



Less is more

Adding full amplifier functionality to the M-DAC+, the M-ONE is a fully featured system in a small box. **David Price** listens in

Remember that classic *Star Trek* episode, *The Trouble With Tribbles*? There's something about the new Audiolab M-ONE that makes this spring to mind. In that illustrious classic sci-fi show, Captain Kirk takes a landing party down to a planet, where they encounter some incredibly cute, small furry animals. They decide to take one back to the ship and it has babies, which then also quickly reproduce, and suddenly the USS Enterprise is full of the things. No one seems to notice, because they're so adorable and nice to have around. I can see this happening with the ONE series, because it too is small but perfectly formed, superbly finished and more than a little charming. It all started with the M-DAC (HFC 359), launched nearly five years ago,

which was absolutely cutting edge in its day and because of this has aged well. All the same, the company decided not to rest on its laurels and produced a more lifestyle, less tweaky variant earlier this year – namely the M-DAC+ (HFC 410). This had a swisher-looking case that was slightly larger and heavier, thanks to the power supply moving onboard. Also, it acquired a more attractive, if slightly less informative, display. It included a price bump from £600 to £800, and increased functionality including more digital inputs and 32-bit/384kHz PCM capability (that original M-DAC had 'only' 24/192) and DSD support (DSD64, DSD128 and DSD256). And now, just like the aforementioned Tribbles, it has wasted no time spawning a baby in the sweet shape of the M-ONE.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Audiolab M-ONE
ORIGIN
UK/China
TYPE
Integrated amp/
DAC
WEIGHT
5.5kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
247 x 114 x 292mm
FEATURES
● Quoted power
output: 2x 40W
RMS into 8ohm
● ESS ES9018K2M
DAC chip
● PCM up to
32-bit/384kHz;
DSD64/128/256
● Inputs: coaxial,
optical, USB Type-A
and USB Type-B
digital; aptX
Bluetooth; 2x RCA
analogue line inputs
DISTRIBUTOR
IAG Ltd
TELEPHONE
01480 447700
WEBSITE
audiolab.co.uk

Essentially, it's an M-DAC+, plus a preamplifier and power amplifier, shoehorned into the same box. Added to this is the handy if not quite purist Bluetooth functionality. The result is a versatile, up-to-date music maker, in one diminutive box. So the M-ONE is interesting because it's both a specialist product, and also a mainstream one too. I wonder how many potential 'lifestyle' customers will be interested to know that it has the ESS Sabre32 ES9018K2M DAC chip – the two-channel little brother to the flagship eight-channel ES9018 chip found in the M-DAC+? The fact that it plays Direct Stream Digital and ultra-high-resolution PCM via a superb silicon chip will turn on audiophiles, but won't interest casual buyers. On the other hand, this latter group will love the inclusion of Bluetooth and its small size. Alternatively, perhaps Audiolab is trying to cater for another market demographic – space-limited audiophiles who appreciate all of its excellent detail touches.

The M-ONE has much of the M-DAC+'s functionality; the number of user-selectable digital filters – which are a kind of 21st-century tone control that let you fine-tune sound – has been reduced to three, but they

haven't gone completely. Happily, the Bluetooth implementation is the latest aptX, which gives far superior sound to the standard variety; again this shows a desire on the part of Audiolab to confer audiophile respectability. And whereas you might expect a pair of Class D amplifier modules under the hood to do the heavy lifting and push out a modest amount of power, the company has actually specified a Class AB amplifier section conjuring up 40W per channel into 8ohm (claimed), which is more than expected. Happily, the manufacturer has also specified a shielded toroidal transformer and multiple power supply sections to keep crossover interference to a minimum – again, better than needed. In effect then, the M-ONE is a sort of affordable audiophile product for those with limited space, or those that don't have either the time or the inclination to have a separates hi-fi system in their room.

