



iFi ZEN One Signature

THE ZEN SERIES OF DACS HAS ALREADY DELIVERED SOME EXCEPTIONAL DEVICES AT AFFORDABLE PRICES. NOW IT'S THE TURN OF THE ONE SIGNATURE, SELLING FOR £349 AND COMBINING DAC AND BLUETOOTH FUNCTIONALITY – ED SELLEY WEIGHS IT UP.

The ZEN Series of devices from iFi performs a variety of functions, but the various models share a unifying theme. Each one – be it a DAC, phono stage or network streamer – has done one job to the exclusion of everything else. This focus has allowed various members of the family to be very good at this single role but does mean that if you need a wider spread of functionality, you may need to look elsewhere. A case in point is the £199 ZEN DAC: in its v2 form it offers superb performance but, as it only has a USB input, anyone with more than one digital source would be unlikely to select it. Enter the £349 ZEN One Signature, the first multiple input member of the ZEN family.

In essence, the One Signature is a combination of both the ZEN DAC v2 and the ZEN Blue v2 with extra functionality thrown in for good measure. This means that it combines a USB-B input, capable of handling PCM to 384kHz and DSD256 with a Bluetooth connection. This is able to receive just about every enhanced Bluetooth format on the market meaning that it doesn't really matter what your Bluetooth source is, the One Signature will connect to it in the highest possible quality. In the case of the LDAC codec- something which is now rolling out to most premium Android devices after years of being rather scarce- this means that a 24/96kHz file (with a degree of compression) can be sent wirelessly.

As well as the USB input, the One Signature now offers an optical and coaxial input that are selected on an either/or basis. This is not absolutely ideal because it means that despite the three connections, the iFi is still a twin input DAC so someone looking to connect a TV and a CD transport for example would still need to consider something like the similarly priced Cambridge Audio DacMagic 200M instead. There is some additional flexibility though. The coax input can also be switched to function as an output

too making the One Signature able to operate as a USB to S/PDIF converter.

The decoding hardware of the One Signature follows a pattern seen in other iFi devices. The company eschews the use of either ESS or AKM chipsets for TI/Burr Brown units. For the USB input, this is partnered with an XMOS processor (of the newer 16 core type that appeared in the ZEN DAC v2) which also gives the One Signature full MQA decoding as well. The rest of the circuit then proceeds to make use of various components selected by iFi, including MuRata capacitors and Vishay MELF resistors to ensure that the signal path is as good as it can be. The 'Signature' badging denotes that components over and above those found in the standard ZEN components are used.

Unlike the simpler ZEN DAC, the One Signature is neither a preamplifier nor fitted with headphone connections. On the rear panel, the same pairing of RCA outputs and a 4.4mm pentaconn connector are present, the latter ensuring that the One Signature can be used with an XLR input with the relevant cable. These two connections are fixed level and cannot be adjusted. Something that has been retained from the ZEN DAC is that you can power the

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Specifications

iFi Audio ZEN One Signature

Type	DAC
Price	£349
Inputs	USB Type A, Bluetooth, coaxial, optical
Outputs	Line stereo on RCAs, balanced on 4.4mm Pentaconn
Format handling	PCM up to 384kHz, DSD up to DSD 256/11.2MHz
Other services	MQA
Dimensions (WxHxD)	15.8x3.5x10cm
Weight	485g

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One Signature via the USB input if you wish via a dedicated cable. Alternatively, iFi provides a 5v PSU which feels rather smarter than most units supplied at this price point, or you can go the whole hog and use the £299 iFi iPower Elite linear PSU with a 5v output, which was on hand for testing.

The Signature central 'porthole' is used to show the incoming format, with an indicator next to it showing the sample rate. This is joined by an input and a power button and another to turn the front panel indicators off altogether. As a 'Signature' device, the One Signature comes in a darker black and blue finish which is something of a mixed blessing. I prefer this finish to the grey of the non-Signature devices but there is no escaping that, if you partner a One Signature with a ZEN Stream as I did for some of the testing, you have two identically shaped devices that stack neatly on top of one another but are completely different finishes. The overall build quality is excellent for the price though.

Wonderfully unforced

Initially powering the One Signature via its supplied 5v PSU and taking a feed from a Roon Nucleus, the immediate impression it gives is in keeping with other members of the ZEN family. Something that the One Signature is extremely effective at is avoiding the 'etched' presentation that some DACs generate in the pursuit of detail. It can present the Kairos Quartet's *Everything We Hold in* a way that feels wonderfully unforced. The duet in *Narrowboat Man* captures the interplay between Emilia Martensson and Marc O'Reilly beautifully and frames them relative to the supporting instruments. Everything sounds both tonally correct and usefully detailed but there's no emphasis on any part of the music that puts undue attention on it.

Further listening reveals the One Signature to be extremely even across its frequency response. The version of *Family Snapshot* on Peter Gabriel's *Plays Live* album elegantly demonstrates this. Growing from Gabriel's almost unaccompanied vocals to its significant crescendo and back down to solo vocals doesn't leave the iFi unsettled at any stage. Indeed, across a fair bit of use into a wide variety of equipment, I have not really had it show any significant weaknesses with any of it. If you can make use of the 4.4mm output, there are some useful performance gains to be had there too, the resident Chord Electronics CPM 2800 MkII sounding significantly better when fed this way.

If you have been happily using a DAC that does gently emphasise a particular area of the frequency response, you may wind up feeling that the iFi sounds a little flat but the reality is that it is simply delivering what is in the mix itself. The appeal if this presentation is bolstered

by two related attributes. The first is that the One Signature is commendably genre neutral. Nothing I've thrown at it while it has been on test has unsettled it or fundamentally changed the performance. The second is that I have found it to be usefully forgiving of less than perfect material. That lack of emphasis on any part of the frequency response and unforced method of delivering detail is ideal for not highlighting the limitations of harsher or more compressed recordings.

What is most impressive about this is that you can buy the One Signature as a wired DAC and then discover that the Bluetooth input is the equivalent of a free dessert. I don't feel that the performance of this section is night and day better than the standard ZEN Blue; the format perhaps limiting some of the 'Signature gains' that the wired connections can show, but this is still one of the most compelling Bluetooth devices you can buy at any price. It is the sort of feature you might idly experiment with at some point and very quickly morph into using on a more regular basis.

Power supply gains

Experimenting with the iPower Elite power supply has been interesting too. Without unsettling that extremely even handed presentation, the linear PSU is able to give the One Signature a greater amount of both out and out bass depth and increase the feeling of air and space around the presentation at the same time. With a 24/88.2 rip of Kraftwerk's *Minimum Maximum*, the pulsating 'Elektro Kardiogram' benefits from both, with the low notes gaining a level of heft that helps them to feel meaningfully infrasonic on a large enough pair of speakers while simultaneously doing a better job of capturing the space of the Tallinn Exhibition Hall. The two devices together would come in at £650 and I'd argue that there is not a great deal under £1,000 that will trouble them. Conversely, while it is possible to power the One Signature from the USB output of the ZEN Stream, I would recommend against doing so as it benefits the performance of neither.

The reality is though is that I am reduced to this level of nitpicking to find anything to criticise about the One Signature. Yes, it is a reasonable hike in price over the single input ZEN DACv2 (and £50 over the Signature version of that; a device I have yet to test) but given it contains a ZEN Blue v2 as well as another input, that is hardly an unreasonable increase when all this is taken into account. With the linear power supply in particular, the One Signature is capable of performance that is pretty much as good as it gets for the asking price and combining this with the additional flexibility of more inputs makes this an absolutely brilliant affordable DAC.