

Audioengine D1 Premium 24-Bit DAC/Headphone Amp Review

<http://the-gadgeteer.com/2012/05/13/audioengine-d1-premium-24-bit-dac-headphone-amp-review/>

June 21, 2012



If you love music and are less than satisfied with the quality of what you're hearing, you might consider adding a digital audio convertor (DAC) to your system or computer. DACs are slowly becoming popular among serious music listeners with many companies are now making them for every budget. Let's look at a new entry from an established speaker company, [Audioengine](#). They are known for their excellent, but affordable speakers (If you haven't heard their monster-sounding A5 speakers, you are missing something). Will the new [D1 Premium 24-Bit DAC/Headphone amp](#) help you rediscover your music? In a word: Yes.



For almost 2 years, I have been using various DACs when reviewing headphones or earphones. I consider DACs essential and I tell everyone who will listen why I think so. But it's not lost on me that most people will *never* buy a DAC because their music sounds just fine and hey, they don't really *need* one. I feel sorry for these people.

Before we get into the review, let's look at why you might want a DAC at all. When you listen to music that comes from a digital source, eventually it will be converted to an analog signal (soundwaves). You can't *hear* digital. A DAC is what performs this conversion. So your iPod, computer soundcard, iPhone or whatever you plug your earbuds into has a DAC. OK, then why would you want to spend extra money on a DAC if you already have one in your digital device? That's easy: Quality.

Music sounds better using an external DAC, period. The DACs used in iPods, sound cards, etc., are relatively cheap. They get the job done and if your music collection consists of lower resolution – 128kb or less – MP3s, save your money. If you have higher resolution files in other formats, such as FLAC, AAC or WAV, then a good DAC can bring out more information. Cymbals can shimmer, bass notes will be crisp instead of muddy, emotion from vocals will sound intimate and involving. DACs take what's there and make it "more."

With so many companies making DACs, what makes Audioengine's special? Not a whole lot, except that the build quality is really good, it sounds great and the price is affordable. It's unusual to have all that in one product. *That's* what makes the D1 special.



Setting up the D1 couldn't be much easier. There is no external power supply. USB does it all. Connect the USB cord, change your sound output setting (if necessary) and you are good to go. There are 3 input options: Standard RCA (red/white) for external speakers, Optical (toslink) and the already mentioned USB. It can be paired with a TV, Apple TV, DVD/BluRay player or CD player. To be honest, I only use the D1 as a desktop device connected to my MacPro using headphones. The front of the D1 has a lighted on/off button, headphone jack and volume knob. It's all very simple and efficient.

The deck-of-cards sized D1 is solid with its rounded aluminum housing capped by hard, rubberized front and back panels. The aluminum keeps the weight down. It also comes with a 2ft USB cable and a microfiber draw-string bag which comes in handy for commuting.



Even though I'm concentrating on the DAC, the D1 also houses a powerful and loud headphone amp. The volume button has never been set beyond the 10 o'clock position. I want to note that I used [Grado GR10](#) and [Atomic Floyd SuperDarts](#) earphones along with Decibel, a high resolution audio player for Mac while using the D1.

What's interesting about the D1 is that when you hear it, you won't be jumping up and down with

excitement about dramatic audio improvements. The D1 excels in subtleness, meaning that you begin to notice things you may have missed before. Instruments sound more distinct from one another and take on more character. It's like the music comes alive. It's only when you disconnect the D1 that you notice how lifeless everything suddenly sounds. The D1 has an effortless quality that sounds relaxed and smooth. You can easily be spoiled by it.

The D1 will process digital audio at any bit depth up to 24 bits and any sample rate to 192KHz. What this means in English is that the D1 can handle anything a human ear can actually hear.

I spent some time listening to an Apple Lossless rip of This Mortal Coil's 80s gothic classic album, "Filigree and Shadow." This recording is full of aural light and shadow. Listening with headphones is a completely different experience than with speakers. With headphones, the D1 reveals all kinds of lost detail. There's so much more going on that it sounded re-recorded. I just heard things I had *never* heard before. Again, it's the subtle aspects that are highlighted by the D1.

The piano in Simon and Garfunkel's remastered "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" sounds as if it's being played live in your head. Each sounded note from a struck key has a reverb that doesn't intrude into the next note. For the first time, I enjoyed the piano even more than Garfunkel's angelic vocals.



The Audioengine D1 DAC/Amp is relatively inexpensive as DACs go. Even so, at \$169, it's not an impulse buy. You have to decide if the improvement the D1 offers is worth it to you. Audioengine does offer a 30-day audition with full refund if you aren't satisfied. But I have to say that I can't imagine anyone who loves music taking Audioengine's return offer. The D1 is an addictive audio upgrade.