

Review: Keces S3 DAC/AMP



Disclaimer: The Keces S3 was sent to me from the manufacturer in exchange for my honest opinion. I do not believe it needs to be returned.

Starting Words

There are several things that I love about [writing for Headfonia](#). Maybe my favorite is getting to hear something really good, from a company I haven't heard of before. Although getting big ticket items from well-known brands is always exciting, I think it is even more interesting to see something new pop up from the unknown, and arrive at my desk, demanding a review. Today, demanding my attention is the [S3 DAC/amp from Keces Audio](#). Never heard of them, you say? Yep, me either. They have been around for a bit; they seem to specialize in power conditioners and LPS. Today, they thought, is the day we get into the amplifying and DAC part of the game (well, that thought came a while ago actually, as this product, like any other, did need time to be developed). I was told that they did make a DAC some time ago, but it's been a spell, and now they are getting back in it with a fresh start. Well, let's have a look!

Keces S3

[The Keces S3 is a DAC/amp](#) retailing for \$1299.95. Not the cheapest price ever, but let's see what it offers. It can be used as a DAC/amp unit, as an amp with another DAC, or as a preamp, running out to another amp. As far as inputs go, it offers USB, coaxial and optical for digital, and both balanced and unbalanced for analogue. For output, it offers balanced and unbalanced, both for use as a preamp, and for headphone output. The only things it can't do are output a line level analogue signal or a pass through for a digital signal. So, it can do quite a bit.



Looking at the unit, it is relatively large, so if you are looking for a real space saver, tiny all-in-one, this might not do the trick, but it doesn't take up any more space than your average separate DAC and amp, and, of course, has fewer wires and cables to deal with, so for anti-clutter and convenience, that is always a plus. The build of the S3 is sturdy and solid, while not being the sexiest thing on the planet. The Keces S3 is made out of machined aluminum, as seems to be the standard today. It weighs just under 9 pounds. It has a small LCD screen on its front. Its switches and connectors all feel solid. The all black look is, of course, something I am always fond of. My only strike against the build is more with the look than the quality. The top of the unit is obviously a separate piece screwed on, with the six screws plainly visible. It does really look bad, and it doesn't make it feel any less solid, but it is noticeable, and as opposed to some other high end units, which take pains to hide such things, it does stick out, just a bit. It doesn't bother me at all, but your mileage may vary.



As far as function goes, the headphone outputs are on the front, while all the others listed at on back (pretty standard there). The LCD screen displays the input being used, the signal being received, the volume and the gain level. It is simply and easy to read. Between the screen and the volume knob is the gain switch. It has two levels: low and high. I never needed to go into high gain, but the [HE-560](#), single ended pushed the low gain to the roof, so beyond that is where low gain taps out. The volume on the KECES S3 uses a 128 step attenuator, so channel balance should never be an issue. One of the only nitpicks I have with the S3 is that the attenuator will pop and crackle when turned at higher volumes, especially if turned fast. I would, admittedly, like that to go away, but I would still definitely file that under “very minor”. Upfront, to the left of the screen, you have a switch to go between headphone out and preamp out. Finally, of course, there are your balanced and unbalanced headphone outs. As far as what formats will the DAC decode, for whom this is a big deal, the USB will do up to DSD256, and the optical and coaxial with go up to 24/192. So, there that is. All in all, the Keces S3 is packing a lot of features within its frame. This really is an “all you will ever need” box. Of course, that only means something if the S3 can deliver in the sound department.

