

# Chord Poly

This pocket-size add-on turns the Chord Mojo into a complete portable streaming solution

Just once in a while, all the hoopla surrounding the launch of a new product is justified by the item in question – and that was certainly the case when Chord Electronics rolled out its Mojo DAC/headphone amplifier a couple of years back at a lunch at the top of London’s Shard. Here was a high-end digital component miniaturised down to the point where one could take it anywhere, powered by batteries and able to be used with anything from a CD player or computer right the way through to smartphones and tablets.

That Chord had launched such a product was hardly a surprise: after all, the company already had on its books the 2Qute DAC and the Hugo battery-powered DAC/headphone amp, now in MkII form. So it seemed logical to make the already compact designs even smaller, to appeal to the so-called ‘iPhone generation’ – which, incidentally, now seems to stretch from children all the way up to very senior citizens, if my friends and acquaintances are typical.

What was more of an eye-opener when Chord revealed its new baby was not only that the palm-size product felt reassuringly chunky and ‘serious’ in its machined aluminium casework but also that it was built around the company’s in-house digital-to-analogue technology. That’s always been seen as Chord doing things the hard way in the search of quality; rather than using the off-the-shelf DAC chips found in just about every other digital device on the market, the company’s digital guru Rob Watts ‘builds his own’, running in complex software on processing chips known as Field Programmable Gate Arrays – but it was quite surprising to find this apparently expensive approach used in a highly affordable ‘pocket DAC’. What’s more, it was notable that rather than putting this



model out to contract manufacturing in a lower-cost country, as most would do, Chord was building the Mojo as it did the rest of its range – in house at its factory in Kent, which is a converted pumphouse originally built to supply water from the Medway to Maidstone.

Chord Electronics boss John Franks explained at the time that the numbers added up on the Mojo because the company was aiming to sell the little DAC/amplifier in huge numbers, which would amortise the initial costs over the production run. His numbers were persuasive, suggesting that if the company managed to sell to just a minute fraction of the iPhone owners out there, it would be very happy indeed.

At that event, Franks was also delightedly showing off a little plug-in box, designed to clip on to the end of the Mojo and add functionality – albeit at that point very much in mock-up form. Two years later, the Poly is here, and combined with the

Mojo it creates a very potent pocketable music system.

Selling for £499 and designed only to be used with the £399 Mojo, the Poly adds playback from microSD cards of the kind used by other pocket music players, as well as DLNA music streaming when connected to a home Wi-Fi network, and both AirPlay and Bluetooth streaming directly from phones, tablets and computers. It can also be configured to operate as a Roon endpoint, so if you have a computer running Roon, you can play music to the Mojo/Poly – or is it MojoPoly? – including Tidal online streaming, and can stream content stored on microSD cards to other DLNA devices on your network. What’s more, the combination retains the wide-ranging playback capability of the Mojo, allowing files of up to 768kHz

## SUGGESTED PARTNERS

The Poly needs the Mojo to work, of course, but here’s how to build a system around it ...

### MACMINI

The simplest source for the Poly will be a home computer – a simple laptop will do, or the likes of a MacMini (used from about £150 or so) controlled by a phone app.



### THE MOJO/POLY

The Mojo/Poly combination will drive a wide range of headphones: try it with a high-quality pair of in-ears such as the excellent Final Heaven IV.



sampling rate or DSD256/2.8MHz to be played; however, if it’s used for network streaming the limitation is going to be the throughput of your home network, of which more later.

As with the Mojo, the Poly has its own internal battery, charged via a micro USB cable from a computer or a plugtop charger of the kind used for mobile phones. It’s possible to ‘charge through’ with the Poly in place but one should ensure one has a charger with sufficient heft. It’s also worth noting that both Mojo and Poly run quite warm when in use: this can be slightly alarming at first but is symptomatic of the sheer amount of electronics packed into both, Chord reassuring users that it’s quite normal and both devices have internal protection should things get too warm.

### PERFORMANCE

Setting up the Poly is relatively simple but should become easier still once Chord’s forthcoming GoFigure app for Android and iOS is in place. For now, one has to put the device into set-up mode by pressing a hidden button below the microSD card slot – Chord supplies a pin such as that used to change SIM cards on phones for just this purpose – which then sets up a temporary hotspot. Connect a phone or tablet to that via Wi-Fi and a screen appears allowing one to select the mode in which the Poly works and ‘tune it in’ to your home network. There are also little voice messages to tell you which mode the Poly is in when the button is pressed. Control of the Poly relies on third-party software running on a tablet or smartphone. There’s no dedicated app for the Chord device but the likes of Linn’s Kinsky app and others will ‘find’ the Poly and enable music to be played to it. Yes, a Chord app would be good; but the

available free alternatives out there work well enough.

The alternative is to use Roon, as I did with my home set-up, controlling the playback using the Roon Remote app on my iPhone with the Mojo/Poly driving either a pair of headphones or fed into my hi-fi systems via a 3.5mm-to-RCA adaptor. It’s worth noting that one should set up Roon to downsample to 192kHz/24-bit, especially if you have a library containing contents at higher sampling rates: the limitations of Wi-Fi mean that playback will be stuttery or just fail completely if you try to push beyond this.

The Poly proves itself to be no novelty item but a very competent playback device, transcending any assumed limitations brought about by its compact size. The built-in battery is good for nine hours’ use – one less than the Mojo manages, depending on volume levels – and the sound of the combination is every bit

as thrilling and precise as that of the Mojo alone, with excellent bass weight and bags of detail and ambience.

As readers of *Gramophone* might hope, this is far from being a system with a sound ‘hyped’ up to please the listener more interested in commercial rock and pop recordings: indeed, such content can be revealed to be over-processed, dynamically flattened and just generally trying too hard. Rather, the ‘MojoPoly’ revels in high-quality recordings, bringing out all the presence and information in a high-resolution set to attention-grabbing effect.

But it’s also rich-sounding, both in overall weight and the way it reveals instrumental and vocal textures, serving simple instrumental recordings as well as it does large-scale works. The recent live set of Berlioz’s *Les Troyens* (Erato, 12/17) benefits from this combination of scale and attention to detail, but the Chord duo is just adept with the more delicate touch of Sabine Devielhe’s ‘Mirages’ set (12/17), handling the soprano’s voice with lovely fluidity and power, and sounding spine-tingling, especially through high-quality headphones. In short, whether used as a portable device or a system source, the Chord Mojo/Poly combination is nothing less than a remarkable achievement. ●

### CHORD POLY SPECIFICATIONS

**Type** Network music player  
**Price** £499  
**Inputs** microSD card reader, Bluetooth, AirPlay, DLNA, Roon  
**Connectivity** Wi-Fi  
**Formats played** PCM up to 768kHz, DSD to 5.6MHz (depending on source/connection); AAC, WAV, FLAC, AIFF, OGG VORBIS, ALAC, WMA and MP3  
**Outputs** Dedicated digital connection to

Chord Mojo DAC/headphone amp (£399); can also serve content on microSD to other DLNA devices  
**Remote control** Via third-party apps on smartphone/tablet, or via Roon  
**Battery life** up to nine hours from a four-hour charge  
**Dimensions** (WxHxD) 6.2x2.2x5cm  
**chordelectronics.co.uk**