



iFi Audio iDSD Black Label - it should be on your short list!



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Pros: Great all around bang for the buck

Cons: volume indicator is barely visible

iFi iDSD Black Label

Hey guys, this is my quick review of the ifi idsd Black Label. The unit itself is courtesy of ifi, and is a loner unit which I am borrowing for seven days as part of a world wide review tour. Besides getting to audition the unit at our home for seven days with our own gear, there are no other incentives or hidden agendas on my part. This is my honest opinion and my opinion only.

Thank you to Laurence @ ifi for giving me the opportunity of auditioning this unit.

Unboxing:



Upon opening the box I was greeted with the unit itself. Taking the unit out of the box, it feels like a well made piece of gear. There are two switches on the front, one is for the XBass+ and one for the 3D+ features. The switches feel sturdy and have a nice firm click to them when flicking them up or down. Up engages the given feature, down is the normal off position.

The volume knob has a good size for the device, and sticks out enough out of the way of the 3D+ switch which is positioned right next to the volume knob. One thing to note here is that the volume indicator on the knob itself is just a small slit and is black on an already black knob so I really couldn't tell most of the time where the volume was at. I would have preferred for the tiny slit to be painted in orange like the rest of the printing on the device for a better visual aid.

Also on the front of the device we find a 6.3MM jack and a 3.5MM jack. The 6.3MM jack is the headphone output, and the 3.5MM jack is actually an input! I was surprised at first since I was expecting both would be headphone outputs to accommodate for both 6.3mm and 3.5mm headphones without a need for an adapter, non the less I don't find it to be lacking either way. The addition of this input makes this versatile device even more diverse as it can be used strictly as a headphone amplifier too!



Moving on to the back of the device we find a pair of RCA outs and a very clever combo SPDIF Coaxial/Optical Input and Output. Also on the back of the device we find the USB input. Again, I find it quite clever for iFi to have the USB input implemented this way. It is essentially a male USB jack that has been recessed in the chassis of the unit. I found it extremely sturdy and very spacious. It easily accommodated for a CCK from my ipod touch and it also fitted my Android USB otg cable without of course, the need for any extra adapters in both instances.



Flipping the iDSD BL on its side we find three small recessed switches that are very well implemented as far as being easily accessible. Easy to switch yet also out of the way enough that I don't think they'll be accidentally engaged when carrying the unit in your hand. Turning the unit on it's belly we find some more orange printing indicating, for example, what these three switches on the side of the unit are for.

One switch is for the Power Mode, one for the Polarity, and one for the Digital Filters.

There are three positions on the Power Mode switch. Eco, Normal and Turbo.

Eco = for high-sensitivity IEMs

Normal = for medium-sensitivity headphones

Turbo = for the most-demanding headphones

The Polarity switch has either "+" or "-"

From iFi: "Adjustable signal polarity of music playback. For a digital signal source only (ie. not for an analogue signal via the 3.5mm input.)"

In all honesty I have not read up much on this and I tried it a couple of times and found there was no noticeable change to the sound.

The Digital Filters switch also has three positions and are as follows: Bit-Perfect, Minimum Phase, and Standard. I believe iFi recommends "Bit Perfect" for PCM, so that's what I used my short time with the iDSD BL since I did not use any DSD or DXD files.

Also on the bottom of the unit we find two more switches. One switch is towards the front of the unit and it's iFi's very own iEMatch(TM). This switch is for further use in tweaking your headphone output for ultra sensitive iems especially. There are three positions on the switch; Off, High sensitivity and Ultra Sensitivity.



Towards the back of the unit we find a two position switch indicating Preamplifier and Direct mode. Direct mode is used as a fixed RCA output that bypasses pretty much everything else on the unit and goes straight to your power amp, headphone amp, etc.

Preamplifier: (direct quote from ifi)

the iDSD functions as a DAC/preamplifier. The volume control is now enabled for the RCA line output and when used in conjunction with the Power Mode offers gain of:

Eco = 0 dB

Normal/Turbo = 9dB

Last but not least on this incredibly versatile unit we find a female USB socket on the remaining side of the unit. This USB port is labeled SmartPower Charging on the belly of the unit. It is used to charge small devices like your smartphone, ipod or other digital transport you might be using with your iDSD BL.

