

Hifi Pig

Magazine

WWW.HIFIPIG.COM

SEPTEMBER 2014
Issue #10

Headphone Month

REVIEWS

Audeze, OPPO, HifiMan, Sennheiser,
Final, Focal, Stax, Lehmann, Epiphany
Acousitcs, AudioValve, Tisbury Audio,
GOJI, Graham Slee

PLUS Reader System, Dealer System, Album
Reviews, The Classics (Deep Purple - Made In
Japan)



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Tony Bolton, Hi Fi World 2014

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Kai Ekholm, Inner-magazines.com



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2013
2014

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Welcome to Headphone Month at Hifi Pig. But why focus on headphones for a whole month, surely it's not such an important area of hifi?

Stuart Smith explains why...

There's something very satisfactory about listening to your favourite music on headphones. First of all is the isolation from the outside world that it gives you that dictates that you have no option other than to get lost in the music without distraction. Secondly there's that exaggerated separation of instruments as there's no bleed over from one channel to the next that you obviously get with live music or whilst listening on a conventional pair of loudspeakers. Then there's the fact that you can enjoy your tunes on the bus, on the train, whilst away on business or any time up find yourself away from your main system. This is where I tend to find myself listening on headphones most of the time, though I do have quite a nice little headphone set up for when I'm feeling a tad isolationist...or more likely the rest of the family want to watch something on the tragic lantern.

The AV headphone market had a revenue forecast worldwide in 2013 of 8.2 Billion dollars, made up of 284 million units being shipped.

Headphones and the associated kit that go with them like headphone amplifiers, portable headphone amplifiers, portable DAC/headphone amplifiers, after market cables and a whole lot more are becoming



increasingly sophisticated to cater for a burgeoning market that are no longer satisfied with a pair of earbuds and an iPod.

Then there's the whole beats generation that, as John Scott mentions in his following article, are potentially the audiophile market of tomorrow. Say what you will about the infamous beats headphones but what they have managed to do is turn their heavily celebrity endorsed headphone business into a Billion dollar enterprise that controls around 70% of the premium headphone market (23% of total global headphone revenues...*Futurescope Consulting*) Where the headphone market would be today if it were not for this brand's involvement?

According to *Futurescope Consulting*, the AV headphone market had a revenue forecast worldwide in 2013 of 8.2 Billion dollars, made up of 284 million units being shipped. They anticipate that growth in this market will increase up until 2017 until growth levels out.

These are big numbers and encouraging figures to my mind. The more people we have exploring music and finding new (and older) music to buy can only be a good thing for the industry.

And this is in part why we at Hifi Pig chose to dedicate a month to nothing but the review of headphones. Of course you don't have to spend a King's ransom to get good quality sound from headphones and this is why we have searched out headphones ranging from just £60 to the more exotic models costing over £1000.

I hope you enjoy reading our reviews and rest assured there will be more to come in September as we have been inundated with samples to review...

Hifi Pig contributor John Scott talks headphones and asks if this is how we attract a new generation of audiophiles.

As it's headfi month here at Hifi Pig I have been having a bit of a think about headphones. Last month, I suggested that if you are happy to take photos on a phone then you are more likely to buy a better phone than buy a camera. Similarly, if you listen to music on an iPod dock then you are more likely to upgrade to a better iPod dock than to a proper hifi system. I've been wondering if the same kind of thing holds true for headphones.

Portable audio started with the Sony Walkman in 1979. Okay, you might argue that it started earlier with the portable transistor radio but I would contend that you are just being pedantic and that the Walkman was the first pocket-sized device (yes, I know, you *did* have to have big pockets) to let you have a choice over the music you played. Evolving through the portable CD player and the MP3 player, portable audio has become ever more popular and with its inclusion in the smartphone's bag of tricks has become ubiquitous.

It goes without saying that now that nearly everyone has a smartphone, nearly no one is without a pair of headphones. Most of those will be the crappy earbuds that come bundled with the phone, but you just have to look around you on your daily commute or as you wander down the street to see that people are trading up their headphones. A fair bit of this is to do with fashion of course. Dr Dre's Beats have helped to make headphones hip (or phat, or dope, or something) and ultimately this can only be a good thing - like the upgrade path with camera phones and iPod docks, people who like to listen to music on headphones will hopefully upgrade to better 'phones, not just better phones.

High quality expensive headphones are nothing new but never before has there been such a wide range available. I'm not sure exactly how or when it

Maybe, just maybe, people who like to listen to music using a headphone amp and a pair of 'phones will upgrade to a full blown amp and speaker set up.

happened but headphone listening has become a popular indoor pastime, not just an al fresco one. Standalone hifi headphone amplifiers are very definitely a thing now - hardly a day goes by without a new one coming onto the market and more people than ever are choosing to opt for a headphone-based system over loudspeakers. As someone who likes to sit in front of a pair of speakers and feel the air in the room move as they do their thing, I'm still getting my head round this but it's clearly a welcome development for the industry. In fact, it has struck me as I write this that the answer to the question I asked last month - how does the hifi industry attract a new generation of purchasers? - could be answered in part by the rise in popularity of the headphone. Maybe, just maybe, people who like to listen to music using a headphone amp and a pair of 'phones will upgrade to a full blown amp and speaker set up. Which is not to suggest, of course, that a good quality headphone-based system cannot be an end in itself. This month's magazine is chock-full of equipment that proves otherwise. So, if you have previously misinterpreted Suzi Quatro's advice and canned the cans, now might be the time to reconsider.

Dealer System



Set in the Heart of Nottingham's sumptuous Sherwood Forest The Missing Link are the subject of this months Dealer System where Mark Sears introduces us to their reference system used in their "Vinyl Passion" Music Room.

these years of listening to equipment and setting up recording studios it is to remember that in choosing equipment price is not a constant relative to Quality. **Room acoustics is of fundamental importance and often overlooked**



Our Vinyl Passion Reference System has evolved over several decades and we have been lucky enough to listen to many different products in our 35 years of involvement with the Hi Fi Industry. We have represented many high end brands and gained insight into differing design approaches, manufacturing methods and marketing strategies and if there is a single predominantly important factor learned from

A badly set up room will sound bad regardless of choice of equipment. This is a deep subject with different options for each environment so we will not have time to go into detail here but just a little consideration in layout and some cleverly placed soft furnishings and textiles can often reap big rewards. The most common mistake with many systems I install is the listening environment . **In choosing a whole system the most important point to remember is that the music source has to be right.**

This is a very personal option and for me it is analogue every time. Of course we sell digital equipment and I have tried the streaming route, spending a lot of time comparing vinyl to FLAC on a very wide range of equipment and yes, the sound engineer on the one side of me argues with the music lover on the other about what is technically correct and possible but as the saying goes 'the heart wants

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Dealer System

what the heart wants' so I realise that my true preference has not changed over the years and I always find myself going back to vinyl to get that extra emotional layer that digital somehow fails to offer.