In addition it both as the heart of my main system feeding a pair of Cambridge Audio Aeromax 6 floorstanding loudspeakers (HFC 391), and also in my home office room, driving tiny Monitor Audio Radius 90 bookshelf boxes (HFC 378). I am surprised by just how

The M-ONE looks likely to live long and prosper

handy it proves in either role, having no trouble handling my Esoteric CD transport, or indeed the digital feed from my Sony Blu-ray player, via its coaxial and digital inputs (which work up to 32-bit/192kHz). It also handles computer audio duties very ably, too – via one of two USB inputs. I use the Type-B for my MacBook Pro (running Audirvana) and the Type-A socket for occasional iPhone connectivity, although the Bluetooth feature makes this largely superfluous, as far as most people will be concerned – both take PCM up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD64/128/256, and both are asynchronous transporters. Last but certainly not least are the two RCA stereo phono inputs, one of which takes the output from my Sony PS-8750 turntable, via an ANT Audio Kora 3T phono stage. As far as outputs are concerned, the M-ONE has a pair of decently solid loudspeaker binding posts at the back, and a front panel headphone socket. The latter is powered by the same headphone amplifier featured in the M-DAC and M-DAC+ models.

Sound quality

The M-ONE sounds much more like a grown-up hi-fi system than its diminutive size would suggest. Anyone that's heard Audiolab's DACs and amplifiers before won't be too surprised by its sound, because there's a clear family resemblance between it and its bigger brothers. However, the real surprise comes from the fact that it is far cheaper than the company's other entry-level hi-fi separates, but not that dramatically inferior.

In absolute terms, the M-ONE is a dry and clean-sounding performer, with a detailed midband and taut, tidy and tuneful bass. At the other end of the frequency spectrum, it sounds crisp and fairly spacious with

a clear and inoffensive treble. Indeed, whatever type of music you play, you'll always get this kind of tidy and detailed sound. It's not the most gushingly emotional performer, but it's always musically communicative and fun. Once again, you have to pinch yourself to remember that this is an £800 single-box system.

Simple Minds' *Theme For Great Cities* is just the sort of programme material that this little system likes getting its teeth into. Delivered via a silver disc via the coaxial digital input, the results are punchy and propulsive. The music shuffles along letting me

Given a decent recording, the Audiolab can sound surprisingly big

enjoy the powerful bass guitar groove which now sounds so reminiscent of the immediate post-punk period from which the band came. Over this, the Audiolab delivers a crisp, dry snare drum sound that cuts through the mix, and lovely thick swathes of Oberheim synthesisers that resound around the room. The M-ONE can't conceal its obvious enjoyment, and flexes its small but perfectly formed muscles to really make the song a success. You'd never call this particular track the best recording to come out of the eighties, but this little system still makes it accessible and entertaining. It doesn't gloss over the mediocre recording quality, but refuses to let it spoil things.

Moving forward in time by nearly a decade, and Inner City's *Good Life* is next on, via LP and the analogue inputs. This is a thumping classic house music tune, with a wonderfully thick and pushy electronic bass line, ▶

CONNECTIONS



- 1 USB Type-A and Type-B inputs
- 2 Coaxial input
- 3 Optical input
- 4 RCA inputs
- 5 Loudspeaker binding posts

Q&A

Tim Bownern
Audiolab PR



DP: Who is the M-ONE aimed at – lifestyle buyers or audiophiles?

TB: Both! Audiolab products have always implemented ‘audiophile-grade’ sound quality with a high level of ergonomics and usability. The M-ONE is a compact integrated amp with state-of-the-art DAC facilities and the wireless convenience of aptX Bluetooth, so it will clearly appeal to those who want a convenient, fuss-free, single-box solution. At the same time, its circuitry is extremely high quality – you won’t find a better specified DAC in an all-in-one product like this.

Is Audiolab moving towards more mass-market products?

It was always a strategy to expand our product line. Earlier this year we launched the M-DAC+, and now the M-ONE takes that same chassis and adds high-quality power amplification. We don’t feel this is a major diversion for us, and at £800 it’s certainly not a mass-market product.

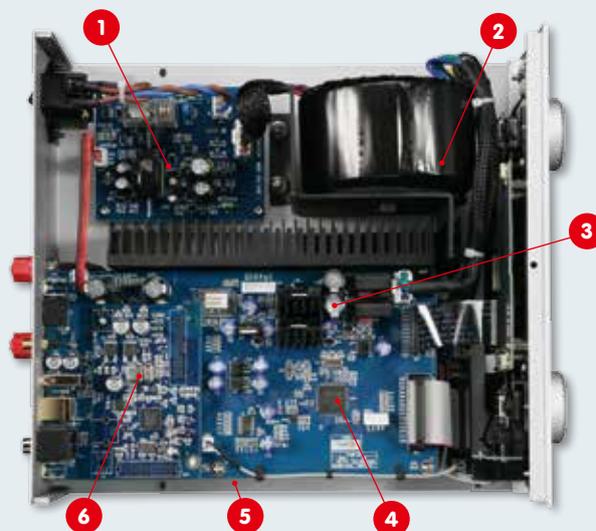
Why choose Class AB amplification, not Class D?