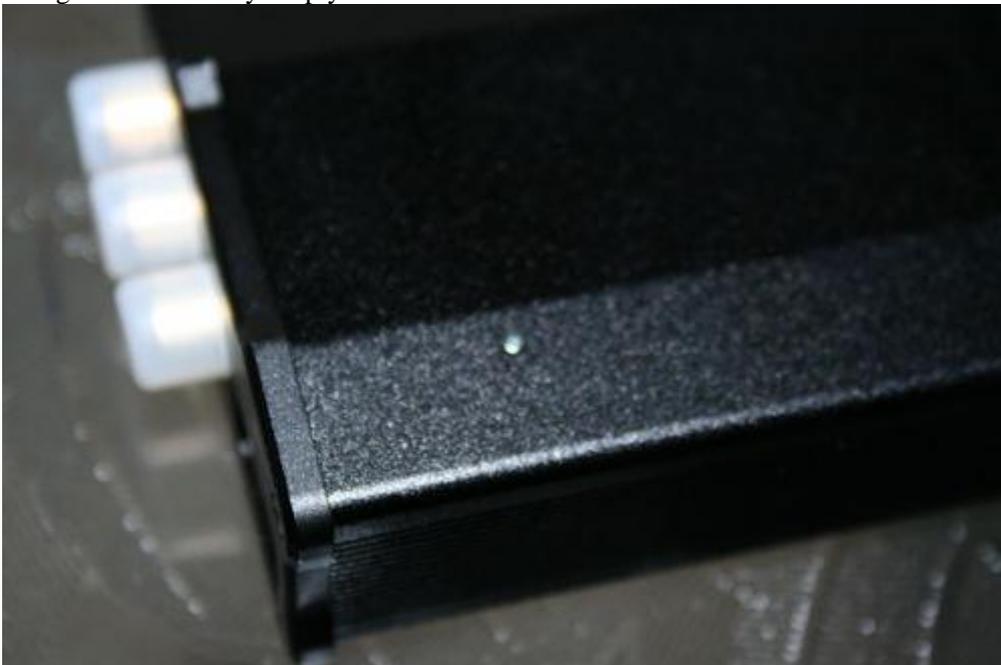
Ah, I almost forgot to mention. There is one thing on the top side of the unit and that is a very small pinhole of an indicator light. This LED light turns different colors to indicate different things:



| LED Color | Mode |
|-----------|---------------------|
| Magenta | DSD512 22.5/24.5MHz |
| Blue | DSD256 11.2/12.2MHz |



| | |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| Cyan | DSD128/DSD64 2.8/3.1/5.6/6.2MHz |
| White | DXD705/768kHz |
| Yellow | 176/192kHz DXD352/384kHz |
| Green | 44/48/88/96kHz |
| Green(Flashing) | Awaiting USB Connection |
| Red | Battery Low |
| No light | Battery Empty |



Accessories inside the box:

- 1x Blue male USB to female USB cable (1 meter) to connect iDSD to a PC.
- 1x Male 3.5mm to male 3.5mm (15 cm) interconnect cable to use iDSD as an amplifier.
- 1x Purple male RCA to RCA cable. (50 cm)

1x Female USB Type B to Female USB Type A converter “cable” to connect iDSD to a PC with a audiophile grade USB Type B cable.

1x Female USB Type B to Female USB Type A converter “dongle” to connect iDSD to a PC with a audiophile grade USB Type B cable.

1x iFi branded, velvety carrying pouch.

2x Silicone bands to attach iDSD to a phone.

1x Silicone piece that protects your phone when you attach your phone to iDSD.

1x Female 3.5mm to male 6.3mm connector.

3x silicon covers/protectors for RCA and coax jacks.



Turning on the unit.

The volume knob is also used to power on the unit. I used the provided blue USB cable and plugged in to my laptop. Plugged in my headphones, turned on my Tidal desktop app, aaaannnd nothing! No music came out. I opened up my Windows playback devices and did not see the idsd BL on the listed devices so I figured I needed some drivers. A quick google search lead me to the idsd BL product page and on the bottom of the page found the Downloads tab which led me to the Windows drivers. After a quick download and setup I was ready to go...

Listening impressions.

I did most of my listening the first few days with my Grado PS1000. The Grados are not considered particularly hard to drive but I have found them to be a bit picky of headphone amps and even DACS. I've owned the PS1000 for over two years now and it has been overall my favorite headphone up to date. I would say it is a very colored headphone compared to all other TOTL headphones I've tried, but it is also very exciting for me. Listening through these cans is always a pleasure for me as the music is always very lively and transparent. The midbass has a very noticeable boost and the highs are very airy. Voices and guitars are excellent imo.

Listening to a few tracks the idsd BL sounds balanced to me and very similar to what I'm used to hearing straight out of the Mojo. The Ps1000 sounds properly driven, the details that I'm used to hearing are all there, there is no added sibilance which is great because I've come across a couple of DACs and amps that didn't play well with the Ps1000. It does not sound too analytical, has nice warmth and the mids sound proper, not thin. I do feel like it might not be as involving as the Mojo.

I decided to compare it against the Mojo since I feel like these two are direct competitors and are around the same price range. For my home setup I use the Mojo feeding my headphone amp so I was curious to see how the iDSD BL would compare.

Micro iDSD BL as a Dac vs Chord Mojo.

