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Headphone DAC | **£93** | [whf.cm/Ztella](#)

Zorloo Ztella

The name might draw a blank but this fledgling Hong Kong-based brand has a little gem on its hands



Image: Zorloo

In these unprecedented times, it perhaps makes sense that *What Hi-Fi?* should embark on a number of product testing firsts.

There are at least two of those here with the Zorloo Ztella – it is the first time we’ve come across this fledgling Hong Kong-based company, and certainly the first time we’ve reviewed one of these headphone adaptor-like USB DACs.


The Zorloo Ztella’s price is \$99 in the MQA form in which we’ve tested it, and \$109 if you also need the Lightning adaptor. At the time of writing, it can only be purchased directly from [Zorloo.com](#), with shipping to the UK charged at a flat \$10. That makes the total cost, including shipping and Paypal’s current currency conversion rate, £93 (£101) in the UK.

Hi-res capability


Zorloo claims the Ztella is the world’s smallest USB DAC with high-end audio capability, thanks to its 11cm length, 5g weight and ability to render hi-res music files up to PCM 384KHz, DSD 5.6M and in MQA. Being both unobtrusive and generally affordable, that would seem to make it the ideal upgrade to your smartphone’s sound – but it might also be good enough to become your go-to for the computer as well.

Zorloo describes the Ztella as plug-in-and-play. However, you may need to take a little care here, particularly if you’re an Android user and want to listen to MQA. Whereas the iPhone has a bit-perfect USB output,


KEY FEATURES



MQA support



Length 11cm



Weight 5g

which allows the MQA Core signal to be passed correctly and recognised by the Ztella, an Android device’s USB output is limited by the capabilities of the Android system, so the signal is not bit-perfect.

The workaround is downloading the USB Audio Player Pro app, which allows the Ztella to properly recognise and render an MQA signal at its finest. That’s more faff than something labelled plug-and-play should ideally involve, but it still performs somewhere near its best without the additional legwork.

The Ztella also incorporates a headphone amp that analyses whatever you plug into it and optimises its output to match – it can deliver more than twice the power of a standard smartphone. And Zorloo has made sure your in-line controls and mic are still active when plugged into the DAC.

As for the other end of the Ztella, the standard connection is USB Type-C, which covers most modern smartphone, tablet and laptop manufacturers. A USB Type-A adapter is included for use with older hardware, and there’s a version with a lightning adaptor for iPhones.

Careful matching required

You should take care with headphone pairing. The Ztella is a wonderfully clean-sounding DAC for the money, but it will emphasise any brightness or top-heavy presentation in your headphones, which can be quite wearing during lengthy listening sessions.

It’s not that Zorloo has got the balance wrong, just that you need to pair the Ztella with something neutral-sounding or mellow. There is still plenty of bass

weight anchoring the sound, and a solid, friendly midrange despite all the sonic cleaning, but this isn’t a DAC that dials back on high frequencies if they’re there.

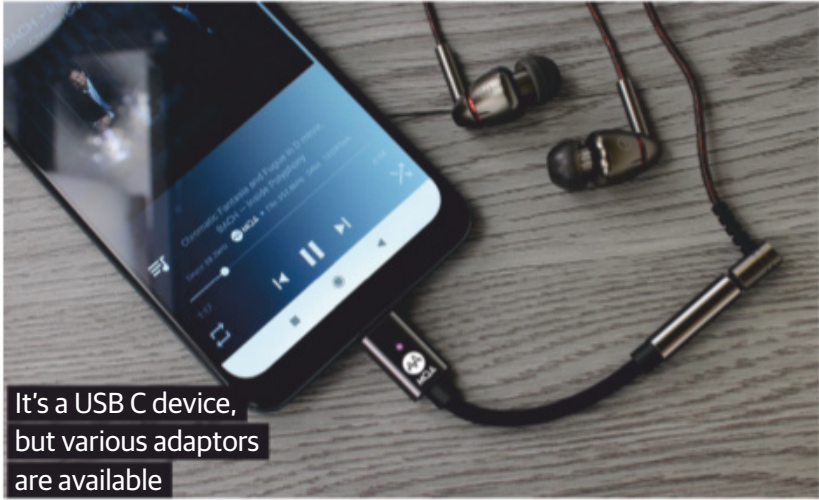
Cleanliness is one of the Ztella’s most abundant virtues, but it’s immediately noticeable how confident and playful it sounds. It does quiet and sombre reflection without sounding like it wants to go faster, but also feels most at home with upbeat tracks.

First contact

Of course, this being the first DAC of its type we’ve reviewed, there is no real frame of reference. We have tested lots of USB-stick-like equivalents, and while they are different prospects in many ways, the good news for Zorloo is that the sound is broadly comparable.

Class-leading DACs that currently retail around the price of the Zorloo Ztella, such as the Cyrus soundKey or Audioquest DragonFly Black, will give a more fluid sense of dynamics, with more accented playing of small-scale shifts, and perhaps also offer more body; but they by no means leave this talented DAC for dust. You may even notice more detail in pieces played through the Ztella, and be moved by its rapid and definite footwork.

Although similar, the Ztella is a fundamentally different product to those USB DACs above, and even with the faff of the extra software for Android users and the care needed with pairing, it’s still a winner. Put simply, if you want to improve your smartphone sound, but don’t want a USB stick hanging off the end of it, this is a bit of a no brainer.



It’s a USB C device, but various adaptors are available

WHAT HI-FI?		RATING ★★★★★	
SOUND ★★★★★	FOR <ul style="list-style-type: none">Clean and detailed soundLots of energy and excitementUnobtrusive size and form	AGAINST <ul style="list-style-type: none">Tiresome with bright headphonesAndroid users need specific app to play MQA files	VERDICT <p>It looks like your smartphone’s headphone adaptor, but will wipe the floor with any bundled-in rival</p>
FEATURES ★★★★★			
BUILD ★★★★★			