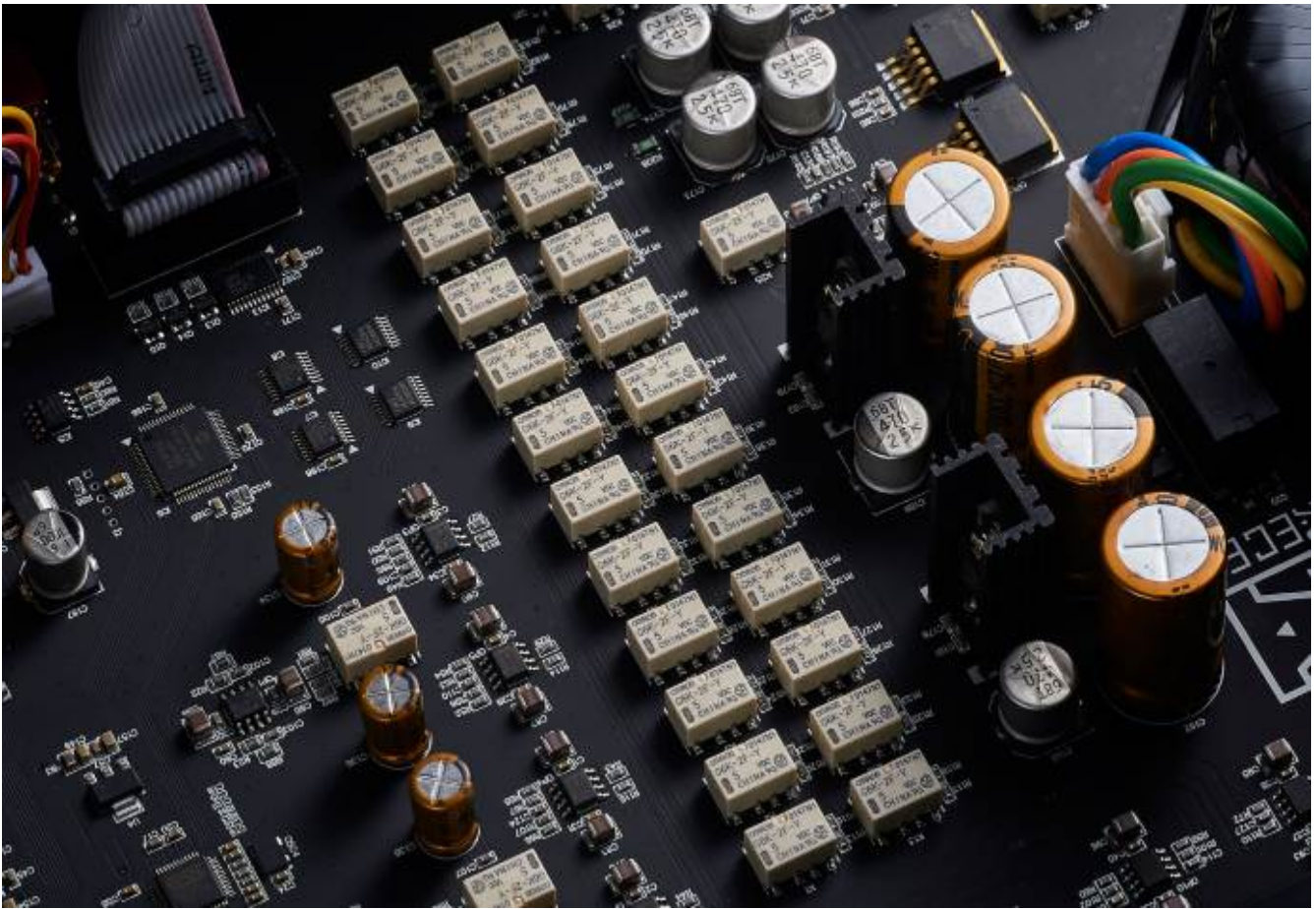
Features

1. High Quality Toroidal Power Transformer.
2. High-performance DAC-ESS ES9026PRO.
3. USB DAC: PCM 32 bit/384kHz and DSD DSD64(DoP)/DSD128 (DoP) DSD64/DSD128/DSD256 (ASIO Native).
4. COAXIAL/OPTICAL DAC: PCM 24 bit/192kHz and DSD DSD64(DoP).
5. Placed Balanced/Unbalanced Headphone output: Max Output Power 2000mW + 2000mW@32ohms.
6. Placed RCA/XLR Input/Output interface: Could be a Preamplifier.
7. Volume Control System: 128 step attenuator. Accurate control volume to achieve left/right channel balanced.
8. Isolation circuit: Completely separates the grounding of the digital and analog sections.
9. Volume/Source/Sampling display using OLED has excellent visibility.
10. The 4mm thickness of the aluminum chassis is effective to block EMI/RFI interference.
11. The full-metal body realizes both vibration control and elegant style in an A4-size body that enables placement on a desktop to be a PC HIFI system or to be a small stereo system.

