



Sugden Masterclass DAC-4 £2,215

JE Sugden started making its first product back in 1967, since then its focus has been on quality over quantity

With the thinking that: ‘if it ain’t broke, why fix it?’ Sugden has designed relatively few products. Certainly, the sound quality of its components is such that they’ve never failed to sell in good numbers – so ‘range refreshes’ have rarely been needed. This explains the curious story of the Masterclass DAC-4. Launched in 2015, it is by the standards of this group, an antique. Its pair of 16-bit, four times oversampling Philips TDA1543 DAC chips are a world away from today’s offerings. There’s no oversampling or filtering of the digital signal. The unit accepts up to 24-bit/192kHz as an input, but does its number crunching only in 16-bit and there’s no DSD. Sugden says these are the best DAC chips it has heard for this application. The output stage is a bespoke-designed discrete circuit including the required sections to remove the filtering and oversampling. “Instead of accepting and using the latest digital trends, we have produced a

product meticulously engineered to play music”, the company explains. The Masterclass DAC-4 has a refreshing aesthetic and ergonomic simplicity. It’s the opposite of many modern ‘whizz-bang’ designs with vast amounts of features, buttons, displays and lights. The front panel is

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a well-finished slab of aluminium, with power and input selection controls, plus power and digital lock LEDs. The metal casework is good quality too. Round the back are three coaxial digital inputs, plus two opticals and a USB-B, which only handles 16-bit/44kHz! RCA phono outputs send the music to your amplifier; there’s no balanced XLR option. The only luxury is a digital output, which will please many.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sugden Masterclass DAC-4

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Digital-to-analogue converter

WEIGHT
5kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
250 x 90 x 330mm

FEATURES
• 24-bit/192kHz input, 16-bit PCM playback
• Inputs: 3x coaxial; 2x optical; USB-B
• Outputs: stereo RCA; coaxial

DISTRIBUTOR
Sugden Audio

Sound quality

Unsurprisingly given its vintage DAC chip, the Sugden sounds quite distinct from the rest of the group – but not in the way that you might think. It is obviously flawed, because its detail resolution is only mediocre. However, it’s a very dynamic performer and has a lovely flowing quality to the way it plays rhythms. The result is that the Masterclass DAC-4 is actually quite a beguiling listen.

ABBA’s *Eagle* is a case in point. This DAC lacks the vocal intelligibility of most others here, especially the Synthesis; the midband is ever so slightly opaque. However, the percussive strumming of the closely mic-ed steel string guitars is more obvious than all others here, being better accented. This in turn gives the track a more tactile and involving feel that’s hard not to like.

The Sugden works its percussive magic on Fryars’ *Love So Cold* too. This modern, sparse and haunting electronic track can sound disjointed. But not so here, with the DAC-4 stringing the rhythms together effortlessly. This makes for a more fluid feel to the music, which is rather addictive and makes up for that slight lack of low-level detail. Indeed, whatever type of music you play, the Sugden goes about playing it the same way – with the emphasis on the music’s emotional aspect. It’s all about expression.

Cue up the beautifully recorded modern jazz of Herbie Hancock’s *The Prisoner*, and it’s a case of swings and roundabouts. Although this DAC sounds very immediate – it’s as if you’re up close and personal in the concert venue – there’s no sense of tonal harshness. Yet still the Masterclass DAC-4 can’t quite impart the full lustre of brass instruments and hi-hats, for example. All the same, this is a great listen on programme material such as this, if you’re not aiming for forensic accuracy ●



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
LIKE: Expressive, engaging sound

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
DISLIKE: Slightly opaque midband

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
WE SAY: Quirky yet enjoyable performer

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★