

Williamson on the Hardware: The Alpha Design Labs STRATOS

09-23-2016 | By [David Williamson](#) | Issue 87

Incredibili Sine Compromissum



This is it. Think of Trader Joe's. [The Hyundai Genesis](#). A Hamilton watch, Uniqlo clothing, a CAO cigar, the...well, you may begin to get the idea. Bear witness: this is the [Alpha Design Labs STRATOS](#) and it is the hidden value champion of USB DAC's. Long may it reign.

God Knows I've Got the Fight

To be upfront: [I am not an expert](#). An aficionado, yes. A delighted student of the audio arts who is constantly learning...yes. Do I have an ass-ton of band and album factoids nestled up against and alongside my overpowering love for music in my brain? Well, I'm not a cognitive psychologist either, but [I love music](#), [I love good music](#), and I abso-damn-lutely love higher-end audio. That said, the good Dr. D saw fit (or took enough pity on me) to allow me some time with the ADL STRATOS. And despite my best efforts to not write this and get some (lots of) extra time, "for research," the bill has come due.

Basics 101

This is a no-nonsense box. It follows in the hallowed (and possibly apocryphal) Henry Ford tradition of offering [every color option imaginable](#), as long as that color is black. From a purely aesthetic perspective, form follows function at an appropriate distance. Things are where they are because they need to be where they are. The

power button is an actual button and will turn the device "on" and put it in "standby" with no complications or issues, which is all I've ever desired of a power button. The volume dial is click-less and conveniently sized (not oversized, which implies *too large*, but sized in a large-yet-befitting manner in relation to both the DAC and my hand) which gives it plus two points in my book. There is an array of marked input and resolution lights that stretch the left front panel with little to no wasted space. If you've ever experienced the nightmare that is "which resolution is represented by which color?", "why are *ALL* the colors lit up?" and "wait...they're flashing now, what does that even mean?" with other DAC's you will appreciate the simplicity of this panel.

You're provided with an XLR 4-pin balanced and a 1/4" unbalanced headphone connection upfront, which translates into another plus for me and a very thoughtful addition. If you have the STRATOS racked, placed in amongst other components or if you have an occasionally messy desk (like me) then you may appreciate the simplicity of those front facing connections which negates the fumbling and swearing that goes along with blindly groping the back of your DAC to find the correct socket(s).

All in all, the STRATOS has got to have been the easiest setup/integration I've ever done. I mean, this isn't my first rodeo and this isn't rocket science (or brain surgery, or computational quantum mechanics) but the experience was anything but challenging. Connect the power cable, connect the USB cable, a quick download/install (if you're of the windows persuasion) and you're off to the proverbial races. The remote is solid and as simple as a remote needs to be and it accomplishes its tasks with simple efficiency (to be honest, I only used the remote to crank the volume from the couch, so it didn't have a tough road to begin with).

I've owned (and own) simple-to-use DAC's and the STRATOS still takes the "easy-button" crown, hands down. My [Sony UDA-1](#) stays with my gaming PC because it has playback issues if I 'm trying to play 128fs DSD files and I'm not using the "right" media player. My faithful traveling rig, the [ifi Nano iDSD](#), is living with my Dad currently and can be, very occasionally, finicky about format playback as well.

Regarding my long defeat, I've fought with my beloved [Mytek Stereo 192-DSD DAC](#) for years now, resigning myself to its idiosyncrasies as the price I paid for access to the wonderfully and enormously engaging sound it imparts. Do I want to update to the latest build of Jriver? That depends on whether I'm prepared to change every setting on the PC and Jriver for the umpteenth time (because the Mytek really does not like it if I change its ecosystem). Did I seriously think I could use the Mytek to play music and then switch over to general computer audio duties ([video games](#), [YouTube](#), [video games](#), [video games](#), [YouTube](#)) without paying homage/tribute/obeisance? No, that's obviously a ridiculous idea. Instead I'll get to spend an exciting hour of settings fiddling and hair pulling every time I switch between sources. Wait, I wasn't going to connect another DAC to the same system the Mytek is connected to was I, especially not at the same time? **"I'm sorry Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that."** I've experienced my share of Mytek-Stockholm-syndrome, taking the pleasure and pain in equal measure. Beautiful sound; reference-worthy even with quirks to make me scream in frustration, all in one delightful package.

