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Antelope Audio Zodiac Platinum DSD DAC/Headphone Amp

BY [ED_SELLEY](#) ON 15/01/2014

If the Top Trumps company were looking for a new subject for their immortal card based shenanigans, they could do worse than look at DACs. Not only are there enough of them to make a satisfying pack of cards (several in fact) but there is a relentless sense of one-upmanship in terms of specification that would keep the most competitive schoolboy engrossed. USB in particular is a particularly fruitful area. In five years we've gone from jittery ole USB 1 with a 48kHz sampling rate to the technical marvel you see here. 192kHz? Old hat. This bad boy handles formats that barely exist making it a potential Star Trump.



Antelope Audio has been one of the companies pushing this technology forward since their arrival in the market a few years ago. Although they have never stinted on the traditional DAC inputs, the focus of their technology has been focused on USB and the attendant handling of the high res material available from it. The company sailed through the 192kHz barrier (if you like, the point where the actual availability of material to play drops from limited to very limited) some time ago but felt no urge to stop at that point. The 352/384 increment was dutifully added and the company moved on to the high resolution unicorn that is DSD. The Zodiac Platinum DAC you see here can decode DSD 64 and 128 and further upsample them to DSD256. This is a huge amount of technical firepower but does it translate to something that is actually any good?

The Platinum is the top of the Zodiac range and builds on the features of the lesser models while adding the DSD upsampling technology. To this end you get an almost cube shaped DAC with a volume control for use as a preamp into RCA and XLR outputs. As well as the all important USB connection, Antelope fits the Zodiac with an AES input and a pair of optical and coaxial inputs that share inputs one and two and auto detect to select. For those of you of a vinyl disposition drifting into a torpor, the Antelope is interesting in that it also supports an analogue input that would technically allow for a turntable or other cherished source to be connected directly and allow the Platinum to usurp your preamp as well. Additionally, twin quarter inch headphone sockets allow the Platinum to act as his 'n' hers headphone amp if you fancy.

This gives a clue to the fact that Antelope doesn't carry out volume adjustment in the digital domain. The volume control is a rotary encoder rather than a conventional pot but still affects the decoded output rather than trying to do anything clever with the signal prior to decoding. This is arguably better in the context of audio quality but vastly superior in terms of day to day use because the volume control demonstrates a usefully swift response and won't slowly chug up and down when you really need it to go like the clappers.



Internally, the Antelope makes use of two Texas Instruments DAC's that themselves feature two tracks per chip, one per channel for decoding. These don't handle the upsampling process however as the Antelope has a separate FPGA system to handle this part of the processing. The USB architecture is bespoke and so is the clock- which also the first time I've seen the phrase 'Oven controlled' outside of culinary practices. If this toasty clock inside the unit isn't enough for you, the Platinum will also support being connected to Antelope's external Rubidium clock if you feel that your digital just won't fly without an isotope or two involved.

What the Platinum *doesn't* feature internally is a power supply. All the Zodiac range make use of external PSU's but in the case of the lesser Zodiac's, this is a mains block type affair but the Platinum is supplied as standard with the Voltikus external power supply. As well as sounding like the mortal foe of Optimus Prime, the Voltikus has been specifically designed to work with the Zodiacs and does offer the decidedly handy operating voltage range of 90-250 volts which is handy for the more nomadic among you. The Voltikus feels impressively substantial- it weighs more than the DAC does and it is utterly silent both externally and in terms of the audible output of the Platinum with no signal.

This isn't to say that the DAC itself doesn't feel well finished because it too feels well bolted together and logically laid out. The chassis of both the DAC and PSU are black with only the front panels finished in silver but the overall impression is smart and while I imagine you can buy more substantial DACs for the asking price, the Antelope feels carefully assembled and unlikely to fall apart any time soon. The controls are well weighted and the white LED's and display are clear, easy to read and make a welcome change from blue.

In terms of being a real world useable preamp, the Zodiac scores well thanks to the responsive volume control already mentioned and additionally thanks to the inclusion of a (rather smart) remote control. This all metal affair controls standby, input selection, volume and muting and aside from the metal buttons rattling slightly in their housings, the overall impression is very pleasing. Antelope also supplies a USB and toslink cable and the umbilical required to connect the DAC to the PSU and the USB in particular is usefully long enough to be used in the real world.

As you might expect, the Antelope can't perform its impressive feats of upsampling with a standard Windows or Mac driver and Antelope provides a bespoke one on their website (as well as one for Linux). This downloaded without a hitch to a Windows 7 machine and once installed also didn't appear to screw any other USB functionality up- always welcome but not universally guaranteed. Not required for playback but also handy to have is the control panel software that replicates the front panel controls of the Platinum. This is a nice touch if not as vital as it might be if Antelope hadn't supplied the remote.



