Replacing both the xCAN and xDSD, iFi Audio describes the xDSD Gryphon as its most ambitious portable headphone amplifier yet. Is this another boost to the success story?

Review: Jamie Bieseman Lab: Paul Miller

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cince launching in 2012, iFi Audio has established a reputation for delivering affordable, compact, often portable audio products. And at some pace too – looking back over the past decade, it’s hard not to feel overwhelmed by the number of devices the company has released. Not all are entirely ‘new’, because iFi Audio likes to ‘tweak’ its products, which is why the xDSD Gryphon tested here follows the EISA Award-winning xDSD Pro of 2017, and also serves as a successor to the xCAN [HFN Feb ’19].

True to form, the xDSD Gryphon is a (sort of) pocket-sized unit packed with inputs, outputs and a few tone/eq features (just about) pocket-sized unit packed with inputs, outputs and a few tone/eq features unique to iFi Audio, plus an internal battery allowing for operation on the go for up to eight hours, depending on usage. Charging is via USB-C, but when connected to a computer you have the option of juicing the Gryphon via the same port or connecting a second USB charging device.

**ADDED X FACTOR**

This DACAMP looks a little slimmer than its predecessor, even though it’s slightly larger. Luckily the size increase brought about by its larger battery has been put to good use with improved ergonomics. The centrally placed volume button is more user-friendly than that of the original xDSD, and – crucially – the Gryphon’s LED lighting scheme on the front resembles the glow rings of the real Mojo 2 from Chord (HFN Apr ’12)? Definitely.

Streaming via Bluetooth might be frowned upon by many audiophiles, but in the real world it can be extremely useful. OK, it’s not totally impossible to walk around with the xDSD Gryphon dangling around your neck with an additional Bluetooth connection when at home.

**GOING NATIVE**

For the Gryphon’s digital side, iFi Audio is using the same DAC we saw in the £3249 Pro iDSD Signature [HFN Jan ’22] but note that the latter contains four of the DAC-chips in an interleaved configuration, not just one. Regardless, the ‘True Native’ design of the DAC (PCM and DSD files have discrete pathways), together with an XMOS microcontroller running iFi Audio’s homegrown firmware, delivers first-rate performance. The Gryphon’s USB connection handles up to DSD512, PCM to 768kHz, and offers full MQS decoding. The SPDIF inputs are necessarily capped at 192kHz.

A further example of trickledown, the Gryphon’s USB connection performance. The USB connection handles up to DSD512, PCM to 768kHz, and offers full MQS decoding. The SPDIF inputs are necessarily capped at 192kHz.

**PLUG AND PLAY**

The bundled USB-C to USB-A lead was a little too short to connect the xDSD Gryphon comfortably to the rear ports on my Mac, but that small niggle aside, there’s not much to grumble about in terms of getting this compact DAC up and running. Opening Roon confirms iFi Audio’s device is Roon Tested, as the software immediately recognises it and presents an xDSD input in the interface. Plug and play, as it should be. PM’s boxout indicates the Gryphon ought not to be fazed by a demanding headphone, and my initial experiences with a Beyerdynamic DT 1990 Pro and Sennheiser HD 650, both connected via the balanced 4.4mm jack, supported this. The energy to present ‘Franacapa’ from Alessandro Quartra plays Attor Piazzola [IAN Solutions LS30467; 96kHz/24-bit/1000µW] as it should be.

**GRYPHON GROWL**

When we tested the inaugural xDSD [HFN Jul ’18] its performance marked a clear uplift on iFi Audio’s earlier portable DAC/headphone amps, including the nano iDSD [HFN Dec ’14] and ‘Black Label’ variant [HFN Apr ’18]. It was also the brand’s most powerful battery-powered amp – rated at 270mW/500mW and 500mW/160mW, it delivered a comparable 330mW/250mW on test with 3.3V or 18.75mV/600mV for high impedance headphones. Four years later, the xDSD Gryphon, the xDSD’s 1750mAH Lithium-Polymer battery replaced here with a 3600mAH cell for extra ‘grunt’ and 90g bodyweight, is rated at 314mW/32ohm and a full 520mW/8ohm [see Graph, right].