The STRATOS (no, this isn't a Mytek piece) has none of these issues. Or any other issues for that matter. Integration with [JRiver](#) was instant and painless. Did I want to connect my ifi Nano iDSD at the same time? Sure, go ahead, it's all copacetic. I had my Sony UDA-1, ifi Nano iDSD and the ADL STRATOS all hooked up to the same system(s) at the same time, gleefully switching between profiles to hear it like this and like that and like this (**and uh**). Pure simplicity. Want to use the STRATOS with a laptop, or Windows tablet? No problem, it all just works. Formats? All of them, in any order you'd like. I couldn't cause a hiccup or stutter, just rock-solid playback at all times. The closest I could come to ANY problem was when playback using a Windows tablet

began to dim and stall (after I had made all sorts of grandiose statements of system magnificence to my brother-in-law, it putzed out as he was listening, don't you know). I spent a few frantic minutes looking at cables and settings before I realized that Windows 10 was in the middle of one of its pigheaded and irrevocable auto-updates. Update and restart completed, the STRATOS sang clearly once more.

In terms of "just working," I honestly think the STRATOS could be the greatest non-mobile mobile DAC ever. If I was going to be staying somewhere semi-permanently outside of my home and had but one DAC I could take with me, the Stratos would be it. The size and weight is perfectly manageable if not entirely negligible, especially if you're going no further than from point A to point B. It's sturdy enough that I wouldn't despair of it traveling in luggage, though I'd box it if I was flying with it (as baggage-handlers are animals). But I'd never have to worry about it not working or not meshing with my system. Period. No caveats, no qualifiers. It's not going to Burning Man (nor am I, thank you) *but it could* and it would be right at home at a Marriott Residence Inn or an office where you need a kick-ass DAC to get through your work day (and if anyone is hiring at said office, send me an email please).

The Hills are Alive

The sound is open and dynamic and sneakily seductive. There's a whiff of effortlessness accompanying the STRATOS that I've yet to have encountered with any of the other DAC's I've brought home. I've played the "A-B-C comparison" game with DAC's before, sometimes making a day of it with drinks and friends. We'd swap headphones and format resolutions along the way in a push to gain a better appreciation of what was in front of us. I've got the best memories of a particularly bad-ass Tuesday listening session ([Soundgarden – Superunknown](#)), where we discussed which DAC reproduced the album most faithfully to our remembrances of first hearing it; which DAC highlighted the album's subtle nuances most clearly, and which DAC we enjoyed listening to the album with the most. The answer for each person and for each question was unsurprisingly a different DAC. We all have our preferences and just like with any other component different DACs can cater to different ears and different styles of music. That said, with all the hours I've put on the STRATOS and with all the feedback from listeners here at my home, I'm reasonably confident that were we to re-visit that Tuesday session the STRATOS would cut right through it all and take the crown with both eyes closed and one hand tied behind its back.

Tangentially, I own a couple of [Audioquest's Jitterbugs](#) and am constantly impressed by the contrast and separation bump I get when I include them in a component chain. So it is with great weight (but small size) that I say that the STRATOS benefited *the least* of all my DAC's from the addition of the Jitterbugs (and also, "All My DAC's"? Should this not be a webseries or at least a regular column? Great name...). There was still a mildly appreciable level of detail to be gained with the Jitterbug(s), just not as much as I'd sensed when using them with other DAC's. The STRATOS' dynamics are such that any separation gains from the Jitterbug(s) were ironically relegated to background noise. The STRATOS sings clearly and achieves such a natural sound, an "aliveness" if you will, that it seems to have been crafted through some form of musical alchemy.

