needed. On a Mac, you'll need to switch the audio preferences to use the D3 as the output instead of the internal speakers, but that's really it.

The only somewhat negative thing I can say about the simple, low-profile design: This thing can get very hot during use. You're not going to burn yourself on it, but I can see it being unpleasant to pop into your jean pockets after you're finished using it. Perhaps this is why Audioengine includes a miniature felt carrying case.

Performance

The most immediately obvious thing the D3 is going to do for most laptops and computers is boost the signal. Simply put, the maximum volume you'll be able to achieve with the D3's output will likely greatly exceed the max volume of your laptop's headphone output (or USB output, if that's what you typically use). But using a D3 is not about blasting your ears out. Good things happen to well-made headphones, earphones, and speakers when they get a more pure, powerful signal.



The thing I most noticed on my higher bit-rate and sample-rate test tracks was a more dynamic overall sound. I won't pretend it was night and day, but listening to lossless Radiohead files on the [Sennheiser HD 280 Pro \\$89.95 at Amazon](#), going back and forth between the D3 and the headphone jack of my laptop, it seemed there was a bit more body to the sub-bass and deep bass ranges, and more brightness to the clicks and taps of transient percussive noises, whether they were real drums or synth sounds. But part of this

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is just what happens when a strong pair of headphones gets driven a bit harder and flexes its drivers a bit more. Swapping out the Sennheisers with other more expensive in-ear options, like the [Shure SE846](#) [\\$999.00 at Amazon](#) further illustrated the D3's prowess.

The D3 pads any bit depth it encounters up to 24 bits—this creates, for most instances, a higher bit-rate and thus a better signal-to-noise ratio and a more dynamic audio experience with snappier transients and quieter passages that compete less with background noise. If bumping up the bit rate seems like an abstract concept that won't really have much effect on your music, consider that any digital file's bit-rate determines its signal-to-noise ratio, or the ratio of any given signal to the background noise of the track. In this case, the noise we're discussing is the noise floor that is inherent in lower bit-rate files called quantization noise (the result of quantization error). Raising the bit rate lowers this noise level.

Will you hear this effect on your tracks? It likely depends on how much dynamic range there is within your files to begin with—an album mastered with dynamic compression in very heavy, limiting ratios and doesn't have much variation in volume between sections will not likely sound as improved as, say, a classical track that was mastered with very little or no compression and has quiet passages mixed with loud sections.

Another factor is your gear—I don't think you're going to hear much of a difference if you're not listening through reference-level or pro-level gear, or at least headphones and earphones of a certain quality range. Your standard issue earbuds won't be much improved by the D3. A pair of the aforementioned Sennheiser studio headphones, or a fancy pair like the Shure SE846 or the [Logitech Ultimate Ears In-Ear Reference Monitors](#), however, will certainly be allowed to offer a more musical, dynamic experience.

Still, it's not all about price. This D3, for instance, is substantially more expensive than the Sennheiser HD 280 Pro, but it helps improve these headphones anyway because they are made for pro studio use, so they can do something with the improved power and fidelity. Extremely nice headphones and earphones—or any speakers that use a 3.5mm or 1/4-inch jack—will probably benefit from the D3's output, but this is assuming, of course, that you are upgrading over a cheap computer headphone jack output and not, say, a quality stereo receiver.

Simply put, you have to be a headphone and audio enthusiast for this purchase to really make sense, as not everyone listens to music in the same way. If a lot of what was just discussed sounds like something that you'd have a hard time noticing, perhaps it's best to first start with a great pair of headphones. Once you get used to them, you won't go back to cheap, lower quality options. A DAC can provide a similar sort of boost to your listening experience, though its improvements will be more subtle and incremental. But if you've got a headphone pair you love and want to get more out of your computer time with them, the Audioengine D3 can be a solid addition to your audio arsenal.

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