



# Simpler streaming

THE LATEST ARRIVAL IN IFI AUDIO'S COST-EFFECTIVE ZEN RANGE IS A NEW DEPARTURE, BUT A LOGICAL ONE: THE ZEN STREAM IS THE PERFECT COMPLEMENT TO THE COMPANY'S RANGE OF DACS, HAS FUSS-FREE LOOKS AND IS EASY TO USE, SAYS ANDREW EVERARD

**Of all the questions I'm asked about streaming music, the most common is a fairly fundamental one: what should be used to access the content? After all, the rest of the music chain – DAC, amplification and speakers – sort of looks after itself, but there's a potentially bewildering array of devices to stream music, whether it's from one's own storage on a home network or Internet streaming services.**

Should one stick to what's at hand, in the form of anything from a home computer to a handheld device such as a smartphone or tablet? Or is the only way a dedicated network player, plugged into the system just as one would a CD machine? And all that's before you get into the choice of network connection – wired or Wi-Fi – and the selection of streaming service subscriptions to buy, so it's perhaps not surprising some give up before they've even started, deciding it's all too much of a faff, and it's more sensible to stick to playing LPs or CDs.

UK-based iFi Audio seems to share that pain: having launched a staggering range of variations on the DAC and DAC/headphone amp themes in recent years, including devices to enhance the audio from home computers and portable devices, it's now taken the bold step of launching its own streaming

devices, as part of its striking-looking entry-level Zen line-up, which already encompasses DACs, Bluetooth interfaces and even a (very good) phono stage, all wrapped in compact and distinctive-looking 'modern retro' casework. The Zen Stream, selling for just £399 and described as a 'Wi-Fi audio transport' may be tiny – it's just under 16cm wide and a mere 35mm tall – but, in common with other iFi Audio products, it packs a serious punch in terms of the technology within.

So, what actually is it? Well, that 'Wi-Fi audio transport' billing kind of tells the story, if not the whole one: think of it as one might a CD transport designed to be used with external digital conversion, but designed for streaming audio instead of discs, and you're on the right track. It has both Ethernet and Wi-Fi network connectivity, the latter using a



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little stub antenna that screws to the rear of the unit, but can also play music on USB storage devices via its two USB 3.0 ports. Those ports also allow it to be connected to a suitable USB-equipped DAC – iFi Audio supplied its excellent Zen DAC v2 DAC/headphone amplifier (just £159) as a companion-piece for this review – while there’s also a conventional coaxial digital output under a white plastic cap on the connections panel.

#### Simple set-up

With those facilities in place, the Zen Stream is simple enough to set up, whether one wants to use it wired or wireless: the unit will generate its own Wi-Fi network for initial set-up, to which a computer or portable device can be connected to specify the details of your home network via a browser window or, if you’re using a wired connection, you can go straight to the detailed set-up by typing the unit’s address – `ifi.local` or `192.168.211.1` – in on your device’s browser. It’s all very standard stuff, and you’ll be up and running almost instantly – the Zen Stream takes a minute or two to stabilise on the network – after which you’ll be ready to start playing music, at least once you’ve done the near obligatory system updates.

Even though the Zen Stream has only been available for a few months: checking for updates at the time of review, I found a whole stack of them available, which the device downloaded and installed promptly ‘over the air’ (OTA) using its network connection. You can also do this the old-fashioned way, using a downloaded file and a connection from a computer to the USB-C port provided on the Zen Stream for this purpose, but why would you when the OTA process is so simple?

The other unusual feature here is a screwhead switch to the rear – ah, that’s what the orange plastic tool in the box is for! – which allows the user to change the mode in which the unit operates. There’s an ‘All In One’ mode, in which the Zen Stream comes configured for set-up purposes, and which will do everything, as the title suggests, or you can set it to only operate as a Roon endpoint: at the time of review the Stream was compatible with

Roon Bridge software, with full certification on the way. It can also be set to ‘Tidal only’; to just operate using the Network Audio Adapter protocol (for which you’ll need the – rather pricey – Signalyst HQ Player software running on a computer), allowing it to direct packets of data straight to the connected DAC with no processing; or purely as a conventional DLNA client. For most users the ‘All In One’ setting will do just fine, but the options are there should you want them, and in these ‘Exclusive modes’ all other programs are shut down to optimise sound quality. I did much of my listening with the Zen Stream in Roon mode, finding it sounded crisper and cleaner when thus used, compared to running Roon in its default ‘jack of all trades’ setting.

#### Wide-ranging ability

Unlike other devices of this kind, the Zen Stream is far from limited in its scope: it will stream content at up to 384kHz/32bit and DSD256 over either Wi-Fi or Ethernet – most only hit peak speed via a wired connection – and render them in native form provided the connected USB DAC can handle them, or downsample to 192kHz/24 bit or DoP if you’re using the coaxial digital output with its limitations. Multicolour LEDs on the front-panel indicate the state of your network connection, and the file format being handled. It will also do the full MQA unfold should you be a fan of Tidal Hi-Fi streaming, and indeed can be controlled directly from apps including Tidal, Spotify, Qobuz and YouTube Music, and has Apple AirPlay built-in with Chromecast to come via a software update.

Otherwise, control is via a range of third-party DLNA clients, although at the time of writing iFi Audio was promising that its own app for the Zen Stream was ‘imminent’: for now, the Zen Stream will work with the likes of JRiver MediaCenter, Audirvana, Foobar 2000, XBMC, VLC Media Player, nPlayer, mConnect and more.