I connected both the Mojo and the BL to my laptop. Both are then hooked up to the Schiit SYS and then the Schiit SYS to my MAD Ead+ HD headphone amp. I listen with my Grado PS1000. All tracks were from the Tidal desktop app. All are lossless FLAC files and also lots of new "MASTER" files which are at 24/96kHz and a few files at 24/88kHz. In the Tidal settings I check "Force volume" and "Use Exclusive Mode" for both the Mojo and the BL.

Switching between the two DACS is as easy as opening the settings in Tidal, picking either dac and the pressing down the button on the SYS. It is important to note that in this direct mode, the Mojo sounds a tad louder so I did compensate the volume on the amp when switching to the idsd BL. Volume matching was done by ear and I did as best as I could.

Setting on the Mojo itself: I held down both volume buttons when powering on to set the volume to a standard output level for typical line-out use.

Setting on the BL: I tried both from battery power mode and USB powered. Output switch set on "Direct".

What I hear with this setup going back and forth was that the BL sounds a bit more laid back than the Mojo. I felt that overall it felt a bit short in comparison. The Mojo simply feels like it has more PRESENCE. The ifi BL tends to have a softer sound. The bass hits a tad softer, vocals are a tiny bit further (also softer), the Mojo sounds like it has a blacker background, the music sounds like it has better attack and it sounds clearer than the BL. There was more enjoyment out of the Mojo since I caught myself more than a few times bobbing my head, singing along and tapping my feet to the music when listening was switched to the Mojo.

Now for the sake of being a bit more thorough I'd thought I try this same setup but this time I switched the idsd BL Output switch to pre-amplifier instead of direct mode. I then proceeded to get the volume on my amp as closely matched as possible between the Chord Mojo's "standard output level" and the volume wheel on the idsd BL to match it. Power mode on the idsd BL was on "normal" btw.

What I now heard was a lot more closer than before, in fact I'm having a hell of a time trying to nitpick and find any differences between these two. I hesitate to say the Mojo is a tiny bit more nuanced than the BL, but I can't reliably tell a difference so I'll just leave it at that.

As a dac/amp vs Chord Mojo:

Same setup as above but without the Schiit SYS and my MAD Ear+ in the audio chain. Volume matching was by ear and once again I did as best I could with these two. Using the Grado PS1000 here's what I found:

I spent quite a bit of time comparing side by side really trying to pick at something to reliably point out but in all honesty I would not be able to tell these two apart in a blind test with my headphones. Any differences that might exist are so small that I don't feel comfortable even pointing out. Again this is my experience with a given set of headphones. One thing to note though, on extended listening sessions between the two, I noticed that I found the Mojo more engaging and musical. The iDSD BL while apparently not lacking any behind the Mojo still fell a bit short for me as far as listening pleasure goes.

Listening with XBass+ and 3D+:

I must say that I did enjoy both the 3D+ and XBass+ features. With the Ps1000 the 3D+ switch makes the treble more airy and expansive. Highs are boosted very tastefully with these headphones and I did find it useful in many tracks but not always. Both these features are well implemented and are good to have imo. I also had great success with the XBass+ and 3D+ on a pair of Ortofon eq-5 iems that I borrowed from a friend of mine. Again the 3D+ makes the treble sound airy and the sound stage more expansive and the bass boost did just that boosting the low end on this iem to a much more favorable level.

Electrical interference:

One thing that I almost forgot to mention was that I found the iDSD BL did really well on my desk right next to my cell phone and also my office phone. The reason I noticed this is because I always have to set my cellphone aside to a different location away from my gear and I also end up unplugging the office phone from the wall wart because of electrical interference.

Due to the short review period with the unit time did not permit me to further test the unit more in depth. I did try the unit as a DAC/pre-amp with my power amp and speakers and I can say that the couple of tracks I heard sounded very well in this setup. I also wanted to compare the amp section of the idsd BL versus my RSA Intruder but only manage to squeeze in a few tracks. I thought the idsd definitely held it's own but the intruder still has a more mature sound and is a step ahead of the amp in the idsd bl.

In conclusion:

Well that about does it for my impressions of the Micro iDSD Black Label. In my opinion ifi have themselves a winner in this device and I would have no reservations recommending this to anyone who is in the market for a DAC/AMP combo in this price range and a bit beyond really, whether it be desktop, transportable or portable

this thing is very good and certainly up there with the Chord Mojo on a short list of what to buy under \$1000.
Great bang for the buck!

Sources:

Dell i7 Laptop

Ipod touch 6th Generation

Samsung galaxy Note 4

Samsung TV - optical out

Amps:

Mad Ear+ HD

RSA Intruder

Yamaha ~~CA-1010~~ *edit CA-2010

Headphones:

Grado PS1000

Grado GH-1

Magnum V7 build

Ortofon Eq-5 iem

Speakers:

Magnepan .7

All Music was lossless tracks from Tidal.