Having chosen your source the clever part is synergy

This is an art in itself and simply buying expensive high end equipment is no guarantee of a great sound - in fact I have listened to many well set up budget systems that would embarrass systems costing hundreds of thousands of pounds. As a sound engineer and a dealer with many years and thousands of hours of listening to different combinations of equipment I am always more than happy to give advice on equipment choices within set budgets.

So to begin I will start with the front end in the Vinyl Passion Music Room - The Analogue Source of our Music

For me this has been a long winding journey in itself. As an equipment design engineer & music lover I have personally collected & restored turntables & vinyl for many years as a hobby aside from my company & dealership and so I have a large collection of both Vinyl and Turntables.



As a Dealer one of the brands we represent and my personal choice of Reference Turntable & Arm is SME, but we also specialise in Vinyl Passion VP-12 Turntables based on the Linn LP12

Our Turntable - Vinyl Passion VP-12

Our own Reference turntable is the Vinyl Passion VP-12 (*pictured*) built into one of the finest plinths available - a Kalos English Oak plinth. This is a heavily modified Linn LP-12 so much so all that is left of the original LP-12 is the main bearing (definitely the best part of the Linn) the rest is all of my own design and made from the finest aerospace grade materials available. We also custom build VP-

12's to order, offer upgrade fits & servicing for the LP-12 Turntables to our customers and we supply the upgrades in kit form either direct or to our appointed dealers.

We use a variety of Tone Arms including Linn, SME, Audio Mods and Rega.

Cartridges we use for preference are from Benz & Sumiko.



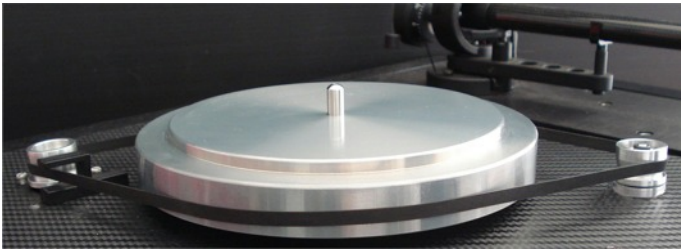
For me this is the most musical turntable I have listened to retaining the musicality of the Linn but with the speed, dynamics and sound-staging of the SME and both myself and the family make sure it has plenty of use.

Kalos English Oak Plinth. VP Unity Two Sub-Chassis with Blue Springs and Unity Two Arm Board. VP Foundation Base Board. VP Orpheus Top Plate. VP Black Platter. VP Purple Acrylic Platter Mat. Linn Bearing. Jeff Spall Audio-Mods Tone Arm with Benz Glider Cartridge.



Dealer System

VP 12 Centripede Drive System



Accessories

Essential accessories for vinyl and really an extension of the system: Milty Zerostat Gun, Carbon record cleaning brush, VP Dust Buster Stylus Cleaner last but not least Moth RCM Pro cleaning machine.



Support

I cannot emphasise enough the importance of good solid support. The equipment really needs to be supported properly and cables lain with thought and care.

In our music room we use a good British brand that has been in the game for years - Apollo Hi Fi Furniture. They offer excellent value with custom colour finish and just to demonstrate how strong they are we have replaced our glass top turntable shelf with a 165kilo slab of granite on which we can run 2

turntables simultaneously to make easy comparisons on the fly with identical pressings - a great development and comparison tool for customers.



Phono Stage

Valves all the way! Superb Performance from the Ming Da MC Phono 2006 mm/mc



Our unit has been re-valved with Russian Gold pin NOS Valves and having listened to many phono stages at many price points for me this is as good as it gets. Also having its own volume control we can skip the pre-amp for Reference listening sessions

Pre Amplifier

Ming Da MD7-SE is used in our main system and this has been re-valved with 4 x JT Full Music 6sn7's and a Golden Dragon rectifier and directly feeds One of Two sets of amplifiers from the phono stage depending on music style that is being played.



Dealer System

Power Amplifier – ONE



The Vincent SP 331-MK 300w Power Amplifier is the most capable valve hybrid power amplifier I have ever encountered. When first compared to our existing stock after receiving one in part exchange 8 years ago I was totally astonished at the superb performance – especially for price. I had never even heard of the Vincent brand. We contacted Vincent direct and after conversing with their head office we are now the sole official UK importer. Needless to say the brand has made a big impression on me and over the years we have continued to compare the Vincent equipment to some very expensive alternatives from other manufacturers. I always try to keep an open mind and in my opinion the SP 331 still wears the crown at this level of performance for price - nothing close in my book as a good all-rounder - this will work well with all music from Led Zeppelin to Debussy to Nora Jones and everything in-between. The SP 331 offers speed and dynamics and a simple clarity that never fails to impress and it can drive any loudspeaker sitting rock steady on the most complex of tracks.

A true Reference Grade Power Amplifier

Power Amplifier - TWO

If I am in a female vocal or acoustic mood I will partner the Ming Da Phono Stage directly to our Ming Da 805

For simple music the Ming Da 805's have the most rewarding sound you could wish for at any price and with a healthy output of 34 watts can easily drive the Quads whilst also working extremely well with Pro AC & Living Voice loudspeakers. Three dimensional holographic voices airily project into the room, stringed instruments sparkle with a vibrancy that has to be heard to be believed; it is both beguiling and hypnotic and I often find myself listening into

the small hours with the wonderful glow of the giant 805's - who needs a log fire ?



Speakers



Almost the last part in the chain and by no means the least - the loudspeakers and being a sound engineer room acoustic and loudspeaker matching is very important.

If you are in the lucky position to have a large listening area Quad Electrostatics are arguably one of the most accurate loudspeakers available and for this very reason I have used them as an open window to assess equipment for more than 25 years. The first 20 years sticking to my trusty 57's – now lucky enough to have a pair of 2805's - for both musical reproduction and as a development tool they are simply indispensable. An interesting *geek* point about the Quad Electrostatic loud speaker is that it is the only loudspeaker in the world that can accurately reproduce a square waveform! This shows it has the most accurate phase response of any passive loudspeaker available - to simplify this is achieved by the panels having a lower mass than any other loudspeaker. The speaker is also a dipole and like a real acoustic instrument radiates omnidirectional sound with the added benefit of no crossover distortion.

