

EQUIPMENT REVIEW



Devialet D-Premier revisited

By Alan Sircom

Unlike most pieces of audio equipment, the Devialet D-Premier is worthy of revisiting. It's worth assessing in the light of both greater familiarity and the current state of the art. However, the D-Premier is unique in audio in that it has received some fundamental firmware upgrades since its launch, and it's worth checking to see just how much improvement these bring to the table. Then, there's the ultimate upgrade of using two D-Premiers in dual mono mode.

As such, we'll skip on much of the back-story, as you would have needed to have led a pretty sheltered audio life not to have noticed the D-Premier when it arrived on the scene a couple of years ago. A slim, chrome Parisian, the D-Premier blurs the lines between digital nerve centre and integrated amplifier, featuring the company's unique ADH amplifier circuit and some of the fastest, brightest converters money can buy. It was an engineering force to be reckoned with when launched... and it still sets the standard by which most products should be judged.

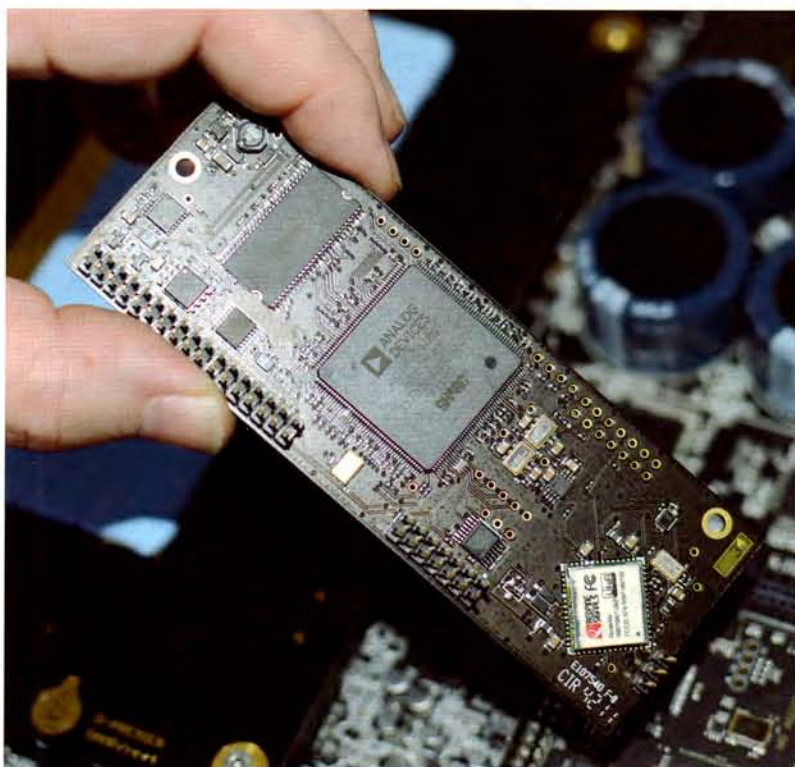
The intervening years of near constant play have been a regular ear-opener. I've mellowed slightly on my febrile initial conclusion, but that just means it only obsoletes about half its rivals, rather than nine out of ten. The amplifier makes short work of most solid-state audio electronics, above, at and below the Devialet's price of admission. Where it still finds successful challengers is in the valve world and in those amps that accent the rhythmic properties of music. Put another way, those designs that have a strong flavour of their own will always have their fans, but if you are looking for

an amplifier that gets out of the way of the music – especially if that music is in the digital domain – this still is the Alpha and Omega of high-end audio devices.

And that conclusion was prior to running any major firmware updates. My D-Premier was an early sample and needed a minor hardware modification to accept version 5.3 software and beyond. Version 5.3 brought a raft of improvements to the D-Premier, most notably access to the product configurator and Devialet AIR. However, the first generation of this wi-fi system wasn't entirely bug-free and we decided to hang fire for a more stable version. Enter Version 5.6 and Devialet AIR version 1.4 software, which show what the D-Premier really has to offer. In the meantime, a Wi-Fi board winged its way to us, for installation.

