

truly gadgets

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Music Sounds Better With The Lovely Antelope Zodiac

Have you spent hundreds of dollars or more on high-quality bookshelf speakers or audiophile headphones? Are you using digital sources like a laptop or desktop computer to store your music collection? Chances are, you need- and should get- a separate DAC/amplifier that can help make those bits and bytes travel smoothly from your hard drive to your ears.

There are a few issues with digital music that cause audio lovers to wince. The first is compression. MP3 files can come in a few sizes, or bitrates, that indicate their general quality, but even better are uncompressed files like OGG and FLAC. You can now purchase music in these formats, though the files are much larger and prices are often higher. If you have CDs, you can also record into these file types using many basic software packages. We have a lot of our music in 24-bit, 192 kHz, or uncompressed OGG and FLAC, as well as some really nice bookshelf speakers ([like those from](#)

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[CEntrance](#)) and quite a few pricey headphones (in general, the bigger the size, the more power they will require, and the more you'll be able to hear and discern from your music). If you are satisfied listening to pop music from your iPod on regular old earbuds, then today's gear is not for you.

The [Antelope Zodiac](#) is aimed directly at people who are willing to spend some serious cash on their audio gear, and want top-of-the-line gear. And certainly, for the price, we had high expectations. The model we tested is actually the entry-level version of the three siblings available from Antelope (the Black and Gold models include some extra features that we didn't really miss). And while we've tested out many other DACs and headphone amps- [from portable DACs like the Graham Slee Voyager](#) to [solid amps like the Music Hall PH25.2](#)- this one offers by far the most options and features.

Using the Zodiac is simple- plug in the USB cable to your source, add power, and then connect to your speakers or headphones (or both). There are no drivers required or software to install, and you can simply use whatever program you would normally use to listen to music (or even watch movies, cinema was also a much improved experience with the Zodiac). It has a fairly dense form factor, so it won't fit on your other A/V equipment but sits nicely on a desk. The power supply itself is bulky, but that's a good thing- separate power means less noise. The overall finish speaks volumes about quality and bodes well- precision engineering, an all-metal enclosure, large knobs and no plastic to be seen. There are also lots of connectivity options, including dual front TRS headphone jacks and on the back you'll find dual toslink optical inputs and a pair of S/PDIF coaxial digital inputs as well, plus the unusual type-B USB input. For those who want to connect passive or active speakers as outputs, you'll

see both XLR and RCA-type connections.

Our unit was already fairly burned in, but as with most audio gear, we also let it play for a full day before really listening and testing.



We primarily used over-ear headphones like [the beyerdynamics we've checked out](#), using either a Macbook Air or other computer as the main audio source. One of the main things you'll notice once you're using high bitrate files and good headphones is a side effect called jitter, and the Zodiac Antelope takes incredible steps to reduce and (in our view) eliminate it. The asynchronous USB connection and an interesting feature called an "oven controlled clock" offers shielding to prevent temperature effects. Think of a circuit board, and imagine cramming everything into a small space- your computer's digital-to-analog circuitry is miniscule and that leads to a wide array of problems, as does the fact that your computer's clock and the timing of your every other component are never aligned. The Zodiac Antelope offers spacious circuitry, dedicated, gold-plated boards that ensure separation of critical components. Volume adjustment is entirely analog, which means more accurate leveling. The end result is what you go to great lengths to achieve: deep, rich sound, accurate instrumentation, a much wider soundstage and imaging that makes music seem far more alive.

You can hear it easily on jazz and acoustic tracks, where the sound is harder, and the range is clipped- you're missing some of the harmonics. If you get a chance, check out the Vienna/Solti recordings of Wagner's The Ring Cycle (Decca Deluxe CD)- the detail is incredible, and the difference between the headphones plugged directly in and when using the Zodiac- is immense. Or try out the Versa Jazz Masters Nina Simone collection-

the remastering isn't as good as some analog sources but still a great recording and version. The depth and darkness are literally unparalleled while listening through this DAC and amp, which put other units to shame. On other tracks, instruments like timpanis and anything with vibrato sounded shimmery and true, and bass was far more present, magnified, but never overblown. While digital can often sound a bit clinical, we never faced that issue when using this unit from Antelope.

[Available online and in stores for around \\$1900, the Antelope Zodiac carries our strongest recommendation.](#) You can- and should- spend money first on good headphones or speakers- but if you can afford it, you'll never regret having this lovely unit on hand. Any serious audiophile will gain a newfound appreciation for their music once played through the Zodiac, and that's a value all it's own. It's versatile and future-proof, and worked well no matter what we threw at it, input, output, or musical genre. Some other reviewers have commented on the lack of a remote, but we never missed it (one is available on the Gold model). About the only complaints we had were a non-stepped volume control (also available on the Gold model), and the unusual USB-type B connector (which, again, is also changed for the Gold model). The definitive DAC/amp in our opinion, the Antelope Zodiac is now how we'll compare, contrast, and dream about music.

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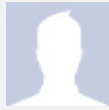
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