



Audioquest Dragonfly Red

To most audio enthusiasts, Audioquest is inexorably linked to interconnects and speaker cables. The company has been producing a comprehensive array of interlinks (analogue, digital and video), and speaker cables for decades.

More recently however, Audioquest has been branching out into other product categories, including a line-up of portable USB DACs, audiophile-grade headphones, an innovative digital noise suppressor, and several power conditioning components.

It's clear that Audioquest is intent on metamorphosing into something more than just a cable maker, and its efforts in that regard have already met with considerable success.

The Dragonfly Red V1.0 is a good case in point. The small, metal-bodied device isn't much bigger than a USB flash drive, with a USB Type male connector at one end, and a 3.5 mm stereo minijack on the other.

The main body has a dragonfly emblem that lights up when the Dragonfly is in use, and displays different colours, depending on the sampling rate of the audio file it is decoding. The entire affair weighs only 22 grams, and the biggest challenge is not to lose the tiny mite!

This latest-generation is dubbed the Dragonfly Red V1.0, and it is one of two Dragonfly models (the other one is the Dragonfly Black) to succeed the original, 2012 Dragonfly. The newcomers are smaller and lighter, and are aimed not only at computer use, but also to partner smartphones or tablets.

Compared to its Dragonfly Black stable-mate, the Red benefits from a higher output (2.1V vs 1.2V) for greater sonic impact and the ability to cope with more challenging headphone loads. It also allows the Red to be used as a line-level device feeding a pre-amp or integrated amp.

The Red uses Sabre's ESS 9016 32-bit DAC chips, compared to the Black's ESS9010. The former benefits from a more sophisticated minimum-phase digital filter that promises enhanced performance.

Finally, the Red's 64-bit, bit-perfect digital volume control is integrated into the DAC chip for optimum fidelity and improved signal-to-noise ratio. The Black uses a host-controlled analogue volume controller.

Both employ Microchip's PIC32MX full-speed isochronous USB controller, featuring very low power consumption, a 32-bit architecture and software-based upgrade-ability. The low-noise power supply also minimises degradation of the audio signal.

The Dragonfly Red plays most recognised music files at resolutions of up to 96 kHz/24-bit. Adapters allow it to connect to iOS or Android devices – or, as I did for this review, it can be hooked up directly to the USB port of a laptop or computer.

In this case, that computer was an



early-2011 13-inch MacBook Pro with an i7 Intel Core 2,7v GHz processor, a 1TB SSD drive and 8 GB of RAM running OSX El Capitan. The playback software was Audirvana 1.12.5 (still simpler and sonically superior to the new Audirvana 2), while I roped in my HiFi Man HE400S headphones for the review.

I plugged the Dragonfly into one of the MacBook's USB ports, opened Audirvana, checked that the Mac and Audirvana had recognised the DAC (which they had) and then selected some music files for playback.

Throughout, I compared the sound using the Mac's own 3,5 mm audio output with the sound delivered via the Dragonfly.

Starting off with Macy Gray's 'Annabelle', off the superb, minimalist *Stripped* (Chesky 96/24 FLAC), the standard output delivered a spacious, open and inviting sound. The lead guitar sounded clear and lustrous on the left of the stage, with the bass providing a muscular and intense counterpoint on the right.

Gray's husky, expressive vocals were positioned dead centre, maintaining a delicate but effective balance with her backing band, while the percussion's incisive presence was almost tactile.

The recording captures the open, reverberant ambience of the performance, and the Mac had no trouble recreating that sense of air and space, resulting in an involving listening experience. Clearly, the Dragonfly would have its work cut out to better that performance ...

But it did: the sound picture was now bigger and more generous, spreading further across all planes. The sense of dimension was more explicit, more generous; but the sound was also more cohesive, with a greater sense of connect between left, centre and right.

The result was a more complete sound, with greater all-round intensity, but also a more pervasive sense of realism – not only as far as the depiction of the individual instruments was concerned, but also with regards to the overall intent and thrust of the performance itself. The music sounded more coherent and more polished, too.

Reverting back to the Mac's own sound card, the title track off Paul Simon's



recent *Stranger To Stranger* (Concord CD ripped to 44/16 FLAC) sounded wide open, with a generous, airy ambience.

Simon's vocals were vibrant and believable, fronting a melody presented with a sense of effortless flow, with only sparse percussion and shimmering synths for company. Intricate details were vividly portrayed, highlighting the arrangement's multiple layers as the song progressed.

And yet, the music always retained its coherence and control, with no sign of smearing or clouding. Indeed, the presentation always offered a full, unwavering and rewarding image of the performance.

But switching to the Dragonfly revealed immediate improvements. The music was delivered with a finer sense of focus and greater cohesion, linked to a more comprehensive, richer sound. There was more body, and more soul, to the music.

The Dragonfly allowed a closer examination of the recording, which resulted in improved resolution and more effective retrieval of fine detail. Elements that were only alluded to before were now brought to the fore with confidence and clarity.

I simply got to hear more of the music: the percussion's intricacies were much more prevalent now, and there was a finer edge and focus to those synths. Simon's vocals sounded richer, with a stronger sense of timbre, too. And yet, the music retained its inherent elegance and simplicity.

These basic trends – more tonal depth, finer focus, a more bountiful harvest of detail, and more air and space – remained consistent, regardless of what I listened to: from the raw authenticity of Iceland rockers Kaleo on *Broken Bones* (Atlantic CD ripped to 44/16 FLAC) to the expansive scale of Bernard Haitink and the LSO's

Beethoven's *Symphony No. 4* (LSO Live FLAC 44/24).

While the MacBook's standard system output sounded pretty darn' good with the assistance of Audirvana, the Dragonfly took the listening experience a few notches higher. It achieved greater depth, a richer range of tonal hues, and finer resolution – in short, more of the good stuff!

I've had to return the review sample, but my own Dragonfly Red is on back order: on-the-move computer audio will never be the same again.

Deon Schoeman

VITAL STATS

Type..... Portable, asynchronous
Supported sampling rates... Up to 96 kHz
Inputs..... Integrated USB Type A
Outputs..... 3,5 mm stereo jack
Power output 2,1 volt RMS
Dimensions (LxWxD)... 62 x 19 x 12 mm
Weight 22 g

Verdict

Transforms what you can expect from your laptop or smartphone as far as music playback is concerned: more detail, more texture, more timbre – more music.

Price R3 990

Supplied by Volco Enterprises
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Website www.volco.co.za

OUR RATING: 85/100

