



TREND SETTER

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◆ Introduction

Could it be that we are now starting to see the death of the stand alone CD Player as an audio source? Let's look at the evidence: why pay mega bucks for some 'audiophile' machine with all the trappings, when most people own the potential equipment already to form the heart of a first rate music reproduction system: namely the PC (or Mac). Think about it... Hi-Fi manufacturers go to insane – and often costly - lengths to create the 'perfect'



real-time mechanism for playback of an audio CD, and even then the end user is none the wiser as to whether they're actually getting 100% of the information off of the disc or not. Contrast this to just about any run of the mill CD-Rom drive on any PC. Just a free download of something like EAC or 'dBpoweramp' ensures that one is getting a bit-perfect transfer of a CD onto the computer's hard drive, or other storage media. In one fell swoop this already gets rid of any 'transport paranoia', and one can then deal with the task of converting this digital information into music. To date however, this is where many PCs have fallen flat, at least when the resulting quality of sound reproduction is compared with a decent stand-alone CD Player.

There are a great many sound cards available which offer superior sound for little outlay, but the inside of your average PC is an electrical and mechanically noisy environment, not conducive to top notch musical playback. The plus points are of course well documented now. All your music library available at the click of a mouse; the ability to create compilations fast or shuffle the music; the ability to download album artwork and song lyrics; the ability to transfer this music onto portable playback devices such as the iPod, upsampling at any bit rate you prefer and so on.

Personally I didn't take music from a PC all that seriously until one day out of boredom I looked into ways of hooking my elderly DPA PDM One – series 2 DAC to the PC. This resulted in the procurement of a very cheap USB-SPDIF converter plugged into my Sony Vaio laptop, and using iTunes to supply the digits. I was pleasantly surprised to say the least, and never looked back from that point onwards. Even with this modest set up one could hear the potential of using the PC as a source, and in some respects (resolution and dynamics) it bested my lightly modified Shanling CD-T80.

◆ Technical Information

Into the fray steps Trends Audio with their UD-10.1 USB Audio Converter. This device – they say – is designed to take the critical USB to SPDIF conversion outside of the interference heavy inside of the PC (caused by the high-speed switch mode power supplies, the fan motors and so on) ensuring a pure and accurate digital signal is sent to the DAC of your choice. Trends say the UD-10.1 turns your PC (or Mac) into ‘a high-end CD Player’. A bold claim indeed, but – as I found out – one that thankfully lives up to the hype, for a change.



The unit itself measures a tiny 110mm x 80mm x 60mm, and is housed in an attractive extruded aluminium enclosure. The real money has been spent inside, however, and contains such audiophile goodies as Elna Cerafine, Sanyo Os-Con and Wima MKP10 capacitors, high precision SMD resistors and capacitors, Burr Brown PCM2704 for USB audio conversion, proprietary dual power regulation circuits, separate power and ground paths, high accuracy crystal clock (+/- 10ppm), impedance matching circuits for digital outputs and more. Internal construction is of high quality and is very impressive considering the cheap asking price. There is a single USB input at the front of the unit, and a blue LED to show all is working fine when connected up to a PC or Mac. Amazingly, Trends have also provided a headphone socket too for those late night listening sessions. As if all this isn't enough however, Trends Audio also supply a gold-plated stereo 3.5mm headphone socket adapter to phono socket adapter, allowing one to use the headphone output as a line level source, thereby turning the UD-10.1 into an external DAC – amazing!

Around the back is a generous provision of digital outputs catering for every need: Coaxial – RCA/BNC. There is an optical output, and lastly a balanced AES/EBU (XLR) for those who prefer a more professional type connection. But that's not all, there is also a 5V DC input too for the supplied rechargeable battery pack, which is claimed to offer the best sound quality possible from the UD10.1. Of course this can also be used with other PSUs of your choice which makes the Trends attractive to those with a tweaky disposition.

◆ Sound Quality

The Trends is a joy to use. You just plug it into the PC (or Mac) and it is good to go. I had no issues at all with any compatibility or driver problems. However to ensure that I was allowing the Trends to fully show what it was capable of, I used Foobar2000, lossless music files, and the ASIO4ALL V.2 plug-in to ensure bit-perfect output. All DSPs and Replay Gain were disabled.

The Trends UD.10.1 is a fantastic reviewer's tool. One gets the impression that whatever is contained within a 16-bit file, the Trends will faithfully pass that onto the DAC without alteration (and those that have tested this with HDCD will attest that this unit is indeed bit-perfect). I could clearly hear the differences between my rather ancient, yet still superb PDA PDM One – series 2 and its bitstream converters, an Audiosector/Peter Daniel NOS multi-bit TDA1543 DAC, and an upcoming DIY favourite the 'Big' 24/192 DAC (available via Ebay for an absurdly low price) with its high quality Crystal CS4398 chipset. The Trends allowed the different sonic flavours of each DAC to be clearly discernable – it brought out the best in each: the PDA was extremely detailed, with superb insight into a recording, startling dynamic ability, and a slightly 'dry' tonal balance; the NOS DACs staggering bass wal op, rich tonal balance, emotive reproduction and – typically of the breed – curtailed treble response; the 24/192s overall even-handed nature with all genres of music. The 24/192 seemingly combining a sampling (pun intended!) of the best of the DPA and the NOS DAC, perhaps not surprisingly given the up-to-date nature of the chipset. No other digital source – to date – has been able to get so much out of each individual DAC I've used, at least none that I have heard. For the first time I felt that each DAC was fully giving of its best and allowed to truly strut its stuff to the max. To those that already possess a quality DAC and own a PC the Trends is an absurdly cheap way of gaining exclusive high-end digital sound without any fuss.