In terms of driving cans, I only spent any significant time using the Sennheiser HD650's and Audeze LCD-3's with the Stratos. Rest assured that both cans were driven quite easily and to their fullest potential despite any reputed high impedance. Appreciation of the STRATOS was utter and complete using either set of headphones and, short of pairing it with some G-d awful Beats, I can't imagine a headphone pairing that would fail to delight. If you feel a need to crank the [volume to eleven](#), then you might hit a bit of a wall with the STRATOS. You might find a bit of that liquid clarity and separation disappears the louder one gets. Thankfully I only

observed this at the outer ranges of my volume tolerance, so a judicious volume-dial-hand (or remote hand) may be all the solution one needs in this regard.

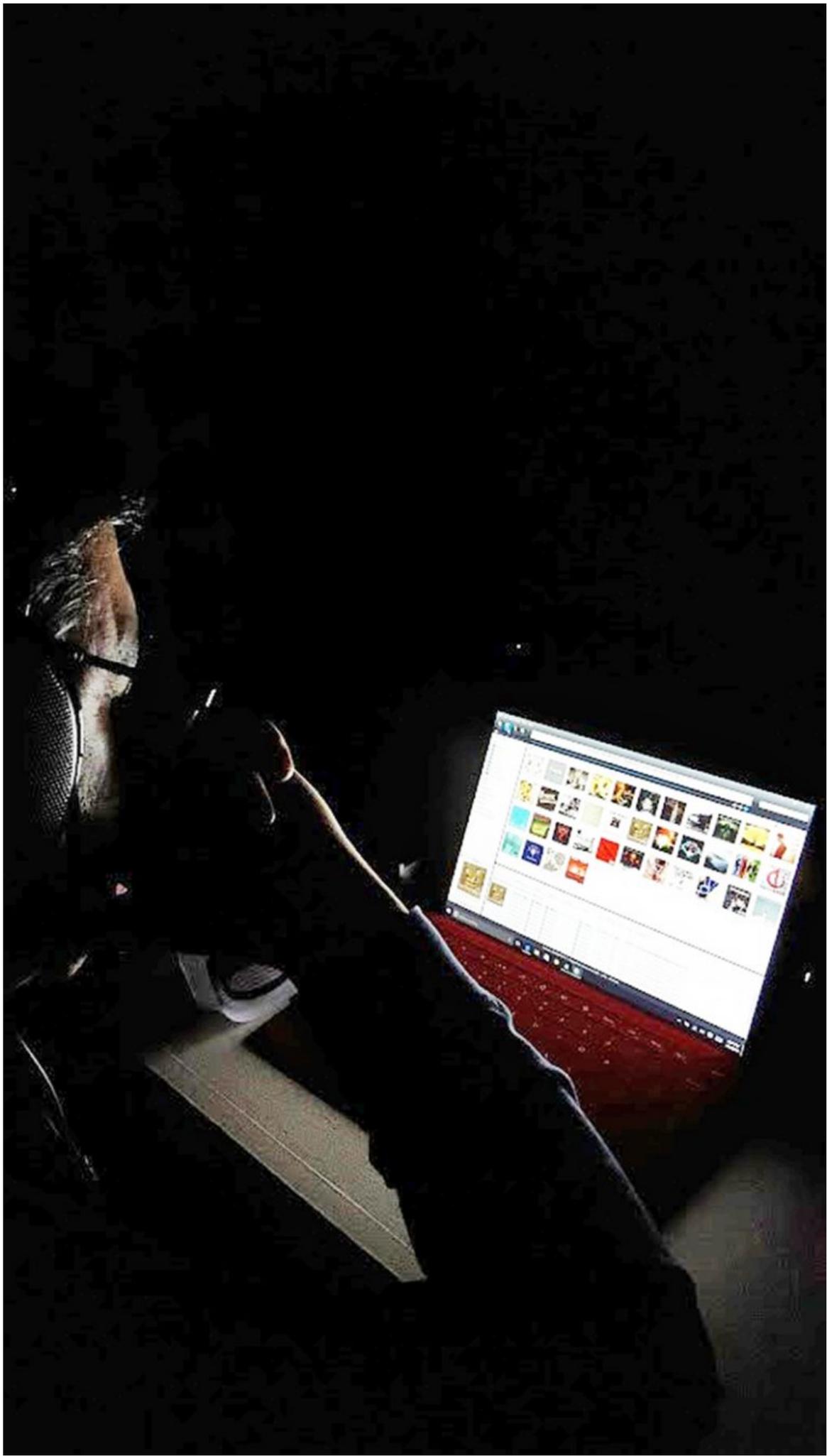
And Now for the Bidness

Ever since Dr. D blew my mind with the DSD256 **MAGNIFICAT** playing through a **whole heap of wonderfulness** and out of the amazeballs **Tidal Agoria** speakers, well, I've been chasing that sound/feeling/thrill like a kid chasing fireflies at dusk. And so, I'm more than happy to report that the ADL STRATOS paired with a set of **Audeze LCD-3's** and **JRiver Media Center** was absolutely up to the challenge of giving me that same thrill.

And not just me! Every. Single. Person. that I cajoled into sitting and listening was moved, in various ways and to various levels of delight or despair. After a "taster" session many a friend was left plainly delighted, grinning like an idiot and immediately set about inquiring into *just how much this all costs* and *how long are you going to have this setup* and *is there a good time to come listen again*. One friend simply shook his head, carefully removed the headphones and in a congenial tone said, "Well, fuck you, you've ruined me for music now." If that isn't a testament to the overwhelming awesomeness of the STRATOS, then nothing I've got to say here is going to make any either/or anyways.

