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AUDIOENGINE D3 DAC REVIEW

by Jason Tsay





Chances are, your headphones are plugged directly into your laptop's 3.5 mm audio jack whenever you play music. It may sound okay, but it probably doesn't sound very good either. That's where a DAC like Audioengine's D3 comes in - it bypasses the computer's onboard digital to analog converter to provide a higher quality output. Does this tiny stick perform as well as it's made out to? Read on for the full review!

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?





Underneath the packaging, you'll find the D3, a 1/8" to 1/4" adaptor, soft carrying pouch, and a manual.

DESIGN





At first glance, it wouldn't be too difficult to mistake the Audioengine D3 for a flash drive. It's a finely crafted brick of brushed aluminum, which means it's pretty lightweight but also very solid feeling. There are two LED indicators on the surface - one indicating if it's on and the other for the sample rate, blue if 88.2 or 96 kHz (DVD-A) and off if 44.1 or 48 kHz (audio CDs) - and a circular, engraved Audioengine logo. It's really quite portable, and the design works matches especially well with a MacBook. On the end of the stick is a standard 3.5mm port. I would've liked it if the D3 had a physical volume toggle, but this isn't entirely critical in the name of maintaining the simplistic design.

SETUP



The D3 operates by the principles of plug and play, so there's barely any set up process to speak of. Simply plug it in, go into System Preferences, Sound, and select Audioengine D3 from the output devices.

SOUND



The first thing you might notice when you start listening through the D3 is a louder volume. That's because the D3 actually has an amp built in - the LME49726, to be precise. This amp will have no problem driving even high impedance headphones like the 250-ohm version of the Beyerdynamic DT770 Pro.

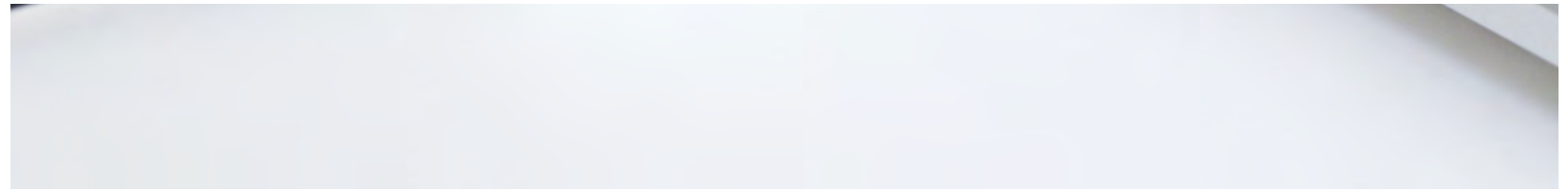
Beyond a louder output, everything definitely does just sound better. It's a little difficult to describe exactly,

but music really comes to life through the D3. Whereas audio through the MacBook's built in output jack clearly sounds like you're playing back a digital file, music through the D3 just sounds more "analog" and more "real." Everything seems to resonate a bit more and feel more transparent. There's more depth and the nuances in songs really come out. By comparison, the normal audio output from the 2012 MacBook Air seems really thin and electronic.

It's definitely something you can notice if you have good enough equipment in terms of the audio files you use and your headphones. You'll benefit especially if you have higher impedance headphones, which require more power to drive. Either way, the D3 produces a very clear signal with no static noise or interference of any kind.

OVERALL





The Audioengine D3 isn't the cheapest DAC you can get, but it offers very good audio performance in a very refined package. The compact form factor and easy setup are certainly advantages in themselves, but the main attraction is the richer, more detailed output you get. I wouldn't say the D3 is an essential buy for everyone, but if you've upgraded to a decent set of headphones and want to get the most out of them, this is certainly a good next step to take. If you're unsure, Audioengine offers a 30 day audition period to see (hear) for yourself.

THE GOOD AND THE BAD

PROS

- more natural sound
- built-in amp
- compact design

CONS

- slightly more premium price

WHERE TO BUY - \$189.00 AT [AUDIOENGINE](https://www.audioengine.com)