

GET A GLOW ON...

AUNE T1 USB DAC HEADPHONE AMP \$229

The USB DAC and headphone amp is a common combo, connecting to the USB of your computer, providing superior digital-to-analogue conversion of your music files, then passing the result to a headphone amplifier and 1/4-inch socket on the front.

The **Aune T1** adds a number of things to this formula. There is an analogue output at the back on RCA phonos, so the DAC can feed into your amplifier as well as providing headphone audio. There is also an analogue input, again on RCA phonos, so you can plug up an extra device — the little toggle switch on top selects whether this input or the main DAC is fed to the headphone amp (the volumes are perfectly matched). Note, however, that the external input can't be sent through to the analogue output, which is a little odd.

The main distinguishing feature of the T1 is, of course, the glowing valve which sits atop the Aune's shiny 13cm-wide slab of a casing — our case was shiny silver, but the pictured black is also available. Mmm, valves! There's just the one here, a Russian-made 6922EH Electro Harmonix — which we used throughout our listening. But a great many other valve types are compatible with the T1's nine-pin socket, so for not much additional cost you can shop for some more and compare the different results — such are the joys of valve experimentation. (A Head-Fi post, part of a massive thread on the T1, has a good verified list of compatible valves: tinyurl.com/T1valves).

The valve here is, as we understand it, operating in the preamp section of the T1 — after the DAC, but before the headphone power amp. That means both the headphone and line-level output will benefit from its tube buffering, but not the external input.

We say "as we understand it" because the English parts of Aune's website are more entertaining than they are informative — the company's mission statement, for example, is "to integrate all resources just for you to enjoy hearing about us", while the introductory

paragraph about the company runs thus: "As R & D and manufacturer of the well-known audio equipment, aune this evaluation in the international: 'the world agree HIFI concept into the design of audio products, aune — Appreciating, aficionados, and know the world'."

But the user manual is well translated, and hey, our Mandarin isn't very good either. There are plenty of competent products coming out of China these days, and we're

happy to confirm the T1 as one of them. The DAC chip used is a BurrBrown PCM1793, which has been around a few years (appearing in serious kit including Simaudio Moon DACs), while the very respectable Tenor TE7022 is used as the USB receiver. This chain, together with the valve preamp and headphone stage, delivered highly enjoyable listening across a range of headphones, offering clean bass, a rich midrange with excellent delivery of vocals male and female, and a bright detailed treble up to the ability of the headphones in question. It's not quite the knock-you-over breathtaking clarity of a \$1500 DAC, but the quality was excellent for this price.

Interestingly we wouldn't call it a notably 'valve' sound — indeed when we set up an A-B of the same tracks between the analogue input and the USB there was negligible difference in tone between





them, so if the configuration is as we understand it, the valve seems to be doing very little in terms of sonic signature. We had the little Cambridge XS DAC (reviewed next issue) working at the same time as the Aune and the sound of the XS was, in fact, slightly smoother; blindfolded we might have guessed that to be the valve model.

The power supply includes a separate brick, and then delivers its current into the main unit through a dubiously male 5-pin DIN plug (see the rear panel above). Headphone impedance seemed to make little difference; the socket is specified for headphone impedances of 32 ohms up to 600 ohms, and levels proved similar on all four models we used — nearly maxed out to achieve our preferred levels, though it was well pitched, as we never quite hit the top spot. This made us wonder whether less sensitive headphones or quiet;y recorded material might be too quiet, but Aune has a solution for this, although we only noticed as we packed up! There are four DIP switches reachable through small holes in the base panel, and these can be variously set to deliver up to a whacking 16dB of gain additional to the level we experienced during the review. So level should be no problem regardless of headphone design. (We tested with 55-ohm AKG 242 HD headphones, 50-ohm Sennheiser HD380 Pros, 50-ohm thinksound On1s, and 150-ohm Sennheiser HD 700s.)

We can envisage many happy users of Aune's T1, especially given its ability to feed a hi-fi as well as headphones, making it good for a home office or small room audio system, perhaps with a pair of active speakers, or in a work office, impressing co-workers with your natty silver (or black) valve headphone amp. Great fun, and good value. *JF* +

More info: www.noisymotel.com.au