My father is more of an audio enthusiast than an aficionado, due mostly to a wife who's not nearly as cool with large and repeated equipment expenditures as my own (hey, that'd be my mom, I love her, but I calls 'em like I sees 'em). He's a retired computer engineer and as such probably retains more technical expertise and knowledge in his left pinky than I've managed to gather in toto (that'd be the **Latin phrase**, not the **band**). Given his mechanical background it's little wonder that he's as excited about audio equipment as he is about the actual music. Since he lives nearby he's always the first one over to see all the cool new things I get to bring home, from headphones to speakers and everything in-between. Somehow, surprisingly, he wasn't the first to experience the "MAGNIFICAT/Audeze/STRATOS/Trifecta Demo Kaboom," but his listening session was certainly the one that stayed with me and most deeply impacted me.

As I got my dad comfy and finished his setup, adjusting the headphones to size and dialing in a volume level that I hoped wouldn't pierce his ears, I asked if he wanted the overhead lights on or off. I'm firmly in the "I don't care" camp myself (except when I do), so I was unsurprised to hear him say he was indifferent. Boxes checked, stage set, I clicked "play" and stepped out to reheat a cup of coffee. When I returned a few minutes later I observed that my father was sitting silently, and not just silently, but utterly still, as well. There was a sense of worshipfulness surrounding him, due in no small part to the adoration being performed so beautifully through the music. As I remained watching, he remained silent and still and then, ever so slowly, he bowed his head slightly. As slowly as he'd bowed his head my father closed his eyes in what I can only describe as an act of reverent resignation. The STRATOS was giving him a glimpse of an audio world he clearly hadn't known existed. The moment was as solemn as any I've been witness to, so I gently turned the lights off, careful not to interrupt or intrude. There was no indication my father noticed, much less cared.



