

Hands-On Review: AudioQuest DragonFly Black 1.5/Red



AudioQuest invented the micro-DAC category back in 2012 when it introduced the original DragonFly. Though doubtlessly complex in execution, the product was simple in concept: plug the little component, which is about the size of a thumb drive, into a USB port on your PC or Mac, plug your headphones into the DragonFly, and enjoy significantly improved sound.

AudioQuest refreshed the product in 2014 to v1.2, improving the power supply, shortening the signal path between the DAC and headphone amp, and dropping the price by a hundred Yankee greenbacks. The company has just introduced two new DragonFlies, the Black v1.5, a refresh of the original, and the Red v1.0, a brand-new product. In Canada, they retail for \$129 and \$249 respectively.

The new versions have an improved USB controller (now USB 2.0-compliant) with lower power consumption and better signal-to-noise. They employ 32-bit DACs with a new minimum-phase filter, which AudioQuest says improves detail and dynamics compared to the 24-bit DAC used on v1.2. They're also software-upgradable through a free desktop application (could that mean MQA support down the road?).

Most important, they work with mobile devices, as well as PCs and Macs. To use them with an iOS device, you need Apple's Lightning-to-USB Camera Adapter (\$49). To use them with an Android device, you need an Android On the Go (OTG) adapter cable.

Like their predecessors, the Black 1.5 and Red have a DragonFly logo that changes colour depending on the sampling rate of the file being played. Both models max out at 96kHz/24 bits, but you can play higher-res files and have your player app down-

sample the output.

The DragonFly Black 1.5 uses the same headphone amplifier and host-controlled analog volume control as v1.2. Its 1.2V amp is sufficient for preamp inputs and efficient headphones. The Red has a higher-output 2.1V amplifier, enabling it to drive a wider range of headphones than either Black model, and providing better performance with any headphone. The Red also has a higher-performance 32-bit DAC than the Black v1.5, with integrated bit-perfect 64-step digital volume control.

The improvements with each iteration are clearly audible. Playing a 24/96 download of Scarlatti keyboard sonatas by pianist Yevgeny Sudbin (BIS Records) from a MacBook Pro running Audirvana Plus 2.5 through NAD Viso HP50 headphones, the DragonFly 1.2 provided a significant improvement over the Mac's built-in output: it was smoother and less clanky. Sudbin's arpeggiated chords were better delineated, thanks to a quieter background. The new Black v1.5 delivered a comparable improvement over v1.2, with faster, more immediate sound, and an even blacker background. The sound was thrilling on the high-tempo sonatas, and exquisite on the more tender works.



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The DragonFly Red had no problem powering my HiFiMAN Edition X headphone, combining thrilling dynamics and musical nuance with a real sense of three-dimensional space. "And They All Came Marching Out of the Woods" from *Gefion* by a Danish jazz trio led by Jakob Bro (ECM, 24/96 download) was utterly engaging. The Red assumed complete

control over the Edition X as it played Thomas Morgan's driving bass lines, while conveying all the delicacy of Jon Christensen's shimmering work on the cymbals.

The two new Dragonflies effected an even greater transformation on the sound from

my iPhone 6 Plus. Through the NAD HP50, the 2014 recording of Rodrigo's Concierto de Aranjuez by guitarist Milos Karadaglic and the London Philharmonic conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin (Deutsche Grammophon, ALAC rip from CD) sounded smoother, more detailed, more refined and more spacious when played through the DragonFly Black 1.5. Instruments were better delineated. Transients were faster. The sound from the iPhone 6 Plus' headphone output sounded boxy and congested by comparison. And once again, the DragonFly Red took sound quality up a further few notches, with better dynamics and more effortless delivery.

Listening to the same work through the HiFiMAN Edition X and DragonFly Red, any ideas of smartphone sound being necessarily compromised went out the window. Every gesture in Karadaglic's incredible solo cadenza in the second movement was ideally illuminated, and the dramatic re-entry of the full orchestra was thrilling, with all the attendant dynamic contrasts convincingly portrayed.

[Chord Electronics' Mojo](#) portable DAC/headphone amp was even better, as you'd expect given the three-fold-plus price difference. Compared to the DragonFly Red, the Mojo delivered more immediate sound, better articulation and control, and richer harmonics.

But that should only underscore what a supreme bargain these new DragonFly DAC/headphone amps are. Whether you listen from a laptop, smartphone or tablet, the DragonFly Black 1.5 can take sound to a new level; and the DragonFly Red can take you higher still.

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