Cables

The last part of the chain - Cabling and Mains Conditioning is another important area. Needless to say, we use Missing Link Cables throughout. It would show little faith in my design abilities to use anything else!

Perhaps another time for full details of the cables we use but as a brief note on the subject of our pure Silver Reference and Passion Signature Cables that we use - All Silver cables are not the same. The VP cables are made from a specially sourced Silver Ore that contains a specific chemical finger print as a result of many years of research to produce the purest conductors possible - just one of the many pioneering points in this range of British hand built cables offering custom finishing in any length, termination and colour required – an especially wife pleasing option! Here's a picture of the Pure 5n Silver Link Cryo Reference Interconnects



Summary

The equipment and set up in our VP Reference System is certainly not the most expensive high end equipment available - more a labour of love in finding and engineering equipment that works harmoniously together.

We obviously have access to a wide range of equipment and we constantly receive new equipment in part exchange and regardless of brand or cost we always have a listen to everything available to us. Some things you expect to impress often fall short but the nicest surprise is when an old bit of kit comes in part exchange with a resale value of £50 and it simply sounds stunning.

My pet hate in the Audio World, and I have encountered it several times, is hi fi snobbery.

This business is about real people listening to real music and it is something that bonds us all on common ground where we can revel in the arts regardless of race colour creed religion or sexual preference and in this day and age that makes me proud to be involved.

It's a fantastic profession where I have met the most wonderful friends and something for which my passion grows daily.

Our Vinyl Passion System is as good as it gets for me and whilst I am able to enjoy the emotions of music my passion for vinyl will continue to grow.

Mark B. Sears

www.the-missing-link.net

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Reader System



Hifi Pig reader John Locke introduces us to his system that has taken years to get to where it is now and contains a pretty impressive list of kit.

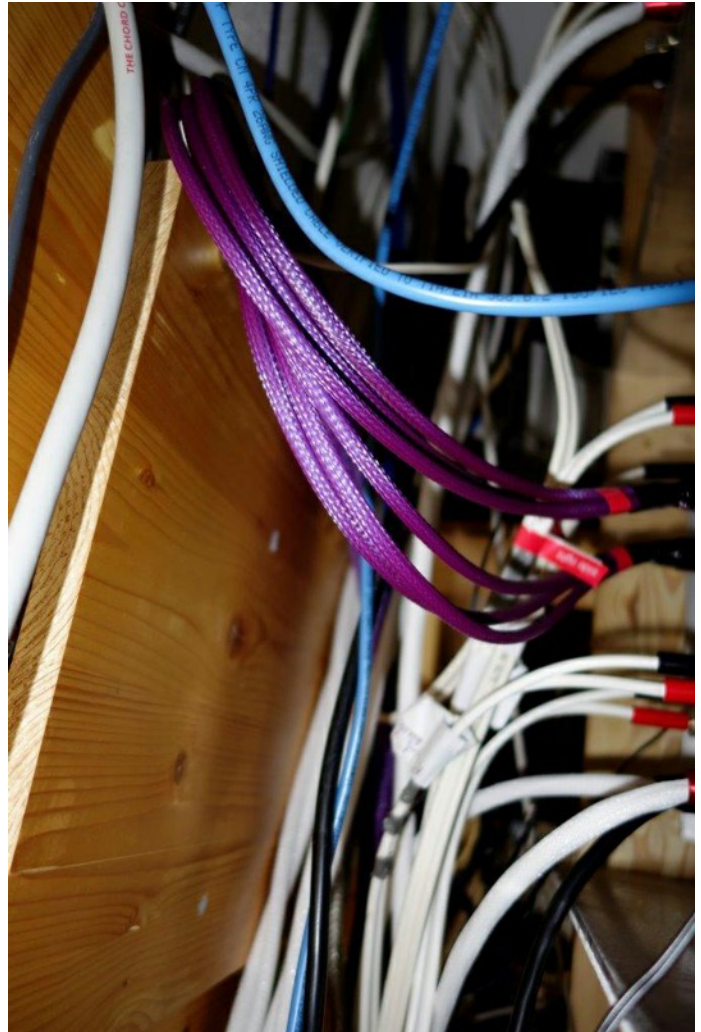
First some context, I have been active in the HiFi since 1975, my father was very keen as well and would build his own amps etc.... during that period I have gone from Denon/Technics, Quad, Linn and Naim systems.

The current system has taken me very long time to get right with multiple upgrades to improve components along the way. I'm always looking and listening to new systems to hear how the technology is changing and the impact that that may have on the musical outcome. I have monthly subscription to most of the common HiFi mags and also read numerous articles from the Internet and attend some HiFi events.

Additionally I get great feedback from Simon at Audio-T (Reading) who's always looking out for any new technology worth me auditioning, his recent recommendation was the Naim UnitiServe-SSD which was a night and day experience for CD ripping. Couple of examples were the Ethernet and speaker cables from Chord Company were Simon suggested I take a listen and in both cases the outcome was amazing, specifically the Ethernet cable which was big surprise and I did challenge why at the time, however the outcome was another big gain in further musicality, so difficult to argue the technicalities as it's the result that counts.

Reader System

The HiFi components are installed in my office with the main listening room housing the speakers, which has a number of benefits and some pit falls, the main benefit being sound vibrations have minimal impact on the equipment, however the distance of up to 17m does create challenge for speaker cables. Lastly the equipment bulk and amount has meant that no rack/shelve equipment exists for ease or able to handle the size other than custom build, currently I have built my own rack, which is not pretty, but does the job, I use aluminium alloy for the shelves and pine wood for the sides, very heavy and stable which is great for the turntable and does allow for pulling the shelves forward to get to the cables, which is always a pain. I have also installed separate mains to power the HiFi only.



In terms of the listening experience, firstly the system is powered up for at least 24hrs beforehand to get the best from the system, I note that having all components switch on for a week further improves of the overall musicality of the system, but this is just a small gain overall. In general I leave the CD,

Streamer, Turntable power supply and Pre Amp on all the time, however switching on the amps do generate large amounts of heat and to help this I do have an Air Conditioning Unit to keep the room cooler if required and is required if the AV is also switched on.

The listening room is L7.5 x H5 x H2.4 meters with concrete floor and brick walls all round with normal plaster board ceiling. I use iPad apps to control the whole system which keeps this simply, the whole system was installed by myself.