I mentioned before that there’s a lot packed into this little device and, as is usual with iFi Audio, much of it is trickled down from other products in the range, although the basis of the streaming implementation is the open-source Volumio

software: iFi says this has been 'coded and optimised by us to achieve the purest streaming software bar none'. The two USB 3.0 ports have the company's latest-generation Active Noise Cancellation, and its Purifier technology is applied to the coaxial digital out, while both outputs are regulated by iFi Audio's femto-precision GMT – Global Master Timing – clock to eradicate jitter. The whole plot runs on a 64-bit Quad-core ARM Cortex processor, and close attention has been paid to power supply noise, including a 1.5MHz controller for even greater noise-rejection, while power for the unit is provided by a supplied plug-top mains adapter. iFi Audio even includes a decent Ethernet cable in the box.

I used the Zen Stream with a few 'downstream' devices: while the Zen DAC v2 provided by the company was very good indeed, the company's more advanced Neo iDSD DAC (£799) showed the transport had even more to give, as did several rather high-end converters. Indeed, whatever I tried with the Zen Stream responded well to this transport, which certainly showed a clean pair of heels to the variety of computers with which I usually test USB DACs. It's hard to argue with the value the Zen Stream/DAC v2 pairing represents as a complete streaming solution, ready to plug into any amplifier – at just £458 all-in, it's a real snip, and more than the equal of many a much pricier network player. What it lacks in striking displays and 'real hi-fi' bulk, it more than makes up for with the quality of engineering and sheer performance.

### Amazing detail

Across a wide range of musical genres and file formats, the iFi Audio pairing amazed with the amount of detail and the weight of the bass on offer – and its taut control – and the effortless flow of music. Playing the excellent Jonathan Fournell recording of the Brahms *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, a recent Alpha release of excellent presence and focus, even the Zen pair did a fine job of placing the piano in a realistic soundstage, with a wonderful sense of the notes being struck and then decaying into the space, and while switching to the iDSD DAC built on these strengths, with even more power and impact in the more up-tempo variations, there was little to fault in the bargain duo's rendition of the recording. The speed and definition of the playing was captivating, and the sense of a real instrument in a realistic acoustic very fine indeed.

With the opening of Pink Floyd's 'High Hopes', the impression of the distant tolling bells is handled well, and maintained behind the track as it builds, while the bass and voice are beautifully rendered, as are the dynamics of the whole piece and its ominous tone. And even when one lets strip with the bleakness and big-theme near-operatic

histrionics of the band's *Animals* set, the drive and punch on offer from these little components is nothing short of remarkable, although the combination of their tiny stature and big, big sound is almost as incongruous as pigs flying over Battersea Power Station!

### Control and finesse

With the Klingzeug Barockensemble's *Memento Mori* set on BIS, the control and finesse is well suited to the intricacies of the contemplative pieces on offer, bringing out the layering of the instrumentation and the quality of the playing and recording. The ominous tone of the music won't have you skipping with delight – far from it! – but the way the Zen duo summons the atmosphere of pieces such as Locatelli's *Sinfonia funebre*, especially in the complexities of the second movement, shows there is still much to which to look forward.

The more I used the Zen Stream, the more I came to appreciate its qualities: yes, some will argue that a device simply taking data from a network and pumping it out as a digital datastream really can't have that much effect on the quality of the resulting sound, but the way in which the little box sees off even computers optimised for audio playback is nothing short of a revelation – if rather disheartening given the efforts I have in the past put into 'tuning' one of my Macs for the best possible performance as a digital audio source!

Even with the driving, 'major production' sound of Duran Duran's *Future Past*, the Zen Stream/DAC v2 combination delivers a suitably epic, yet closely detailed, sound from the standard CD-quality files, showing that even with highly commercial music of this kind the quality of this set-up shines through, while with a nod to the season the chilling take on festive music on Tarja Turunen's *From Spirits and Ghosts* set is delivered with bags of icy ambience right from the shivering opening 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!'

The ethereal voice is just as striking in the 'Pie Jesu' from Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Requiem*, while the lush yet frosty version of 'O Tannenbaum' has definite overtones of Danny Elfman's score for *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, the levels of information the iFi Audio pairing presents ensuring no detail is overlooked, and allowing the big, dramatic scoring of the latter part of the track, when it goes a bit Hans Zimmer, full expression.

By any standards the Zen Stream is a rather special piece of equipment: for the easy route it opens up into streaming audio; for the cost-effective pairing it makes with the Zen DAC v2; and for its ability to sustain further improvements to the DAC it feeds. It looks like iFi Audio has another winner on its hands.



### Specifications

<b>iFi Audio Zen Stream</b>	
Type	Streaming transport
Price	£399
Network connections	Ethernet,
Wi-Fi	USB ports 2x USB 3.0 for storage devices and audio out; USB C for updates (also available 'over the air' via network)
Digital outputs	USB, coaxial
File formats output	Up to 384kHz/32bit and DSD256 via USB; up to 192kHz/24bit via coaxial
Accessories supplied	Power supply, Wi-Fi antenna, Ethernet cable, screwdriver tool for mode selector
Dimensions (WxHxD)	15.8x3.5x10cm
Weight	578g
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