▶ The Devialet AIR upgrade box arrived with a small tool kit, including a Torx driver to open the rear panel of the D-Premier and an Allen key to secure the board. The one omission in the pack is an electrostatic earth tag (to prevent you frying the board with static), and this is not mentioned in the online instructions so I decided to follow Devialet's rules while standing on a carpet to see if anything bad happened. It didn't, but I recommend at least discharging any static before trying to install. Or get an expert to do the upgrade. It takes longer to open and close the case than it does to install the AIR card, but remember to download new firmware to the supplied SD card and reinstall this when first powering up the AIR-ready D-Premier. Installation is easy though... it works on your wi-fi network (you need to enter your network's basic details on that SD card, using the online configurator) and as long as you have iTunes on a Mac or PC on the same network and load up the Devialet AIR software on that computer, things are quite straightforward. Devialet suggests a 3.5m maximum between D-Premier and the wi-fi connection of the host computer. Thus far, the AIR program only works with iTunes, but it's hoped to extend its reach in subsequent versions (I'd recommend J River, J Play and Spotify player extensions as priorities). But, bringing the beating heart of the Mac direct to the beating heart of the D-Premier link means aftermarket quests for bit perfection (Amarra, Pure Music) become superfluous.

The configurator allows you to control a wide degree of operational aspects of the D-Premier, answering some of the functionality limitations of the original design. This includes a significant amount of tailoring to suit specific phono cartridges, power output, balance and tone control allocation, and the provision to drive multiple D-Premiers in mono – and eventually active – mode. The method is the same throughout; point browser at Devialet website, load firmware on SD card, use SD card slot to flash firmware on D-Premier.



I used the D-Premier in default mode and used both analogue line in and AES/EBU digital in from my trusty but rusty Lyngdorf CD-1, comparing the discs with their ripped versions through the Devialet AIR wi-fi connection. I preferred the wi-fi connection to anything wired. Granted this is not a night-and-day difference, but I consistently preferred the performance through the wireless connection because it sounded more focused, precise and immediate than the AES/EBU link, where previously the AES/EBU link was the preferred choice of connection.

It's a very 'digital' sound – clean, bright and energetic – but not necessarily in the way people use this term as a pejorative. It's like being closer to the music, rather than closer to the processing. As such, the Devialet D-Premier just improved upon what was its best digital connection. For free.

Thinking about the D-Premier in conventional hi-fi terms becomes increasingly pointless the more time you spend with it. You find yourself moving inexorably toward a wireless digital system when using the D-Premier today, simply because there isn't ▶



▶ a penalty in doing so. When the Devialet AIR program includes a wider range of applications (as is intended) so the move to your computer as sole source and Devialet as digital hub will be complete.

Of course, all of this is predicated on using a D-Premier. Just one. Adding a second is a fascinating leap forward. Once again, you go to the configurator, turning one D-Premier into 'master' the other into 'slave'. Currently, you can use the D-Premier as bi-ampable (The master D-Premier takes the sources and drives all left channels, the slave merely powers the right channels, both sets of terminals are powered), dual mono (master drives left channel, slave drives right, only the +ve terminals are driven... make sure you don't wire out of phase here, because it's easy to do) or multi-room (with the second amplifier digitally slaving to the first one). By default, the two amps connect via the digital coaxial phono link, so just one cable between the two. It's hoped that full active drive will be an addition soon. I tried both dual mono (through the Raidho C1.1) and bi-amped (through an old pair of ProAc Studio 150) and dual mono is the way to go. Bi-amping sounds like the D-Premier; dual mono sounds like the D-Premier squared. In dual-mono mode, the amplifier seems considerably more powerful (it can be updated from 240W per channel to 400W, but even in standard 240W per channel, there's a lot more control over the loudspeaker's bass drivers). The worry was that by increasing the 'right-sized' D-Premier would make a 'supersized' D-Premier. In fact, if anything it made the soundstage smaller, by making it more controlled and taut. This is one of those 'not a big changes' that ends up being impossible to live without. If you like the D-Premier, then the only thing better is more D-Premiers.

Finally, there's the app, which replicates the ace cool handset. It's designed for iPhones but magnifies to fit iPad screens, and it replicates the

big volume knob and the display of the D-Premier. It works well and if you are using Remote to control your iTunes device, makes the iDevice an all in one handset. Cool.

When it first came on the scene, the D-Premier effectively redefined what you could do with good audio. Today, the same still applies. It's cleverly kept itself just that bit ahead of the game. And remember these improvements happened for free (until you add more Devialets). Just when you think you know what makes the D-Premier tick, another software update comes along and raises the performance a notch. In short, it just keeps getting better and better. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Price: £11,450

Manufactured by: Devialet

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