I listen to Vinyl and HD Audio for serious listening and for comparing any new cables or equipment as I have found this to be the best source for the best musically experience. I have wide range of music and generally buy music that I like. However some of the latest re-master Vinyl from Led Zeppelin sounds fantastic and the Vinyl still delivers the best sound as far as my system goes. That said some of the latest HD Audio is rather good and already better than CD on my system.

Reader System



As far as my system sounds I would say that this is very wide, huge dynamics with massive scale and detail and I believe it gets close to what you put in, just the music, but this all comes down to the quality of the source recording, for example the latest Vinyl re-mastered Led Zeppelin has such great scale and realism that you feel part of the music and it simply enthralls to feel part of the band or at least there... I have always aimed to remove the HiFi from the listening experience, the only down side is that you want to turn the volume up and before you know it its loud but stress free, effortless and totally wrapped in the music. I get such pleasure and relaxation from listening to the music after work, which is why I constantly look at how I can tweak or change the system to improve further, I suspect my next purchase will be to upgrade the speakers.

The Complete List

Turn table,

LP12SE, MC Anna, Radikal

CD, Blu-Ray/SACD, CD Burner,

ChordElectronics Red Reference CD player MKIII
Oppo 105D Signature Audiocom
Oppo 95 Signature Audiocom
Tascam DV-RA1000

Music Streamer and CD ripper,

ChordElectronics DXS1000 Streamer
Naim UnitiServe-SSD

Pre Amp,

ChordElectronics CPA8000

Amps,

ChordElectronics SPM 14000 MKII x 2

ChordElectronics SPM 1400 MKII

ChordElectronics SPM 3005

ChordElectronics SPM 600

Speakers,

BW800D Main room

Focal 1008BE Office

AV Speakers, main room

BW DB1 x2

BW CCM7.3 x 2

BW HTM2

Kef Ci1500 x 2

AV Prcessor,

Marantz AV8801

Lexicon MC12HDEQ

TV,

Pioneer LX608D Kuros

Portable,

Hugo and AK240

Cables,

All Chord Company

XLRS Sarum TA/Indigo TA

Main Speaker cables Sarum TA (BW800D)

Ethernet Cable Sarum TA

Surround speakers use cables from Naim and Townshend

Mains filter,

For source components and Pre Amp:

ISOTEK Titan

NAS,

Synology 3612xs with 10Gbps fiber connect. 48TB

(main) Synology 2411+ with bonded 2x 1Gbps copper Cat6 .48TB (backup unit)

If you'd like to see your system featured in Hifi Pig then get in touch on 0044 297237078 or email us [here](#).



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Audeze LCD-XC Headphones

August is « Headphone Month » at Hifi Pig and so where better to start this series of reviews than with what must surely be one of the most expensive and talked about pair of cans on the market today...



Price: £1.500

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Reviews

You can't explore the world of headphones too far without coming across the Californian manufacturer Audeze sooner or later as they seem to be just everywhere. I'd been speaking to Jonathan Scull who handles the Audeze PR in the US for a good while on social media and finally managed to get hold of a pair of their LCD-XC headphones whilst at Munich High-End earlier this year.

The £1500 (1799 USD) Audeze arrived in a well padded, moulded plastic carrying case that looks all but bombproof and is a neat solution for transporting the headphones from place to place. Along with the headphones there's a useful quarter inch to minijack adaptor that I think thoughtful addition to the pack. The 2.5m cable attaches to each of the cans via a mini XLR jack with a rugged quarter inch jack on the amp end... I believe a number of aftermarket alternatives are available for those looking to explore this particular route. Overall this packaging really does it for me as it is both practical and attractive in an industrial kind of way – it certainly screams high-end. If you are buying these headphones you'll also get a wood care kit, a personalised frequency response graph and some warranty documents in the box.



The LCD-XC are the second to top price-wise of the Audeze hierarchy and are the companies only closed back design. Like the HifiMan HE560s the Audeze are a planar magnetic design and they have a 38.9cm sq diaphragm. However, they are a heavy headphone tipping the scales at 650g which is considerably

The first thing that grabs you about the Audeze' is the size of the sound, the second is that you are completely isolated from the outside world and all you hear is the music.

heavier than any of the headphones we have in for review. Appearance-wise the LCD-XC are BIG and, despite their luxurious Bubinga wood cups and lamb skin earpads, their looks will certainly divide opinion... I think they look pretty cool and have a retro sort of vibe about them. Needless to say at this price point the Audeze headphones are for serious headphone enthusiasts and whilst their closed-back design certainly isolates you from the world and it from your music, I'm not sure I'd personally feel comfortable hopping on the bus with them strapped to my head... but if you do I'm sure you'll get both the odd "what the hell" gawp as well as a few admiring glances. That said I did wear them pretty much non-stop for the ten hour train journey from Munich to Paris and despite their weight I found them fairly comfortable for the whole journey.

The cans themselves are big and cover the whole of my ears and the earpads are very thick and very comfortable indeed with no sense of them rubbing, itching or becoming sweaty. The earpads are thicker at the back than they are at the front in the same way the HifiMan HE 560s are...only more so. They press fairly tightly onto your head and to some extent your face, but they do move around a bit when you shake your head about. The headband adjusts fairly simply to the correct size and is pretty comfortable given their weight, though not as comfortable as some of the other headphones we have reviewed.

The LCD-XC are 20ohms and have a sensitivity of 95dB and seemed to be easy to drive, though I opted

to use my reference headphone amp over the output on the reference preamp. With the little HiSound Studio portable player and our son's iPod they went loud enough, but there seemed to be a little missing and I'd suggest a good quality portable headphone amplifier to be the order of the day whether at home or on the go.

The Sound

The first thing that grabs you about the Audeze is the size of the sound, the second is that you are completely isolated from the outside world and all you hear is the music. There's certainly a good impression of the soundstage and out-the-head feeling and instruments sit within the mix as they should with fabulous separation and space. I'd suggest the soundstaging is better than the Final Hope VIs which surprised me given the Audeze's closed back design and I can only put this down to the fact the actual drivers are a way from your ears – whatever, it's pretty impressive.



There seems to be a greater weight to the music with these 'phones across the frequency range and popping on David Crosby's "Croz" there's simply more detail than with any of the other phones we have in for test. Drums have dynamism with the toms being precise and hard hitting, whilst bass kick hits and then stops with no overhang. Bass guitar is tight, punchy and plays along with the drums to create great rhythm. Sonically on this kind of music it's really hard to

fault the Audeze LCD-XC and it's difficult not to perhaps suggest that these are the best headphones I've ever heard...but then that would make for a pretty short review and there's an awful lot of 'phones I've yet to experience.

