



M2 TECH HIFACE £100

The two words on everyone's lips these days seem to be 'audio' and 'computer', not necessarily in that order. Now that hard drives have got big enough not to be an issue, and that FLAC has become a sort of default standard file format for audiophiles (it doesn't sound as good as .WAV, but it's close, especially when encoded on a good ripper such as Exact Audio Copy), playing serious hi-fi quality music on your Mac or PC is at last a practical proposition. But given that you've got your music in to your computer, how then to get it out?

Of course, a variety of options exist, from the crude expedient of running a 3.5mm mini-jack to phono lead from your computer soundcard to your amp's auxiliary input on one hand, to fancy networked audio on the other via the likes of a Logitech Squeezebox or Linn DS system. But there are affordable middle ways, such as using a USB soundcard or indeed this, a USB digital interface that ports the music straight out from your computer's motherboard to a coaxial digital output, which you

then plug into a decent DAC such as a Cambridge Audio DacMagic or Stello DA100 Signature.

Not much bigger than a memory stick, the oddly entitled M2 Tech hiFace just plugs into a spare USB socket on your computer. You install the driver from the CD provided and hey presto, you have an S/PDIF output to provide your DAC with a very high quality digital signal. This little (102x22x22mm) unit supports 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4 and 192kHz, at up to 24bit resolution, courtesy of two high precision clocks claimed to have an accuracy of 2.5ppm and very low jitter. Support is there for both PC and Mac platforms, with Linux PC to follow. For the purposes of this review, I used it on a PC (Acer Aspire 7720G notebook with Intel Core 2 duo T5550) running Foobar 2000 v1.0 (download free from www.foobar2000.org) configured for Kernel Streaming, which bypasses the Windows audio mixer.

The hiFace played MP3 and .WAV files effortlessly, plus streamed audio from Facebook and other sites, outputting very clear digital audio to a Stello DA100 Signature DAC. I occasionally experienced clicks when changing between material with differing sample rates, but by and large things proved glitch-free. The sound was surprisingly good, making the PC come very close to the digital output of a Cambridge CD640 in sonic terms, which is no mean feat for a device of this type. At all times, things sounded spacious, smooth and nicely musical, with only a slight lack of low bass marking it out as not being a high end hi-fi product. Of course, other computers

SPECIFICATIONS:

Input:	USB type A male
Output:	RCA female S/PDIF stereo digital
Sampling Rates:	44.1kHz, 48kHz, 88.2kHz, 96kHz, 176.4kHz, 192kHz
Bit Depth:	16-24bit
Size:	102x22x20mm
Power Supply:	5V DC from USB bus
Temperature:	from 0°C to 70°C
Weight:	50g

may sound better; this was hardly optimised for audiophile use.

A CD rip of 4Hero's 'Escape That' was a pleasure, not in any way sounding like it had emanated from a computer, conjuring up a subtle yet expansive sound that let the music's flavour flood out. It was ultimately slightly dynamically constrained, but this couldn't be said of a 24/96 transcription of Elvis Costello's 'Armed Forces' album, which sounded viscerally powerful, if just a slight bit tonally dry. The hiFace really didn't sound like computer audio in the way I normally experience it, and would doubtless improve still further with a superior DAC.

So, considering its modest retail price, this is a very effective way of getting audiophile-quality digital music off a computer without having to fall around with networks. It's streets ahead of any computer soundcard (providing you have a decent DAC to connect it to) and as such represents fine value for money if you already own a decent DAC that's not USB-equipped. My only reservations are that you do have to configure your PC for it to give of its best, and also that in theory at least it would be nice to have an optical TOSLINK output too, as there's a school of thought that says anything that breaks the electrically noisy computer's connection to a hi-fi, and ground loops, can only be a good thing; obviously fibre optic digital is ideal for this. Recommended. **DP**

[Contact: www.purttaudio.co.uk, +44(0)208 815 5878]



soundbites