

Toucan do it for headphone and DAC duties

An high-end headphone amplifier with a built-in digital-to-analogue converter isn't something we've come across before. But should you need this blend of talents, the Toucan is a great buy.

It's part of a newly expanded Chordette range, which aims to deliver top-quality sound in small, beautifully made packages. And the tiny Toucan certainly packs it in: there's two analogue inputs - an RCA plus balanced XLR - and USB digital input. Standard audio digital inputs, such as coax and optical, aren't offered.

Better than a budget DAC

That's a shame, as the on-board DAC is great. It's a big step ahead of budget units such as Cambridge's DAC Magic in terms of transparency and dynamics, and not far behind Stello's £750 DA100 Signature.

The Chord has two full-sized headphone outputs. Both can be used together - and, rather surprisingly doing, so doesn't dim the overall performance. That's great news, because this is a fine headphone amplifier.

The Toucan sounds pure and massively detailed. Straight from the box there's an element of edge and aggression, but given a few days worth of use this fades away leaving a very natural, unexaggerated

sound. From Dvorak to Drake, the Toucan takes all music in its stride, delivering it in a lively, entertaining and honest fashion.

There's a switchable filter to make headphone imaging sound a little more natural. It makes the sound less demanding, but also less transparent; we left it off.

You'll need top headphones to make the most of this Chord: something like the £250 AKG K701 should be a bare minimum.

Our only gripe is that our test sample - one of the first off the production line - had an overly sensitive volume control.

The Toucan is a tiny, two-in-one triumph - we can't wait to test the rest of the range.

The tiny Toucan measures a mere 7x16x4cm (hwd) but packs in both bags of features and a cracking two-in-one performance

Rating ★★★★★

FOR Pure, unexaggerated sound; impressive detail resolution; excellent build; fine on-board DAC; two headphone outputs

AGAINST Doesn't make sense with anything less than high-end headphones

VERDICT The Toucan has an unusual mix of features, but it's an impressive performer.

Also consider

Lehmann Black Cube Linear £750

This low-key design remains one of the best stand-alone headphone amplifiers at this price