Despite how gorgeously the Audeze 'phones play the likes of David Crosby I found myself pulling loads of harder edged rock from the virtual shelf. There just a feeling that the Audeze bring a dynamic feel to this kind of music that really makes it...rock. I know this is petty vague but, apart from the weight of the phones, you can forget to some extent you're wearing headphones at all. The grunge sounds of Bush's "Everything Zen" is visceral and raw and this is down to the way the LCD-XCs do dynamics. If you like rock then you're gonna really enjoy these headphones, just be careful about the headbanging as you'll end up with a severe case of "Headbangers Neck".

Fleetwood Mac's "Songbird" is one of the tracks I use to listen to how a bit of new kit puts out the feel of a room's space as it's recorded on a large stage in an empty hall and with the Audeze you get a really good sense of the space. It's not as pronounced as with good loudspeakers, but then it was never going to be. When the dry kick of "The Chain" (the next tune on the record) comes in it sounds correct and when the rhythm section gets going there's speed and control displayed that drives the beat – other headphones we've reviewed have speed and control, but I can honestly say it's a notch above both the Hi-FiMan HE 560s and the Sennheiser HD800s with the Audeze in place.

On electronic music the bass lines are deep, whilst all the little intricate noises and effects come through... and then there's the kick drum which gets me to thinking perhaps the bass is a little over done on these headphones. I toyed with this concept a good while and came to the conclusion after listening to loads of tunes that it's not over done, it's just powerful and the 'phones are capable of giving a great sense of what they are actually playing across the frequencies – there just seems to be more of everything.

Comfort

These are heavy headphones and you do know you are wearing them, particularly when sat typing I found as I lean forward to look at the keyboard which led to a little neck ache, but they're also pretty comfortable all-round when sat in your armchair.

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Reviews

The headband is well padded and comfortable over long periods (though not as comfortable as the HifiMans nor perhaps the Sennheisers mentioned) and whilst the cans are big and do press onto your face a bit you get used to it.

For long periods of listening I found the earpads were very comfortable with no irritation as with the HifiMan HE 560s, but they were certainly less comfortable than the Sennheiser HD800s over longer periods. As with most things you lose with one thing and gain with another.

Yes they do stonking basslines with aplomb, but they also manage to temper this with being able to be subtle where required.

Conclusion

£1500 is in most people's book a good chunk to throw down on a pair of headphones and yet the Audeze seem to be selling very well, so clearly there are people out there who can justify this kind of expenditure.

This is both an audiophile product and a luxe product and when thinking about them you need to keep this in mind. The fit and finish is very good and there's the attention to little details that set them apart from the competition.

I suppose the question that needs to be asked is does the extra expenditure bring you a suitable increase in perceived sound quality and whilst I'd suggest that there's the dreaded law of diminishing returns coming in to play here, these are none the less a very, very good headphone indeed.

There's something almost unfathomable about the Audeze LCD-XCs that stands them apart from the crowd. Yes they do stonking basslines with aplomb, but they also manage to temper this with being able to be subtle where required. No one area of the music stands out and to me they seem almost perfectly balanced, giving a wonderfully musical experience.

If headphones are your only source and you want the best then you ought to audition these immediately! If you don't have this kind of money to splurge then there are alternatives for you (look out for lots of reviews in the days to come), but be aware you may be missing out on that nth degree of magic.

Stuart Smith

Sound – 9.25

Comfort – 8.00

Fit and finish – 9.00

Value – 8.00

Overall – 8.56

Recommended for those wanting a no compromise headphone listening experience.



And now Linette's thoughts on the Audeze LCD-XC headphones.

I had been itching to get my hands on (and ears in) these headphones since we picked them up at Munich. They very much seem to be the audiophile flavour of the month and I wanted to find out for myself if they lived up to the hype.

They have a very different look to them than most headphones with their Bubinga wood cups and black lambskin earpads, they look like they mean serious business, especially as they come in a very robust 'ruggedized' carry case...resembles something that Ironman might use to take his butties to work. There is a definite air of 'manliness' about them.



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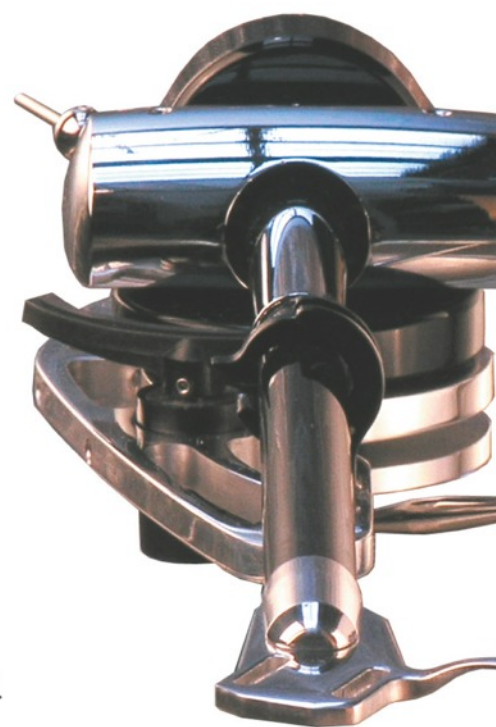


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Reviews

Picking them up it was a case of 'whoa, these are REALLY heavy!' (650g according to the Audeze website)

I had visions of developing a neck like an F1 driver if I wore them for any length of time...surely these were headphones for big, beefy men, not a delicate flower like myself!

Putting them on for the first time made me realise that although they weigh a lot for a pair of headphones, they are actually perfectly balanced and extremely comfortable.

It's kind of like having your head firmly hugged.

The leather earpads are exceptionally soft and probably the most comfortable I have ever felt on a pair of 'phones. They sit nicely around the ears with no 'lobe crush' or hard bits digging into you, plus the headband is well padded and caused no discomfort and I could leave my glasses on without them being pushed into the side of my head....I was impressed!

It felt like sinking into your favourite, soft leather armchair.....cocooning is probably a good word to describe them....and I hadn't even turned the tunes on yet!

So enough about how these feel, how do they sound? First impressions were great and I spent quite a bit of

So have these headphones got it all? Well crafted, comfortable and incredibly engaging to listen to.....and then there's the elephant in the room ...the price.

