

**F**irst, a word about our methodology. Obviously we've chosen a wide range of DACs, spanning a £1,000 price gap. You wouldn't expect the cheaper ones to beat the pricier ones, but still this 'supermarket sweep' gives a good idea of what extra you can, or can't, get for your money. As such we get excellent performers at both low, middle and high price points, and others which are good but not so remarkable given their cost. This is what the globe ratings represent; a £700 five globe isn't better outright than a more expensive four globe product, but certainly is better relative to its price rivals.

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And so to putting them all into context! I've based the following ratings mostly on sonic performance, with flexibility and value factored in. It's worth noting that all units tested here proved really rather good, and the cheaper units here offered a very good-to-excellent level of performance for their price point, so all are worth investigating, dependent upon your budgetary restrictions...

In eighth place is the Arcam rDAC. For its price it is a fine little package, with a bright, spry and musical midband, but it's just a little rough and ready compared to the just £50 more expensive Emotiva. The Arcam's packaging, build and functionality are superb however, especially if you're going to use it for computer audio where it shines brightest thanks to the Asynchronous USB connection. Overall it's a great budget do-it-all design, one for which I have respect.

Just pipping it is the Emotiva XDR, which brings the advantages of a smoother, better balance sonically, plus a wider variety of inputs, and remote control, which if you use it as a preamp as well as just a DAC, is a boon. It's only £50 more than the Arcam, yet offers more extras than the price difference would suggest. Still, it can't hold a candle to the rDAC's lovely industrial design.

In sixth place came the Wyred 4 Sound DAC-1. The presentation was almost the exact opposite of the expansive sound of the Musical Fidelity MI DAC, being quite tightly controlled – I found it a bit cerebral and lacking in any form of emotional display. Bizet's 'Flower Song' should

be an impassioned plea from Don Jose to Carmen, but this DAC seemed to rob it of that intensity, leaving instead a pleasantly sung but otherwise unremarkable performance of a song. I don't doubt that some will prefer it to the larger and/or more exuberant nature of some other units here, though – it's horses for courses...

In fifth place is the Musical Fidelity MI DAC. It possessed one of the widest soundstages displayed in this group regardless of price, which is a real achievement. It was also refined and 'expensive' sounding, giving a particularly nice rendition of classical music, even if it was a tad airbrushed and glossy in absolute

terms. The downside was its rather laid back approach to rhythms, which stopped it from being a giant killer...

Next up, in fourth place I put the Lite Audio DAC-83. I have described it as an engaging listen, and it was, but sonically I felt that it was bettered by other designs. The focus was very much around the midrange of sounds, and while this carries most of the musical information that we respond to, especially at this price I would have liked to have heard better defined treble, and more weight and shape in the bass. It was very good indeed, but not quite up to the best of the rest at its price point.

So now we come to the podium positions and here the choice became even more difficult! All three of the remaining contenders acquitted themselves well tonally, spanning the frequencies in a pretty even handed way. Each managed a respectable level of dimensionality in their staging of the music, and all coped well with what for me was the most difficult test, that of successfully representing voices in a realistic manner. So at this point I start adding and subtracting brownie points for connectivity and price to try and

ascertain the final order of merit.

Headphone users will go straight to the CEntrance DACMini, while those who already have satisfactory bass output in their system might find the sound verges on the bass heavy on occasion, and would prefer the slightly more moderated performance of either the Calyx or the Teddy DAC. So in the end I have placed the Calyx in third place. Although the most expensive here, and offering a very sophisticated and detailed presentation of music, it is slightly restrictive in some environments in only having USB and coaxial inputs.

In second place was the CEntrance. Again the sound was superb, but may be a little big for some tastes. However the wider choice of connections makes it a more flexible device and the £720 price tag may well make it the first choice for a lot of potential purchasers.

So that leaves the Teddy DAC as this month's winner. Like the previous two it offers a very detailed, well presented and engaging sound, and I



**Best for value: CEntrance DAC Mini**



**Best for sound: TeddyPardo TeddyDAC**

have no doubts that it will satisfy the majority of listeners with its super smooth presentation of digitally stored music. Alvin Gold loved it in his full review last month, and I have to concur. But as always, it's best to listen for yourself if you possibly can; sound is an intensely personal thing and we all respond differently. You're bound to find one of the DACs here perfectly suited to your number crunching needs! **TB**