Amplification

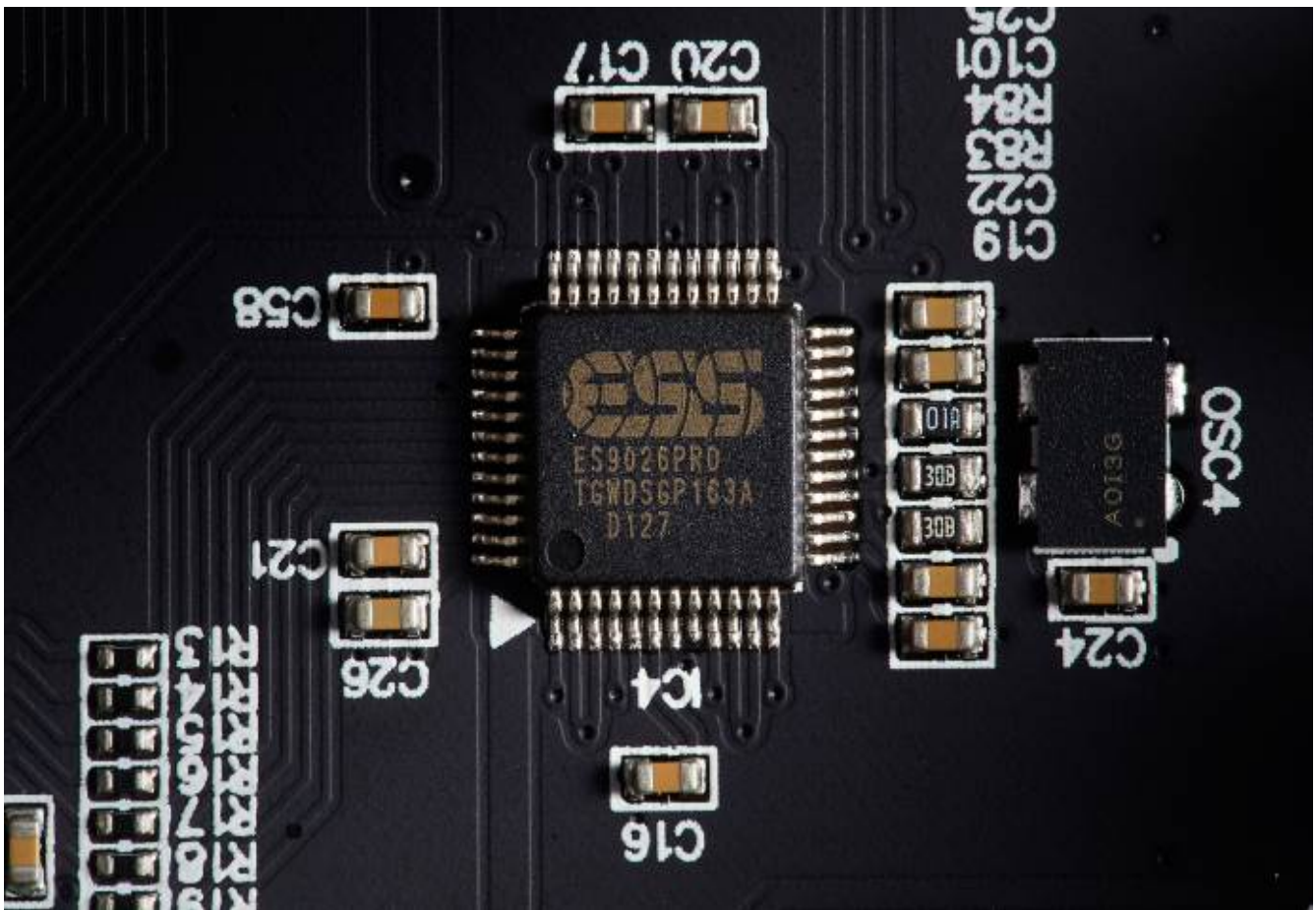
So, let's start with the amp. As said before, it can do both balanced and unbalanced. The overall feel of the amp is neutral, maybe ever so slightly v shaped. It is easiest to start with the treble. It is well extended and it sparkles real nice like. This, of course, can be a mine field for people who are allergic to treble. I never found it to be piercing or unpleasant, so, unless you hate treble outright, you should really like it here. The air around the top is terrific.

The bass has the prerequisite weight to it, and balances out the treble nicely. It punches well, and is as tight as the music (or source or headphones) will allow.



The midrange is the part of the frequency that is between the bass and the treble. It is clean. It isn't overwhelmed by the bass or treble. It also isn't special in any particular way. You could view this as either a good or bad thing. It all works for me, as the S3 sounds very coherent to my ears, and the mids sound musical. If you are looking for a lush midrange, or even a more extreme V, this wouldn't be your amp. The voices are of a part with the rest of the mids. They are clear, and well presented, but aren't of the seductive, romantic variety. Well, that isn't necessarily true; they will sound how the recording wants them to. So a romantic recording will sound as such.

