

# Pocket symphony

Oppo has updated its portable headphone amp/DAC to SE spec, **Ed Selley** finds out what's changed

**A**dd-on DACs look like being a big thing in the coming year as manufacturers follow Apple's lead and remove the headphone socket from their upcoming smartphone models. The change means that they are no longer a deluxe add-on, but are instead the only means of listening via a conventional pair of headphones or earphones.

Oppo was quick out the blocks with the original HA-2 launched last year and reviewed in *HFC 397*, and we became keen fans of the elegant little DAC. It hasn't let the grass grow under its feet, however, and the HA-2 SE claims performance improvements. Anyone looking for sweeping changes on the outside is likely to be disappointed, though. Save for the addition of an 'SE' moniker, the new model is identical to its predecessor. This is no bad thing as it is a great piece of industrial design. The decision to make it much the same size and shape as a smartphone means that it is easy to use alongside one, and the leather and metal finish is very attractive.

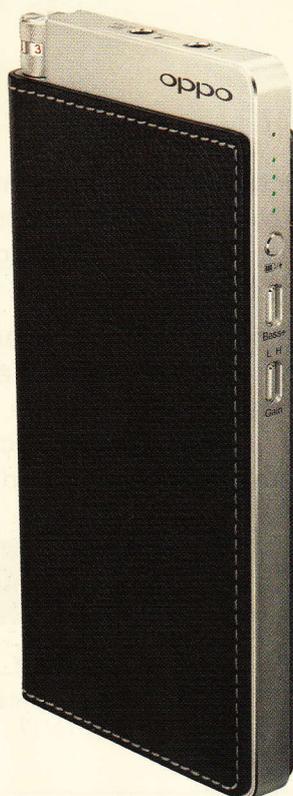
Internally, the SE model moves to a newer version of the ESS Sabre DAC – the ES9028-Q2M. The formats and resolutions supported remain unchanged – with 32-bit support already in the specification – but performance is improved. This is partnered with a new headphone amplifier section that is intended to reduce noise when used with sensitive in-ear monitors.

Connectivity and features are unchanged and the HA-2 SE has a single USB input split between normal and micro Type-A connections and a 3.5mm headphone output combined with a second 3.5mm connection that can be used either as a line out or an analogue line in. This is less connectivity than you get with

Chord's Mojo (*HFC 405*), but more than AudioQuest's DragonFly Red (*HFC 414*) can muster. The Oppo retains the very useful ability to shunt charge from its internal battery to your phone or tablet, allowing it to act as an external power supply.

## Sound quality

Given the lack of visual clues about the changes to become the SE, it is good to note that sonically, the new model makes some useful gains over the old one. With an original HA-2 running in parallel connected to a Lenovo ThinkPad, the single biggest change is the drop in the noise floor. With the full-size Sonus faber Pryma 01 (see p63), this does not make an appreciable difference, but with a pair



## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Oppo HA-2 SE

**ORIGIN**  
China

**TYPE**  
Portable headphone amp/DAC

**WEIGHT**  
175g

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
68 x 137 x 12mm

**FEATURES**

- 32-bit/384kHz and DSD256 capable DAC
- Inputs: 1x USB-A; 1x USB micro-B; 1x 3.5mm input
- Outputs: 1x 3.5mm headphone jack; 1x 3.5mm line-level
- Quoted battery life: 13 hours

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of Noble Dulce Bass earphones – which are much more sensitive – the improvements are readily apparent and the SE is impressively silent.

As a result, with the 24/88.2 rip of Dead Can Dance's *Toward The Within*, the sparse and simple performance of *The Wind That Shakes The Barley* is fleshed out with a greater sense of the venue and the audience, and gains a considerable boost to the realism and presence as a result. The tonality with voices in particular is weighty and natural and bass extension is exceptionally good.

Ask it to deliver something a little more frenetic – in this case the 16/44.1 download of Grimes' *California* – and there is a sense that it wants to have a bit more fun than its predecessor. Without altering the fundamental accuracy of the sound, there is a little more urgency than before. The odd bassline has more definition and energy to it, which draws you into the music much more effectively.

Some traits of the original unit have been retained, and I still feel the low gain setting sounds considerably better than the high setting. The good news is that there's enough grunt so that even in the low setting it should handle most headphones with ease. The bass boost facility is best left set to off as this can be somewhat unruly, and spoils the otherwise excellent tonal balance.

## Conclusion

If you already own the original HA-2, there probably isn't a great deal of point upgrading to the SE version. What it does ensure, however, is that an already excellent product has improved even more in expectation of the portable headphone and DAC market becoming a lot more significant in the year ahead. Viewed in this context, the HA-2 SE is a very desirable add-on device at a highly tempting price ●



## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful and involving performance; good build; good looks

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Works best in low gain mode

**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Some detail revisions to an already excellent product make for a very capable DAC indeed

**FEATURES** ★★★★★

### OVERALL