I knew from the first few seconds of 'You Don't Understand Me' from the Raconteurs' Consolers of the Lonely album that the Trends was going to mark the beginning of a very enjoyable listening session. The studio ambience present at the beginning of this track, before the music begins, was extremely palpable, there in every detail in front of you. The counting in of this track by one of the band members – which can seem obscured and lack physical space using lesser gear – was scarily realistic. You could pin-point exactly where he was situated within the studio. Then the piano comes into the mix. Piano is one of those instruments which seems to be a bit of a devil to pin down accurately in terms of 1) recording it in the first place and 2) accurately reproducing that sound convincingly. In this instance I needn't have worried. It was possessed of exactly the correct 'weight', and had a wonderfully rich and sonorous quality. This was a real reproduction rather than some half-hearted 'take it or leave it' digital reproduction which is often the case with lesser equipment. I noticed too that the decay of the notes was correct as well. Often – given that it was on the original recording of course – 16-bit digital seems to struggle with the decay of sound from instruments recorded in a real environment and acoustic space. It is these seemingly little details which, when missing, result in the oft-heard complaint about digital being flat and lifeless. Not so here. All instruments on this track lived and breathed as they should. It was also possible to follow what each instrument was doing, as well as the singer, without any effort. All strands of the music were beautifully teased out, there for

the listener to unravel at leisure. Toe tapping – again often conspicuous by its absence in lesser digital gear – was present and correct using the Trends UD.10.1. Music was enjoyable!

My attention was arrested by the dynamic ability all my DACs possessed when used with the Trends. A well recorded snare drum – for example – had enough power and speed to really make you jump! Fast, tight and with no overhang – just like the real thing. In fact many 16-bit files sounded so good I am sure it would be easy to convince someone they were listening to an SACD instead! Many CDs I had thought not recorded very well were given a new lease of life via the Trends, indicating the recordings were actually not bad to begin with, it was the lesser gear I was listening to them on... The UD10.1 will surely have you re-evaluating your entire music collection.



Impressed with the Trends I decided to try out the battery pack which – in theory at least – should give the best sound quality possible from the UD10.1. I have to say the sound didn't change as much as I expected, it was extremely subtle. The sound seemed slightly more 'relaxed' and smoother. It was hard to pin it down exactly. In the end I just preferred the sound without the battery pack as I thought it was a little more dynamic, especially with rock music.

However with classical or acoustic based music the battery pack could well find favour with many users. Of course, it all depends how clean the power supply is within your computer, as to how much of an improvement you can expect using the battery pack: I think I was lucky with my Sony Vaio laptop. Using the Trends with the USB power supply resulted in a superb sound from my equipment. However I am sure there will be situations where the battery power supply offers a much cleaner power supply than some computers are capable of supplying. Experimentation is the order of the day here.

Lastly – thinking it was undoubtedly a bit of an afterthought in the Trends design phase – I decided to try out the headphone output (remember to turn the volume control on Foobar2000 or iTunes down before doing this!). I was surprised to discover that it offered a very articulate and enjoyable presentation, certainly far better than the built-in headphone outputs on 80% of most commercial gear, especially those on computers. I could detect no obvious digital degradation from using the volume control within the software programs either. Bass was nice and extended through my Audio-Technica ATH-AD700s, and the midrange and treble rich and involving, much like a good valve amp I thought. Sound staging appeared normal too without that 'ball' of sound between the ears one can sometimes experience from some headphone stages. My only suggestion to Trends here for a possible UD-10.2 would be to include an analogue volume control for the headphones output on the unit itself – this would save having to keep getting up and using the software to control the volume (assuming the UD10.1 is situated nearer to the listener). I briefly tried using the headphone output socket with the supplied adapter, thereby using the UD-10.1 as a stand-alone USB DAC. I am pleased to report the same confident and enjoyable reproduction was evident as with using the headphone, thought not up to the same standard as using a quality external DAC.

◆ **Conclusion**

I think the little Trends UD10.1 is a landmark product, and fully deserves all the praise that has already been heaped upon it. My only complaint – and this is churlish at its price point – is that it doesn't handle 24/96 files, and I'd love to see what audio magic Trends could come up with at this higher bit rate. However, for those keen on getting the best 16-bit sound out of their computers and into a DAC it really is an essential audition, and frankly for its asking price of £139.95 is a steal. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised at what your DAC is capable of via the Trends. Add to this a rather impressive headphone output as an extra, the ability to use optical/coaxial or a balanced XLR output, plus a supplied battery pack and charger and the Trends UD10.1 really does make a persuasive case for itself. Please, ignore the low price. The Trends is a genuine high-end performer and will provide years of listening pleasure – I will not be going back to a conventional CD transport now. Audition with 100% confidence.