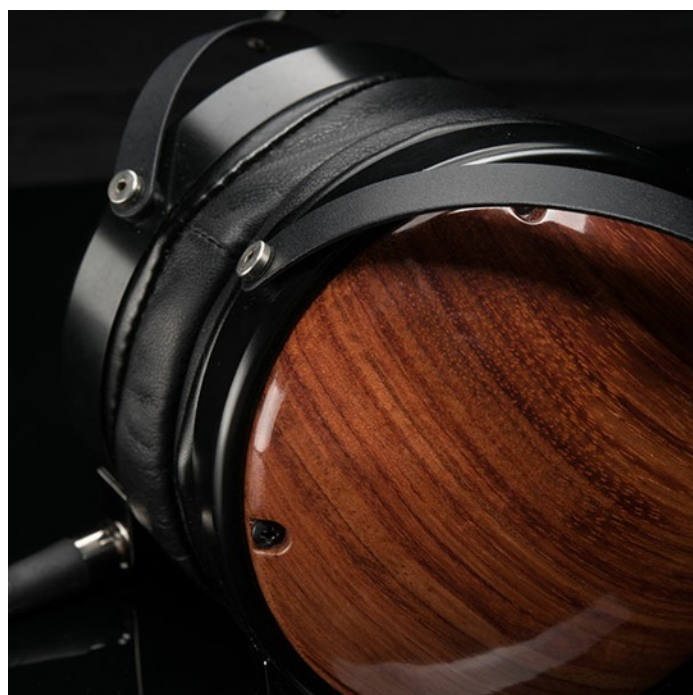
time listening to tunes from my laptop, particularly memorable was a stream of Carl Cox DJing at Space in IbizaI scribbled down the notes 'feels like a nightclub on my head' which just about says it all!

On goes Hardfloor's 'Once again back'. This is my go to track to test out a system, it's especially tricky with deep sub bass, swirling 303s and skippy top end. It is a track that has the possibility to make things sound terrible if they are not up to the job.

With the Audeze the bass was dynamic and interesting, not just a splodge of sound...great definition and that proper 'in the music' feeling.

I really love Rudimental, their album 'Home' gets a lot of play here, I have a lot of respect for a dance act that can play and sing live and have a real horn section.

This is uplifting music, hands in the air time and I got a big case of goosebumps listening to tracks like 'Feel the love' and 'Right Here'. With the Audeze I got a sense of just wanting to sit and listen and not actually do anything else.



I do love a bit of disco so appropriately 'Lost in music' by Sister Sledge went on next. Driving bass, funky guitar and breathy, sweet vocals all sounded perfect. The sound stage with the Audeze is big and 3 dimensional and I get the feeling that I am really hearing what I should be hearing...this almost as good as listening to the main system to my ears.

Still feeling the Nile Rogers vibe I put on 'Get Lucky' from Daft Punk. Again, funky and crystal clear ...I've heard this tune many, many times but I'm hearing things in the backing vocals that I haven't heard ever before...fantastic detail.

A bit of Gil Scott Heron and his 'Ghetto Style' album next and once again I'm struck by the depth and clarity I'm getting from the music, there is a real sense of where each of the artists is playing or singing in the soundstage and little nuances in the back-

ing vocals and from the drums that I haven't heard brought out so well before.

So have these headphones got it all? Well crafted, comfortable and incredibly engaging to listen to.....and then there's the elephant in the room ...the price.

At around 1800 US\$, and retailing around £1500 in the UK, these are not cheap headphones by any stretch of the imagination.

But have a think about it. Would you balk at spending over a grand and a half on a pair of loudspeakers? Probably not. Probably, if you are an audiophile, you would be happy to spend quite a bit more than that.

But what if you have a love of listening to your favourite music, on your great hifi...and you have neighbours who just don't share your enthusiasm? Short of becoming the vilified 'Neighbour From Hell' what options do you have?

And I guess this is where exceptional sounding, incredibly well-made, expensive headphones come in. I wouldn't use these to walk about in, or go jogging

in, they really aren't made for that (for a start the Ironman Lunchbox would be a bit inconvenient to cart about) I would wear them to sit down, chill out and get lost in music. Perfect playback of your tunes, from your desktop system or from your main hifi, even when you can't crank up the volume using your speakers.

The Audeze LCD-XC certainly live up to the hype.

Linette Smith

Sound – 9/10

Comfort – 9/10

Fit and finish – 9/10

Value – 8/10

Overall – 8.75/10

Highly recommended as an exceptionally well made extremely comfortable, enjoyable to listen to headphone, for those wanting an alternative to using loudspeakers in the home or who want the best from a desktop system.



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OPPO PM1 Headphones

Oppo are perhaps most well known in audiophile circles for their well regarded Blu-ray players, but they also make a couple of pairs of planar magnetic cans and a headphone amp. Here Linette and Stuart Smith take a listen to their top of the range PM1s.



Price: £1.099

Reviews

Although Oppo are known for their bluray and cd players (and mobile phones, outside of the audiophile market), I didn't know they made headphones....and they didn't until recently. So, is a high end, £1099 pair of planar magnetic headphones what you would expect for a company's first foray into the headphone market? Not really.....this is certainly going to be interesting!

Right from the off you know Oppo have gone high end. The box arrives...surely this can't be headphones, its too big and heavy?! But headphones it is. Nestling in the Oppo branded box is another box, in an understated silvery finish. Sliding off the lid and its Christmas morning and my birthday all rolled into one. Oppo have obviously made a mistake and sent me a beautiful, shiny wooden box with some luxurious jewellery instead of headphones!

The understated, luxury vibe continues as I open the box and lift out the 'phones. Cool, sleek and minimal...and very light for planar magnetics, just 395g.



I love the feel of these headphones. The leather is soft and flawless and everything, twists, pivots and moves just as it should do with a effortlessly smooth action, they put me in mind of a well oiled, top of the range Mercedes...perfection!

There is also a very nice, denim carry case for taking them out and about, an extra pair of velour earpads

The chills are back again as I put Rudimental's album 'Home' on.....'Feel the love' is elevated to epic status, I love this tune...I hold my hands in air to it and I just feel that the Oppos have the edge...best headphones I've ever listened to?

and the choice of a long cable and a shorter one for portable use.

They slip onto my head and the feeling is one of complete and utter comfort, indeed rather like settling into the seat of a high end car. They fit me like a glove, like they were tailor made for me; I really like how the earcups pivot in their mountings to achieve this. The leather feels soft on my ears and, even though they are an open backed design, I feel cosseted and cocooned.

Are these the most comfortable headphones that I have ever tried? They are, I thought that the Hifiman were the pinnacle but these are even better for me, and even with extended wear they remain exceptionally comfortable, my ears don't sweat and my glasses cause no issues.

This does surprise me because looking at them, the PM-1s do not appear to be 'over padded' in the way that the Audeze are, a little investigation reveals that they use a hypoallergenic natural latex for padding, so perhaps that has something to do with it.

