



## FIRST LISTEN - IFI ICAN NANO PORTABLE HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

By [Chris Martens](#) | Jan 03, 2014 Products: [iFi Audio iCAN Nano](#)



In 2013, the tiny **iFi Micro iCAN** desktop headphone amplifier proved one of the most pleasant—and pleasantly affordable—discoveries of the year for serious headphone audio enthusiasts operating on real-world budgets. I'm not sure if I conveyed this impression as vividly as I ought to have done in my *Hi-Fi+* review of the iCAN, but the simple fact of the matter is that the iCAN was and is just ridiculously good for the money (£225). "Surely," I thought to myself, "one would have to wait a very, very long time before anyone offers a better value in the world of small, overachieving headphone amps."

But then again, perhaps not. I say this because, as it happens, the mad geniuses at iFi Micro (aka the R&D team from Abingdon Music Research) have been at it again and may have come up with an even greater, higher value achievement: namely, the new **iFi Micro iCAN Nano** portable headphone amplifier (£149 with VAT). At Rocky Mountain Audio Fest 2013, iFi Micro's Vincent Luke kindly loaned me an almost-ready-for-prime-time, pre-production sample of the iCAN Nano to play with until such time as a full-product review sample could be made available.

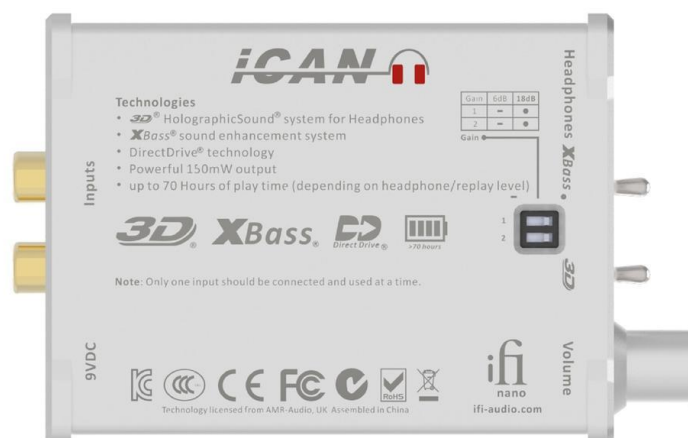
Unlike the original iCAN, which was strictly a desktop unit that draws its power from a special, very low-noise wall-wart power supply, the iCAN Nano, which is about one half the size of the already compact iCAN, is a portable unit driven by a lithium-polymer battery whose playback time per charge is—get this—in the range of 70+ hours (no, that's not a typographical error). Can you say "convenient"? Just think: You could charge up the iCAN Nano in England, fly to the 'States listening to the Nano all the way, then listen to it some more during your trip, and finally return to England (again listening to the Nano all the way) and *still* have a little bit of charge left over. Cool, no?

Then there's the feature set. Normally in audio products, and especially portable ones, making a product smaller equates to deletion of features, but with the iCAN Nano this isn't precisely the case.



Whilst it doesn't have the exact same features as the bigger iCAN, it comes pretty close. Thus, like the iCAN, the iCAN Nano features iFi's signature Direct Drive amplifier circuitry (no output coupling capacitors in the signal path), plus an updated though simplified version of the firm's 3D HolographicSound circuitry (an attempt to give headphones more speaker-like soundstaging characteristics), and XBass circuitry (which allows users to dial in a judicious dab of very low frequency bass lift, if desired).

In terms of output, the iCAN Nano is, as you would expect, less powerful than the drives-almost-anything iCAN, but it nevertheless puts out a very respectable 130mW into 32 ohm loads. In practice, the iCAN Nano probably cannot drive desperately power-hungry 'phones such as the HiFiMAN HE-6, but it is perfectly adequate for powering the vast majority of "normal" headphones.



This brings us at last to the biggest question of all, which is, “How does it sound?” I have to tread carefully, here, because Vincent Luke made me promise I would withhold judgment until I have heard the final production unit (one is on its way to *Hi-Fi+*, but is not here yet). So, take the following comments with a large grain of salt and the foreknowledge that the production unit is said to sound even better than the pre-production sample I have.

If that is so, then iFi will surely have a winner on their hands as the pre-production iCAN Nano sounds terrific (a lot like the original iCAN, but slightly less powerful). If asked to supply a two-word description of the iCAN Nano’s sound, the two words I would pick are “vibrant” and “robust.” If you drive headphones directly from a iPod, smartphone, tablet, or desktop PC and then insert the iCAN Nano in the signal path things immediately get better—a lot better. It’s as if the music has been suffering from anemia and then suddenly receives much needed transfusions of energy, dynamic muscularity, and natural, organic-sounding warmth. What is more, the 3D Holographic Sound and Xbass settings seem at once simpler than, but also more sonically subtle and usable than their equivalent settings in the original iCan. ‘Works for us.

In short, we can’t wait to hear the final production unit. Watch for a full review in *Hi-Fi+*. Until then, happy listening.