



Meet the V-Team! Musical Fidelity now has a wide range of V-series boxes, with digiphiles catered for by the V-PSU, V-Link and V-DAC, which work superbly as a threesome...

MUSICAL FIDELITY V-LINK £99

The computer audio world reminds me of the microcomputer boom of the early eighties; for a while people used everyday consumer durables like portable televisions and cassette recorders to interface with their shiny new micros, to keep costs down. It's the same with hi-fi now; people are using their computers to do the job because buying bespoke devices (not that there are many available) is too expensive or inconvenient. The result is that large amounts of music has ended up on people's laptops or desktops, in varying formats, and is played out to the wider world in all sorts of nefarious ways!

The obvious point to make is that playing your computer music files via its built-in 3.5mm minijack audio or headphone output is absolutely the *worst* way of doing it; even your iPod will sound better. For this reason people are piping it out either via built-in digital outputs (such as those built in to the latest generation of Macs) or USB ports, to external DACs. This is a far better way to do it, and will sound 'hi-fi' at least.

But it doesn't stop there. First, using your computer's optical connection (if it's got one) should be better than standard USB, because lots of high frequency noise gets thrown out down the USB cable's electrical wires from your computer to your DAC. However, just to make life complex, there's now the option of Asynchronous USB on a few DACs, which lets the DAC control

the clocking of the data, which makes for a largely jitter-free connection. It still has the disadvantage of residual electrical noise, but unlike the optical connection you're no longer at the mercy of your computer's audio clock (which is bound to be poor, in audiophile terms)...

So which should audiophiles go for? The Musical Fidelity V-Link removes your dilemma; it connects to your computer via USB, controls the music data transfer asynchronously, and then outputs the datastream optically. In effect you can have your cake and eat it! There's also an electrical coaxial output, but why?

Well, sadly optical TOSLINK doesn't go up to 24/96 resolution, whereas electrical does. So you've got the choice; the V-Link will play your CD-quality music files (i.e. 16/44.1) asynchronously out from your computer, using its own high precision clock, and port out this very low jitter digital signal via noise-free optical. But if you're playing hi res 24/96 files (such as those downloadable from a number of music label websites, such as www.linnrecords.com) then you'll use the coax out. Either way, you're getting the music sent to the V-Link in a very stable way.

The device works superbly. There's a clear sonic improvement compared to porting the signal out via USB to a non-asynchronous Musical Fidelity V-DAC. Via my MacBook Pro, the V-Link feeding the V-DAC made for a smoother sound, with things in better focus, and a superior sense of ease and flow. It's not amazingly dramatic, but you'd take it every time.

Of course it's an extra box; you plug the V-Link into the computer (via USB) and the DAC into the V-Link, whereas before you could hook the V-DAC directly to the computer (via USB), but the additional £99 is easily justified. Obviously, for CD-quality files it's better to use the TOSLINK optical out from the V-Link, as it gives a slightly smoother and cleaner sound than coaxial, but hi res files sounded great via the coaxial.

The new V-Link joins the well established £180 V-DAC in Musical Fidelity's range; it's a complementary product along with the £120 V-PSU. The latter has three 12V DC outputs giving cleaner power to other V-series components, making for a noticeably clearer and smoother sound.

Overall, the new V-Link is a fine little tweeky product for computer audiophiles. Rather like using domestic cassette recorders and televisions for running your microcomputer, I suspect that in ten years when we're all massively networked up around the house products such as the V-Link will look as unnecessary as MiniDisc does today; it's very much a product of its time, designed to solve a particular problem for customers of today. It does precisely this, unlocking a very high quality digital music feed from your PC or Mac in an efficient and fuss-free way. It costs a mere £99; not so long ago, products with asynchronous USB functionality cost one hundred times that. Makes you think, doesn't it? **DP**

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Soundbites