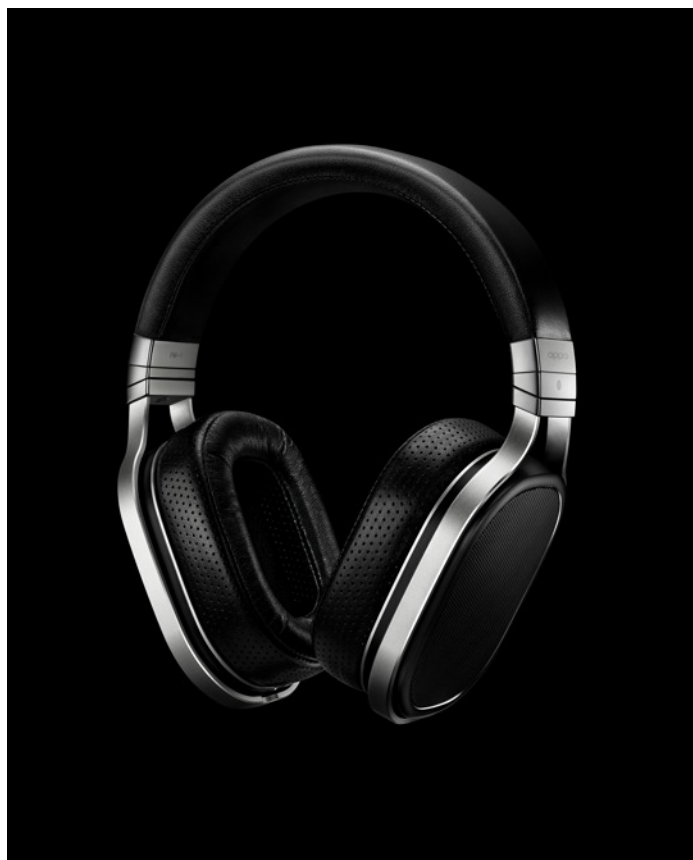
As soon as I turn the music on I get chills in the same way as I do when I listen to a high-end horn system...this is weird! And I'm listening to Deadmau5...which is not really the most 'chill inducing' music in the world...it's brash and banging,

but the Oppos bring so much detail and feeling it is really uncanny.

I described my first experience of listening to the Audeze LCD-XC headphones as being 'like a night-club on my head' Oppo take it one stage further, this is total music immersion. To be fair, I didn't think that anything could blow me away more than the Audeze, much less an open backed pair of 'phones, but Oppo have done something VERY clever here and are starting to seriously justify their grand+ price tag

The soundstage is perhaps the most 3D I have heard, the music is all around me with an incredible depth and clarity, there are layers to Deadmau5's tunes that I never knew existed or expected.

It extends in every direction but still retains the drive in the centre of my head; there is a sense of the sound coming from many different directions. The bass is very controlled and again detailed and fast...and there is plenty off it, enough to satisfy even a basshead like me!



Don't get me wrong...I love, love, love the Audeze but I just feel that where they seem to shout with a sharper brightness, the Oppo's whisper and reveal more detail...with the Oppos the dimensions in the soundstage are unsurpassed and I feel that I could

walk around quite happily in a way I could not in the Audeze...yes there is sound bleed from the open backs, but I'm feeling a bit selfish and don't care about that right now.

The chills are back again as I put Rudimental's album 'Home' on....'Feel the love' is elevated to epic status, I love this tune...I hold my hands in air to it and I just feel that the Oppos have the edge...best headphones I've ever listened to? Right here right now..... I would say yes.

Of course Hardfloor are back for the serious bass test with 'once again back'....again I am getting incredible levels of detail and clarity and serious, serious bass...better than the other headphones I have reviewed? Yes, and bear in mind that I have them all on my desk and am switching between them to gauge my aural memories.

I switch to Gil Scott Heron and his 'Ghetto Style' album, again, something I have listened to with all the headphone reviews this month. With more natural than electronic music the 3Dness of the soundstage is even more apparent...I pick out 'No Knock' because the bongo player is sat about 4 feet diagonally behind my left shoulder...I have to look round to check he is not really there!

I need to rock out a bit, Eels 'Beautiful Freak' goes on ...I forget that I am supposed to be 'reviewing' and just lose myself in the music in the way that I have only really done before with the Audeze. The connection with the music is incredible, combined with the comfort and the fact that you could wear these headphones 24/7 if you were so inclined makes me very, very happy. I could go on...I've listened to loads more music on these headphones but I am just drawn into listening and enjoying rather than reviewing, that has to count for something.

So which would I pick? They are both stunning in their own way; I guess it just comes down to personal preference, if they were cars then the Audeze would be a seriously rugged Jeep and the Oppo a slick, silver Mercedes...horses for courses and hard to decide between; but for me the emotion and detail coupled with the slickness of the design and supreme comfort puts the Oppo PM-1 as the best headphone I have used.

Yes the Audeze are a bit more expensive, but basically the two are competing for the same market, they are both £ grand plus planar magnetic headphones from California, but where as you probably

Reviews

haven't heard of the Oppo PM -1 you can't have avoided Audeze if you have any interest at all in Hi-fi.

If the Audeze are the A list celeb, posing for the paparazzi at the VIP lounge in the airport, Oppo will have already slipped discretely through security and be sat on their private jet sipping champagneAudeze are what all the cool kids say we should buy, Oppo are what the cool kids haven't discovered yet.....go figure, be a leader not a follower.

Linette Smith

Sound – 9.5/10

Comfort – 9.5/10

Fit and finish – 9.5/10

Value – 8.75/10

Overall – 9.3/10

The best headphones that I have heard....I'm putting my neck on the line and saying it. The ultimate combo of sound and comfort...I would happily live on beans on toast for a month to pay for them.

Probably as close to a perfect ten as I can give.

...and now Stuart Smiths thoughts.



The Oppo PM1 headphones have gained quite a reputation as a very well regarded set of cans since their launch and so we thought that Headphone Month at Hifi Pig would be incomplete without taking the opportunity to take a listen to this £1099 pair of planar magnetic headphones.

They arrive packaged in a luxurious, polished wooden box with a good quality, long OCC cable that is wrapped in a black fabric and terminated with an Oppo branded quarter inch jack. The cable is terminated on the headphone end with a pair of minijacks which means you can have a play with aftermarket cables.

There's also a handy denim carrying case which allows the headphones to be popped in your hand luggage when travelling about (the PM1s fold completely flat which I think is a useful and advantageous feature). Topping off the accessories is an alternative set of velour pads which OPPO say offer users a slightly different presentation over the lamb-skin pads the headphones come fitted with. All in all this is a good start for the Oppos, initial impressions count for a lot and at the asking price buyers should expect to feel they are buying a lavish product.