USB testing of the Antelope was carried out with a Lenovo T530 ThinkPad running Windows 7 and Foobar as my playback software. The choice of Foobar stems from it being fairly logical in what it does and also having the ability (after a superhuman amount of faffing) to play DSD files. I also used the Naim ND5XS/XP5 XS combo that resides in my listening room full time to test the coaxial inputs. Partnering equipment was mainly the Naim SUPERNAIT 2 that also resides in the listening room full time. Instead of my usual Neat Momentums which are currently under a big pile of other things, I used a pair of Morel Octave 6 standmounts. I also tested the preamp functionality into the fixed input of a Cambridge Audio 851A.

The Antelope had already been run before it arrived with me but I left it to run for a bit before sitting down to listen. First things first, as the preamp of the Zodiac appears to be active all the time, it is important not to run it at maximum which appears to run the output voltage rather higher than line level. This left the Antelope inducing a little distortion on high notes and sounding a little rough. Winding it back to -15 on the dial massively improved matters and this was the setting I chose for the rest of listening.

Before I went anywhere near high res or DSD, I started with some bog standard 16/44.1 FLAC and settled back. From the off, the Antelope showed some very positive attributes. I suspect that when the Platinum goes somewhere to be rigorously measured, it will turn in some superb measurements and this means that the performance is not demonstrative in the way that something which is overtly monkeying around with the frequency response. What you get instead is a wonderful demonstration of how good a well sorted and well-engineered piece of digital can be.

With something well recorded but by no means immaculate like Fink's *Distance and Time* the Antelope is open, expansive and extremely assured about how it goes about presenting Greenhall in relation to supporting instruments. There is a three dimensionality to the presentation that is isn't overblown but still exceeds what you might expect a piece of digital attached to a Naim amplifier to achieve. Depth and height from stereo might be tricks of the mind but the Zodiac has it sussed and this lends the performance an effortlessness that means it rarely becomes fatiguing or overblown.

This is further aided by consistently excellent tonality that is unfailingly believable. The Antelope shows more than a nod to the company's studio background in that it won't flatter really poorly mastered discs but it will do everything it can to keep things listenable. With anything half decent, the Antelope is a very well balanced blend of accuracy and engagement. Voices have a weight a texture to them which lends them a realism that can be lacking and instruments that live or die on the tonality like piano and cello manage to sound right.

Underpinning this is a bass response that is detailed, deep and filled with the same refinement that the upper registers have. It has enough urgency to be fun as well. A spirited rendition of *Their Law* by The Prodigy has enough drive and attack to sound thoroughly entertaining and the Antelope is able to hammer through dance and more aggressive electronica with an assurance that is more than simply an accurate piece of studio gear going through the motions.

Moving to high resolution material in FLAC and WAV, the Antelope is excellent unsurprisingly enough. The same basic performance attributes that work well with lossless material are also applicable here with the general advantage that the excellent mastering of most high resolution material further plays to the strengths of the Antelope. Nothing I played at increments of 24/44.1, 88.2, 96, 176.4 and 192kHz showed any signs of issue and the Antelope is more than capable of presenting these recordings in the best possible light.

And DSD? Let me start by saying that playing DSD via Foobar at least is a task only marginally simpler than mastering zero point energy or surviving on photosynthesis. I actually went through the misery of setting my computer up for DSD testing with a product before the Antelope so most of the legwork had been done but nonetheless it remains a fiddly and fairly thankless task. And

the payoff? The limited selection of DSD test material I have sounded great- better than Yamaha's admittedly less expensive CD-S3000- but the material I have, I own on no other format so I can't hand on heart say it is better that it would be in the comparatively 'ordinary' format of 24/192. I've never subscribed to DSD being intrinsically 'magic' and the Antelope doesn't necessarily change this. It is staggeringly good with DSD but then again it is staggeringly good with WAV and FLAC too.



Tests with the coaxial input taking a feed from the Naim streamer suggest that the other digital inputs are equally well sorted and tests with the Cambridge Audio 851A acting as a power amp suggests that the volume control is linear and has enough increments to allow fine adjustment throughout the volume range. The preamp functionality is good enough to make the Antelope viable to be used in this fashion and the remote makes it convenient too.

The Antelope is seriously impressive all things considered. I tend towards streamers for convenience but the Zodiac is sufficiently well sorted to be a viable competitor if the USB source was sufficiently well sorted. I'm a pessimist and I suspect that the bespoke DSD implementation may never be given the range of material that allows it to show what it can really do- although I'd be delighted if this turns out not to be the case. That being said, the Zodiac is good enough with lossless and more readily available high res material to be something worth seeking out. This is great digital and arguably one of the most future proof designs on sale today. For anyone looking to replace their preamp too, this could be a knockout.

Price as tested; £4,250

Contact; <http://www.antelopeaudio.com>

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