The majesty of the MAGNIFICAT aside (and what an aside!), the STRATOS took my father somewhere totally new where he'd been completely immersed by the sound and entirely absorbed by it. He's been previously privy to many a listen through the LCD-3's, and is no stranger to the mystic art of DSD, so I put much less stock in these elements than I do in the STRATOS itself. When my father had finished listening (and I do mean finished, he'd let the first seventeen minutes roll by without a twitch of his fingers) he pressed pause on JRiver, removed the headphones, and then he gave me a look that's usually reserved for the offer of a second Scotch or my noticing of an attractive woman. With a calm, measured voice and the aura of revelation swirling about him my father said "I'm positive you could spend a lot more money and replace everything here with better and pricier components" hard period, long pause. "But I don't know why you would possibly need anything beyond this".

The Rub

So, what do I think about the STRATOS? I'm enamored of it. It may be the single greatest piece of equipment that has graced my house. Do I want one? Yes. Solidly Yes. Are there "better" or capital-b Better DAC's available? Sure, absolutely. The STRATOS can't play Octo DSD. It doesn't respond to voice commands. It will not change my child's pajamas and it has yet to make me a proper Manhattan. All of this is tertiary to these questions: Do you want a sensibly-priced DAC that is more than capable of playing all of the readily available audio formats currently on the market? Do you like listening to music more than you like spending money?

I can only recommend the ADL STRATOS so much, which turns out to be all of the much. All of it. The magic-per-dollar with the STRATOS is unmatched. The pure listening joy is unrivaled. Certainly there are DAC's that will offer you more: more clarity, more volume, more neutrality. But...BUT...If you have even the slightest inclination towards purchasing a new DAC, firmly in the affordable range, you must give a listen to the ADL STRATOS, the Value/Performance Champion.

Long may it play!

SPECS

- High-performance MM/MC Phono stage
- DAC and ADC Digital Preamplifier (with Remote Control)
- ESS ES9018K2M SABRE32 Reference Stereo DAC
- XMOS U8 (supports PCM 24-bit~32-bit/384kHz Max.) High Speed 480Mbps USB Chip
- Three Powerful Headphone Amplifiers TPA6120A2 (12~600 ohm)
- CS5340 High-performance ADC Chip
- S/PDIF Input and Output (24-bit 192kHz Max.)
- Controller supports ASIO and Asynchronous mode
- USB Playback Resolution: supports PCM 24~32-bit/384kHz (Max.)
- USB Recording Resolution: 24-bit/192kHz (Max.)
- Frequency response: 20Hz ~20KHz (+/-0.5dB)
- SN ratio (A-WTD): >96dB / Line Output , >60dB/ MC Output , >70dB/ MM Output
- Analog Output Level: 5.0 Vrms
- Line Input Level: 2 Vrms S/PDIF Input: 24bit/192KHz (Max.)
- MC/MM Input Level: MC: 0.4mV / MM : 4.0mV
- MC Input Capacitance: 1000 PF - MM Input Capacitance: 100 PF
- Line Input Impedance: MC :100 ohm / MM :47K ohm / Line : 47K ohm

- Headphone Balanced output Level (XLR 4-pin): 1% THD 1kHz (Max.)
400mW(12 ohm),800mW(16 ohm),1200mW(32 ohm), 2200mW (56 ohm), 700mW (300 ohm), 350mW (600 ohm)
- Headphone Unbalanced output Level (6.3mm Stereo phone jack): 1% THD 1kHz (Max.)
1100mW(12 ohm),1400mW(16 ohm),1000mW(32 ohm), 820mW (56 ohm), 190mW (300 ohm), 100mW (600 ohm)
- Power Supply AC Adaptor Rating: Erp step2 compliant, 2Wire AC Input Type,
Class II, AC/DC Switching Adaptor output DC 15V / 0.8A / 12W
- Dimensions: 215 (W) x 180 (D) x 64 (H) mm
- Weight: 1330g Approx.

Retail: USD \$1399

Alpha Design Labs

<http://www.adl-av.com>

[All photographs by David Williamson; image processing by David W. Robinson]

<http://positive-feedback.com/audio-discourse/williamson-hardware-alpha-design-labs-stratos/>