

NIGEL PALMER followed a colleagues recommendation of this headphone amplifier and would urge you to do the same.

Headphone amplifiers, along with such things as clock generators, power supplies and cabling, are usually thought of as boring but necessary and it's easy enough to see why can amps might be overlooked – they just do what it says on the tin, don't they? However, I think some that combine good design and facilities with very good sound are worthy of a second glance: no longer does the headphone feed from a workstation or to a live room have to be of the dubious quality many of us have experienced. I was intrigued recently when a mastering colleague, Eric James (co-conspirator with Bob Katz on Bob's classic *Mastering Audio* book), suggested I take a listen to the DACS HeadLite four-channel headphone amplifier, a unit that's been around for a few years now, as he thought it sounded pretty good. Eric is a long-time and successful classical recordist with a fine pair of ears, so I tend to take notice of his opinions. Let's see if he was justified...

with beyerdynamic DT990 Pro headphones for editing and QC) by jacking between the two. Although not an instant comparison, once I'd got the levels matched a pattern started to emerge with the DACS unit exhibiting a greater top-end clarity against the Benchmark, the latter sounding smoother and warmer by comparison. This was particularly apparent with the job I was working on at the time, mastering and denoising some Brahms orchestral pieces: at first I thought I hadn't set the HeadLite's output level correctly as there seemed to be more hiss than with the Benchmark, but, in fact, I was just perceiving the hiss in the recording to a greater extent along with clicks and other artefacts, which because they were more clearly apparent were easier to deal with. This was very useful, not to mention impressive, but then I became a little concerned that this was a 'hyped' presentation and that multitracked popular music was going to take my head off: I needn't have worried as the HeadLite's sound turned out to be clear but natural throughout.



DACS HEADLITE FOUR-CHANNEL HEADPHONE AMP

Overview

The HeadLite headphone amplifier from UK manufacturer DACS is a 1U box with a lavender and black front panel. Arrayed across the panel are four headphone outputs, each with a standard sized stereo jack socket, a volume control and a matrix switch allowing the user to select any of the four inputs, A B C and D, in a combination of either two stereo channels (AB or CD) or four monos normalled to both sides. As standard, output one is a LOUD (Line Output Upgrade to Device) channel identified by a white volume knob which gives a significant increase in power – DACS says you can power four, five, or six more sets of headphones from that output alone, and this modification can be fitted by DACS to any or all outputs as required and includes a soft clipper to help protect low impedance headphones from burn out. A large illuminated power switch rounds out the front facilities, a useful indicator of overall construction quality as these are among the first items to be left out in production cost-cutting exercises. The back view of the unit is sparse but workmanlike and includes a mains inlet, four headphone outputs paralleled from those up front for running out to recording areas (the circuitry is designed to drive long lines with no problem), a separate earth tag and the ABCD inputs for sources such as converters, patchbays and consoles.

In Use

The HeadLite's technical specifications read well, citing distortion below 0.002%, A-weighted signal to noise better than 124dB, a flat frequency response from 1Hz to 20kHz and so on, but as usual that says little about how it actually sounds and some careful listening was called for. To begin with I hooked up the XLR outputs of one of my Benchmark DAC1 digital to analogue converters in 'calibrated' mode to inputs A and B of the HeadLite, and compared the sound to the DAC1's built-in headphone amp (the HPA-2, itself a good design and my usual choice

The idea of the next test set-up was to see if I could use the slightly unusual two stereo/four mono topology to let me switch headphone monitoring easily and quickly between my two SADiE workstations, and so it turned out: the calibrated DAC1 output proved advantageous in that it was straightforward to match level to the -10 feed from the other workstation and switch between the two without major volume changes – a useful exercise anyway as the DAC1's fairly hot factory output setting at first caused the HeadLite to distort occasionally on material approaching odBFS or Full Scale, but a short time spent tweaking the level pots soon got things back in the comfort zone.

Conclusion

Good call, Eric: for the HeadLite to not just come close to the Benchmark headphone amp's quality but provide a perfectly creditable alternative to it is pleasing – while I thought both presentations valid, they each brought out subtly different musical aspects and I can imagine the HeadLite might be one way to help a vocalist maintain his or her pitch, for example. Niggles? Nothing to speak of, and although I did wonder whether in the heat of a studio session the volume controls could do with being a bit bigger, at the price the DACS HeadLite is a good-sounding multiple headphone feed with many practical applications. **FAV**

INFORMATION

④ DACS HeadLite £285 + VAT.

DACS (UK)
+44 (0)191 438 2500.
www.dacs-audio.com

THE REVIEWER

Nigel Palmer has been a freelance sound engineer and producer for over 20 years. He runs his CD mastering business, Lowland Masters (www.lowlandmasters.com), from rural Essex where he lives with his family and two dogs.