

Cypher Labs AlgoRhythm Solo & Nuforce Icon iDo

Before we start on these reviews, we should probably explain what a DAC is, for those not in the know.

Put simply, although the music we store on our Macs and iOS devices is all digital, all our speakers and headphones are analogue, so somewhere along the way the audio must be converted from digital to analogue – by a Digital-to-Analogue Converter (DAC).

Our iPods, iPhones and iPads all have DACs built in, but they're cheap little chips – industry sources tell us that they cost just a dollar or two – that work fine but not well. If you care about high-quality audio, the idea is to use an external DAC that costs a few hundred dollars and delivers the highest quality analogue signal to your amp or headphones.

These two offerings from Nuforce and Cypher Labs have dual roles. Firstly, operating via the dock connector, they use USB Host Mode to extract pure digital audio from your iPod or iPhone, bypassing all the circuits that normally process the audio for you. This digital audio can then be passed on to the high-end DAC of your choice and then on to an integrated amplifier or pre-amp.

Or, secondly, you can use the AlgoRhythm Solo and Icon iDo's

built-in DACs to output an analogue signal directly to an amp.

Choosing which is easy, as the units output both at the same time. Both have a coaxial digital-out port; the Solo has a 3.5mm analogue-out; and the iDo has stereo RCA analogue-out plugs and a 3.5mm headphone-out jack.

You can't connect headphones directly to the Solo – you'll have to first place a headphone amp between the two.

While the iDo is a desktop unit 15cm x 11cm x 2.5cm, the Solo is smaller at 11cm x 7cm x 1.9cm and fully portable thanks to a built-in rechargeable Li-ion battery.

When we hooked up the iDo it introduced more realism and clarity into our music, with bags more detail. The Solo did the same, but cranked things up a notch or two further. All of a sudden there was a wider, more defined soundstage as well.

Macworld Australia's buying advice.

If you've been taking this review with a pinch of salt, let us assure you that you'll definitely find a marked improvement in your music with either of these units – the Solo, particularly – but you're paying a lot more for it. The feeling is like cleaning your windscreen



CYPHER LABS ALGORHYTHM SOLO

www.addictedtoaudio.com.au

PROS Even better audio delivery than the iDo; portable; rechargeable battery

CONS Expensive

RRP \$579

– you could always see through it, but now you can see clearly. Of course, if you're going to all this trouble, you need to make sure that your digital music is the best it can be, and that means you should try to avoid MP3 or AAC files. Try Apple Lossless Encoder or AIFF formats, both of which remain true to the quality of the original studio recordings.

To change your import settings in iTunes, go to Preferences > General > Import Settings and change the format in the 'Import Using' drop-down menu.

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NUFORCE ICON IDO

www.internationaldynamics.com.au

PROS Audiophile-level audio processing; built-in headphone amp

CONS Not quite as good as the Solo

RRP \$329

