

Bladelius Design Group USB DAC

By Michael Lavorgna • Posted: Jun 15, 2012



Device Type: Asynchronous USB Digital to Analog Converter

Input: USB (24/192)

Output: (1) pair RCA line level outputs

Dimensions (L x W x H): 7 1/4" x 2" x 1 1/16"

Weight: 1lb.

Availability: through Authorized Dealers

Price: \$695.00

Website: www.bladelius.com

A Simple Black Dress

Alingsås, Sweden based Bladelius Design Group makes a fairly full line of products including amplifiers (six models), preamplifiers (three models), a phono stage, integrated amplifiers (three models), CD/DVD Players (four models), the Embla Media Player, and from the A-Line our little block of DAC the aptly-named Bladelius USB DAC. If you've seen any of the Bladelius products, or if you've visited their website and taken a gander at their likenesses, you'll have seen some clean, unfussy, and fairly spartan stuff. To my eyes this approach is a breath of fresh Nordic air and I recall the first time I laid eyes on the Bladelius USB DAC thinking—that's a nice chunky mini-monolith-looking hunk of DAC. I hope it sounds as good.

After coming off a trio of Streamer reviews with more ins and outs and what-have-you's than the IRS code, the utter simplicity of a bus-powered USB-only DAC was refreshing, frankly. One USB input on one side and a pair of RCA outputs on the other housed in a slender black aluminum brick-shaped chassis with "Bladelius" embossed into its top (the Bladelius USB DAC doesn't really have a face). A digital signal comes in on the USB bus, up to 24-bit/192kHz, and exits as analog via RCAs. And that's about it on the surface.



If we dig a little deeper, we learn that this USB DAC incorporates an asynchronous-mode USB circuit which is also galvanically isolated meaning its bus-power is kept physically separate from the audio signal so the former doesn't contaminate the latter with noise. The Bladelius USB DAC also employs "re-clocking with a fixed low jitter crystal clock" as well as a minimum phase apodizing filter*. In brief this filter is claimed to provide, in part by eliminating pre-ringing and pre-echo, a more natural sound. Some people might call this a more *analog* sound but saying that digital sounds analog always strikes me as misplaced nostalgia not to mention a recipe for disappointment.

Apple users can plug 'n play and get up to the USB DAC's max 24/192 playback while Windows users need to install the custom drivers provided by Bladelius on the included USB thumb drive to reach the same heights. The reason for this extra step for Windows users is due to the fact that Windows does not support USB Audio Class 2.0 and USB Audio Class 1 only supports up to 24/96. To fill out this Windows-limitation, if you do not install these custom drivers, your output will be limited to 24/96. This holds for any 24/192-capable USB DAC connected to any Windows computer.

The Sound of a nice chunky mini-monolith-looking hunk of DAC

My initial hopes were more than met as the Bladelius USB DAC sounds in some ways better than it looks albeit with some striking similarities. Clean, clear, transparent, devoid of grain, controlled, and more. It's also a micro-detail super freak exposing aspects of the performance that other presentations tend to gloss over.

*I asked Tim Ryan of SimpliFi Audio, the US Distributor for Bladelius, if he could explain a bit more about that apodizing filter as well as the USB DAC's D/A details and will add his response when I receive it. I also asked Mr. Ryan if he could provide some "About Us" kind of information since the Bladelius website doesn't include this information and will also add this when I get it. I do know that Mike Bladelius, the man behind the Bladelius Design Group, worked for Threshold and consulted to Classé Audio in the '90s.



Typically a reviewer will point to some non-musical detail like a grunt or a chair squeak or an audience-member's digestive difficulties during a live recording that was heretofore unheard or buried in the mix. But I'm not going there. Instead, I'd say that the Bladelius USB DAC's ability to catch even the slightest change in inflection and tone caused by more or less pressure on or against a string or air forced through reed and brass allows us to better hear into a performance. It can make music that much more exciting since we can pay more attention to smaller events in time.



In terms of tones and voices, the Bladelius USB DAC offers up what I hear as a presentation that leans toward resolving detail as opposed to lingering over tone. Even the most complex music is splayed out in exquisite detail for you to explore. Over extended listening sessions this translated for me into feeling a sense of hardness creep in especially on less-than-ideal recordings and even though this may sound contradictory, I'd attribute this perceived hardness to the Bladelius' strengths namely its attention to micro detail, deft delineation, and a tonal cleanliness that does not emphasize or hang on to decay. Think cool and incisive as opposed to warm and fuzzy or an emphasis on the sound of strings as opposed to the resonant wooden body they're stretched over.

On that note, I kept thinking about the [Halide DAC HD](#) which I reviewed back in November since it is a similar product, a USB DAC, although it includes captive cables on both ends (the USB cable and RCAs are hard-wired to the DAC). While memories of specific sonic traits are tricky and potentially fickle beasts, what I do recall is a greater sense of unrestrained play with the Halide DAC HD. That sense of fatigue that crept into some longer listening sessions with the Bladelius, did not happen with the Halide. I will note that these preferences are not universal and your tastes (and system) may very well have you preferring the reverse or something else altogether.



I will also share that this review was one of the more difficult to write because on one hand I initially thought that this DAC was fairly remarkable all things considered offering up a level of performance that's difficult to complain about. If I had written this review after just a week with total listening time clocking in at hours as opposed to days and weeks, I most likely would have written a nearly unqualified rave. I also had an opportunity to hear this DAC at the NY Audio Show a few months ago in the SimpliFi Audio room and left with a very positive impression.

It was only after time and extended listening that this one nit I've picked began to be an issue. At its worst, I found myself navigating away from some music because the recording simply sounded too

aggressive through the Bladelius USB DAC. Some might call this accurate whereas I'd describe this as being thin on timbre where voices whether human or instrumental do not sound fully fleshed out. I also compared the Bladelius USB DAC to a number of other DACs (see list below) and I did not find any of these exhibiting this same sonic stinginess when it came to body. I also tried the Bladelius USB DAC in three different systems to make sure that this trait followed it and it did.

Choices and Voices

I'm sure some people will take issue with the idea that our chosen hi-fi is best judged by how difficult it is to switch tracks, walk away from, or turn off. But that's exactly the way I see it. Ideally we want the experience of listening to music to be all-consuming in these times when we rarely do just one thing at a time. The relevant question for today becomes—can the Bladelius USB DAC pull off this most important feat of gathering up all of our senses for an extending and undistracted listening and getting lost in the music session? And I'd answer perhaps.

Perhaps, if your system tends to roll off higher frequencies, or leans toward the 'darker' sounding side, or perhaps has exceptional bottom-end extension. Any one, or better yet all of these traits combined, may make the Bladelius DAC a good fit.

I would even go as far as to suggest that those aspects of the Bladelius USB DAC's performance that I've been critical of could very well strike another listener in another system in another room as being a purely positive trait especially if you are picky about the sound quality of the recordings you listen to. Considering its strengths which are formidable, the Bladelius USB DAC may in fact be just what you're looking for.

Associated Equipment

Also on hand and in use during the Audiophile Desktop review: Wadia 121Decoding Computer, Wavelength Proton 24/96 USB DAC, Mytek Stereo192-DSD DAC, Schiit Bitfrost DAC, AudioQuest DragonFly USB DAC.