The 500mohm output impedance is also useful, ensuring the xDSD Gryphon headphone system is largely unaffected by swings in load impedance – from 0.2ohm to 0.05ohm to 0.2ohm [without bass presence shaping out to 0.4ohm] to 0.015 to 32ohm. Noise is low too with a residual of just +10dB (Phono) and a S/N ratio of 101.5db (re. 1V/32ohm), ensuring the xDSD Gryphon is both quiet with high sensitivity ear buds and lusty with low impedance cans. PM
Above: The xDSD Gryphon provides single-ended (3.5mm) and balanced (4.4mm) sockets that act as inputs in analogue headphone amp mode and as line outs in DAC/preamp mode. One 3.5mm S/PDIF and two USB-C inputs serve digital in and battery charging, respectively, with bass/presence response shaping toggled nearby.

Partner. In contrast, the original xDSD handles this track with the Sennheiser headphone competently but with less authority.

Bass Invader

I rarely experiment with bass liftings, but iFi Audio’s XBass II analogue processing is the exception, as it manages to narrowly boost lower frequencies without suppressing the lower midrange. Its effect is enjoyable too, ensuring the incessant beat drone on ‘Release’ by Kelly Lee Owens [LP:8, Smalltown Supersound STS394; 48kHz/24-bit FLAC] dominated the track without darkening it.

I wouldn’t engage XBass II with every model of ’phone, but it did make some presence-focused Final Audio B1 in-ears more to my liking. As expected, on a bass-oriented headphone, such as Sony’s MDR-Z7M2, the processing can be a bit too much. Approach with care!

XSpace, a crossfeed function for a loudspeakers-in-the-room listening effect, is more of mixed bag. According to iFi Audio it adds a ‘cavernous soundstage’ to recordings, which happens to be an accurate description. It does conjure a sense of grandeur, but this often comes at the expense of natural tonality. For example, ‘Armee Der Tristen’, from Rammstein’s recent Zeit album [UMG 0602445085019; 48kHz/24-bit FLAC], sees a midrange lift with XSpace engaged. Not a bad thing per se, but noticeable with guitar-driven music.

It was with the Final iEMs I pondered composer Max Richter really needed to re-work his controversial Vivaldi: Recomposed album from 2012. Listening through the B1, which the xDSD Gryphon drove nicely without a trace of background hiss, it turns out, that, yes, Vivaldi Recomposed [2022] [DG 48624648; 96kHz/24-bit FLAC] is at least a worthwhile effort. Returning to period instruments, Richter has created a grittier performance – a ‘punk rock sound’ – which the DAC/amp painted intensely and richly. It was possible to focus on the strings in the background of ‘Spring 3’ and discover a lot of texture, getting a real sense of the character of these Baroque era instruments.

Sounds of Summer

That said, it was the tempestuous violin playing from Elena Urioste which really grabbed my attention. The sheer speed and accuracy delighted here, while at the same time the xDSD Gryphon DAC/amp avoided presenting it in too penetrating a fashion. Even the violin finale ‘Summer 3’, which the DAC resolved so finely you get the impression the violin strings are ready to snap, stayed away from jarring brightness.

Hi-Fi News Verdict

The xDSD Gryphon possesses an admirable combination of useful features and superb sound, all at an affordable price. Comprehensive Bluetooth support, proprietary eq modes, plus a balanced output, make it as well suited for those seeking an on-the-go upgrade as for audiophiles feeding demanding headphones at home via their hi-res library. iFi Audio’s impressive track record continues...

Sound Quality: 84%

Bass Presence

Hi-Fi News Specifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specification</th>
<th>Measurement</th>
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<tr>
<td>Maximum output (re. 0dBfs into 47kOhm)</td>
<td>2.28W (unbalanced line out)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Max. power output (re. 0dBfs into 32kOhm)</td>
<td>314mW (headphone out)</td>
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<td>Output impedance (20kHz/20kHz)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freq. resp. (20kHz/20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Dimensions (W x H x D) / Weight</td>
<td>279x193x123mm / 215g</td>
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