For reasons of sound quality. At the price point, it would not have been possible to incorporate a Class D solution without some sonic compromise. Our implementation of Class AB offers excellent linearity while also being efficient enough to fit in the M-ONE’s compact case. The output stage uses bi-polar transistors, giving better linearity and efficiency than an equivalent Class AB MOSFET design.

Why did you specify the ESS ES9018K2M DAC chip?

This is the new addition to the peerless ESS Sabre32 Reference D/A chip family from ESS. It’s a two-channel solution that’s the little brother to the flagship eight-channel ES9018 that we use in our top-end M-DAC+ and 8300CD. The latter eight-channel chip can be configured in quad-mono for stereo applications, giving it a technical advantage in terms of signal-to-noise, although the new ES9018K2M used here comes close in performance terms.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Standby power supply
- 2 Toroidal transformer
- 3 Power supply
- 4 Microprocessor
- 5 Audio PCB underneath with DAC, volume and power and amplifier circuitry
- 6 USB audio

above which is a dreamy but densely mixed synthesiser part and Paris Grey’s superb vocals. The M-ONE gets all of this right, serving up a solid and dynamic sound that only really starts showing signs of compression at really high listening levels through the big Aeromax 6. Tonally it’s certainly a little dry, because it doesn’t quite communicate the track’s very warm, analogue sound, although it does sound pleasingly crisp and muddle free on what is certainly a dense mix. It also stays consistent across the volume scale, refusing to descend into brightness at high levels.

The M-ONE has a detailed midband alongside a taut, tidy and tuneful bass

Firing up my MacBook Pro, I play some hi-res music files into the M-ONE via its USB input. Supertramp’s *Oh Darling* at 24/96 PCM is a joy, the little box really ramping up the quality from this superbly recorded album. The improvement isn’t as great as you’d get via grown-up separates, but there is a clear improvement compared with my CD version, with a real sweetening of the treble (the hi-hat sound suddenly becomes spacious, sweet and silky) and opening up of the midband. Indeed, given the chance with a good recording, the Audiolab can sound surprisingly big. Image placement is stronger than you’d expect for a one-boxer, and there’s a decent degree of depth – even if you can’t quite call the

soundstage ‘cathedral-like’. It impresses just as much via the small Monitor Audio Radius 90, too – although as I expect it doesn’t go anywhere near as loud with this considerably less efficient micro-monitor. Bluetooth implementation proves good too, with a useful 10m range and a foot-tapping sound from my MacBook Pro and Sony Xperia Z5 smartphone. It’s a handy feature to have and perfectly pleasant for casual listening, although you really want wired inputs for best results.

Conclusion

A fine little single-box system, this strengthens Audiolab’s M-series range and gives punters like us the chance to get a compact all-in-one system with some real audiophile credentials. It’s pretty simple to use, flexible and sounds surprisingly good with no obvious power limitations for most people in most situations where it’s likely to find itself. It’s not quite as lovable as a Tribble, but it’s certainly very nice to have around ●



Naim’s UnitiQute 2 costs £1,150 and offers an even more polished package, plus the kudos of a high-end brand name and the versatility of hi-res plug and play streaming. Admittedly, it’s also a tad fussy and fiddly to set up, and more casual users may just want to stick to the Audiolab’s aptX Bluetooth, which is easier to use but doesn’t give hi-res. The Naim lacks a CD player, but is considerably better sounding than the Audiolab – with a stronger and more sinewy sound, and a pleasingly warmer tonality. But it should do better considering the price differential, and the Audiolab can still hold its head up high in the sonic stakes.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



FEATURES



OVERALL



LIKE: Punchy, engaging sound; decent power output

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: Cute, flexible and fine-sounding single-box system