Over all, that is how I would describe the sound, accurate. I was going to use the word analytical, but that tends to come with negative implications. Comparing it to my old standby, the [Vioelectric V100](#), it is a study in contrasts. For the sake of this review, we will say the bass is roughly equivalent between the two. The biggest difference comes in the midrange and treble. The midrange of the v100 has more body to it, and is more forward than that of the S3. It also has a smoother, more slightly more laidback treble section. This gives the V100 a bit of a warm edge, and can make it more forgiving of bad recordings (although I would still classify the V100 as neutral, just on the smoother side). The thinner (not thin, but thinner) sound of the S3 amp does give it a more analytical edge, but it also supplies some great benefits: it can make micro details more readily apparent, and it helps provide a terrific sense of space. I think that last one is the greatest strength of the S3 as an amplifier; it really feels like it opens up the sound of my music. I absolutely love that for classical.



Oh yeah, it also does balanced! Using the Hifiman HE-560, or the [Sennheiser HD650](#) with a balanced connection adds even more width to the soundstage and perhaps even a touch more detail, but it doesn't make any huge changes to the sound. It is just as described above, just with a little something extra in the soundstage.

This is a darn good amp in its own right, but as a built-in amp, it is really impressive. It holds its own with the excellent, but very different sounding, V100. Musically accurate... that's how I will describe it! The one area where the S3 does have to give up the ghost to the V100 is in unbalanced output, it doesn't have quite the same power. It would struggle with the HE-6 for example. Now, on to the DAC section!

DAC Section

Using the Sabre 9028Pro, it has the sound one might have come to expect from a Sabre DAC: clean and neutral, but musical. The resolution and micro detail are excellent. It gives the sound enough body throughout the range to never let the sound feel thin. The sound stage is both wide and deep. I actually think it offers performance comparable to that of the X-Sabre Pro. Comparing the two, through the S3 amp section, the S3 DAC has the more laidback treble and therefore a more laidback sound in general, while the Pro is a little more upfront, yet not really any harsher. The Pro might throw a slightly bigger sound stage, but I find them to be pretty even in overall performance, with the more forward treble being the only major difference. They sound like they are cut from the same cloth which is a very good thing.



What might be most important is that they sound great when used together as a unit. Everything works together to create a clean, accurate and musical sound. The detail offered by the combo is great, as are the dynamics (it would have really punched with the Elear). The soundstage is wide and deep, and well layered. It never errs too far on the side of analytical. You know, how, on certain winter days, you step outside and, instead of finding it cold, you feel a crispness in the air that is enlivening, and it gives you a sudden burst of energy? That is the Keces S3. It isn't cold; it's crisp.

The other DAC/amp I have in my collection is JDS Labs the Element, and while excellent for the price, the S3 is noticeably more refined, and can do balanced. The Matrix Quattro II is a closer comparison. I am going off memory here, but I find the DAC performance to be roughly similar, with the edge in detail going to the S3, but the S3 carries a much more robust and fully featured amp section. The big test for me was comparing it to my X-Sabre Pro and V100 stack. The S3 went toe-to-toe with my stack easily. The V100 made the stack a little smoother, but the S3 offered a more spacious sound. Both offered terrific detail from my mid-fi/high-fi headphones (HD650, HE560. Aeon Open and Closed). Both were completely musical.



If there is some aspect to the sound, or some question I have left unanswered, please ask it in the comments. I am feeling oddly tongue tied in this review.

End Words

To be honest, the Keces S3 is probably going to be my go to unit for music listening for the near future. It sounds great, compares extremely well to my reference units, has all the features I could use and it does this all in one unit. I can be a slob, and my desk tends to become cluttered really fast. That I can cut down on the cables and components without sacrificing sound quality in the least, is really exciting for me. I know that \$1299 is a lot of money to spend on something, especially from a company that you might not have heard of before, but the Keces S3 balanced DAC/amp is the real deal. However, till Monday, November 27th, you have the chance to get the S3 for even less. It is currently [on Massdrop](#) for the price of \$1099, and, if up to 4 people join the drop, the price gets reduced to \$999. That is \$300 off. For all that the S3 can do, and do so well, that is a pretty good deal. So, if the thought of a high end all-in-one, do-all-and-end-all is appealing to you, here it is. You're welcome.

Link to the Massdrop page : <https://www.massdrop.com/buy/keces-s-3-balanced-dac-amp>

Link to the product page: <http://keces-audio-usa.com/products/S-3>