The cans themselves are over the ear, a squared oval in shape and pretty much cover the whole ear, but are actually relatively small in comparison to the likes of the Audeze cans. I'd have preferred the cans to be a smidge larger so they did cover the whole ear as I found they rubbed slightly on the outer part and to the back of my ear.

I'd certainly be happy to walk about with these on my head and the design is relatively understated so you don't stand out like a spare part at a wedding. They also leak very little noise into the surrounding environment which will be a boon for your fellow passengers on public transport. They are well padded with natural latex and sit fairly firmly on your head but not with too much clamping effect – though shaking your head about does move the phones about so they'd not be ideal for vigorous exercise.

The headband is well padded, covered in the same lambskin as the earpads which coupled with the relatively light weight of the PM-1s (395g) makes them extremely comfortable on the top of the head. They're not as comfortable on the top of the head as the HifiMan HE 560s but you can wear them for long periods without any problems at all. Altering the headband is nice and easy and can be done while the PM-1s are on your head, meaning you can get the perfect fit quickly, even if you share your headphones.

Along with the Audeze and HifiMan headphones we've been sent for review the OppoPM1 have a planar magnetic driver and here it's 85 x 69mm with a symmetric push pull neodymium magnet system. Oppo also say that they are a 32 ohm load and 102dB (1mW) sensitive and I found that they were easy enough to drive from both the output of the preamp and the headphone amplifier. Plugging them into my portable player I found that they were a much easier load to drive than the Beyer Dynamic T1s with me struggling to get the volume above

20/30 without it being too loud. Indeed I'd be really happy to have these connected to this whilst out and about as the sound quality was really rather good.

Relaxed and unforced are the first words that come to mind when you first listen to the PM1s. Nothing seems to be at all shouty and theirs an evenness to the way they reproduce the music.

The Sound

Relaxed and unforced are the first words that come to mind when you first listen to the PM1s. Nothing seems to be at all shouty and theirs an evenness to the way they reproduce the music. You put these on, turn the music on and it's as if a feeling of calm descends. There's also really good isolation from the outside world with the PM1s that add to this feeling of calm.

Emiliana Torrini's Fisherman's Woman sounds absolutely gorgeous and theirs detail in her breathy vocal that is certainly up there with the very best headphones I've had the pleasure to hear. The simple arrangements on this record play very much to the strengths of the PM1s with every little nuance of the guitar work being audible and you find yourself really drawn into the recording. This isn't to suggest that these are an over analytical headphone, they're not, but there is a natural easiness to the sound without the feeling that you are missing out on any of the detail on the recording.

This story is repeated on Kathryn Williams' Crown Electric record and whilst this album has more going on than the previous it's the velvety smooth vocal that is the first thing to grab your attention. Strings are lush and hats are crisp and sparkling with the bottom end having good weight and authority. It has to be said that it would be easy to go to female vocals constantly with the Oppos but convention suggests I ought to seek out tunes that I think will test these headphones and find out any weaknesses.

And do it's on with Smoke On The Water from Deep Purple's Live in Japan album that I've been listening to as a bit of a test track whilst reviewing headphones this month. The guttural bass guitar is difficult for

some headphones to reproduce with any sense of realism but I'm happy to say the PM1s do a good job here. They perform similarly well with the other bass check track from Hardfloor that I've been using, with the growling bassline and drum kick sounding as it should. Indeed here there is a really good sense of what the musician's were doing in reinforcing the bassline with the kick; the kick is clearly apart from, but enhancing, the bassline if this makes sense. There's also good speed with the bass notes, and particularly the electronic drums starting and stopping on a pin. Like the Audeze and to a lesser extent the HifiMan HE 560s, there's pace and rhythm that brings the bass and drums together to create a really exciting listen, despite my fears that these would sound a touch lack lustre and polite with this style of music given my comments about them being relaxed and unforced. Indeed, there's a real dynamic feel to these cans that makes them really quite addictive. I'm no scientist by any stretch of the imagination but I'm guessing, given the similar qualities of the Planar Magnetic headphones we've been playing with, that something in the way this driver system works adds to the dynamic feel they have.

Herbie Hancock's One Finger Snap goes on next and you do really get a great sense of soundstage. It's not over exaggerated though and the musicians do stay in their place between you head with a reasonable feeling of front to back space too. Moving onto In-Duologue's Blue Skies record there's excellent sense of the recoding space and a great insight into the way the recordings were made.

Comfort

These are a pretty light headphone and so over the top of the head they are pretty comfortable, not the best but very acceptable.

Now here's where I fell out with the PM1s a little and it must have something to do with the shape of my right ear because whichever way round I had them (right can on right ear, or left can on the right ear) I was getting a degree of discomfort, but only on my right ear and in one particular spot. I asked Linette to wear these for an afternoon before I continued the reviewing process and she reported no discomfort at all, so, as I say, I reckon this is down to some issue with these particular headphones and my right ear shape. On the left they were as comfortable as you'd like. They do get quite warm after extended periods but this is pretty normal with any headphone in my experience.

Reviews

Conclusion

At over £1000 OPPOs PM1s are not a cheap headphone by any stretch of the imagination, indeed they are the second priciest headphones I've heard and only beat in this respect by the Audeze's. That said they aren't massively more expensive than the Sennheiser HD 800s or the Beyer Dynamic T1s and so compare very favourably with them.

There's a sophistication to the sound of the Oppos that is hard to ignore. At first you get the impression that they are going to be polite and a little bit on the boring side but then you listen further and realise that this is only a very small part of their presentation because presenting them with dynamic and complex music really gets them singing. Add to this a great level of detail speed and you really have a headphone that is difficult to better I'd say. Yes, overall the Audeze are a better headphone, but they cost more, are heavier than and not as portable as the Oppos, so you take your money and you take your pick.

They are easy to drive, even with a portable device and they fold flat into their nifty little denim carry case and so a good choice for those looking for a high quality sound on the go.

From my perspective I wouldn't buy the Oppos because of the issues mentioned with comfort on my right ear, but then not everyone experiences this.

The Oppos are a luxurious product with very careful attention to detail being made in the packaging and fit and finish and this should be applauded.

Stuart Smith

Sound – 9

Comfort – 7.5

Fit and finish – 9

Value – 8.5

Overall – 8.5

A very good sounding, refined headphone that is portable and offers a level of pride of ownership that will be hard to beat.



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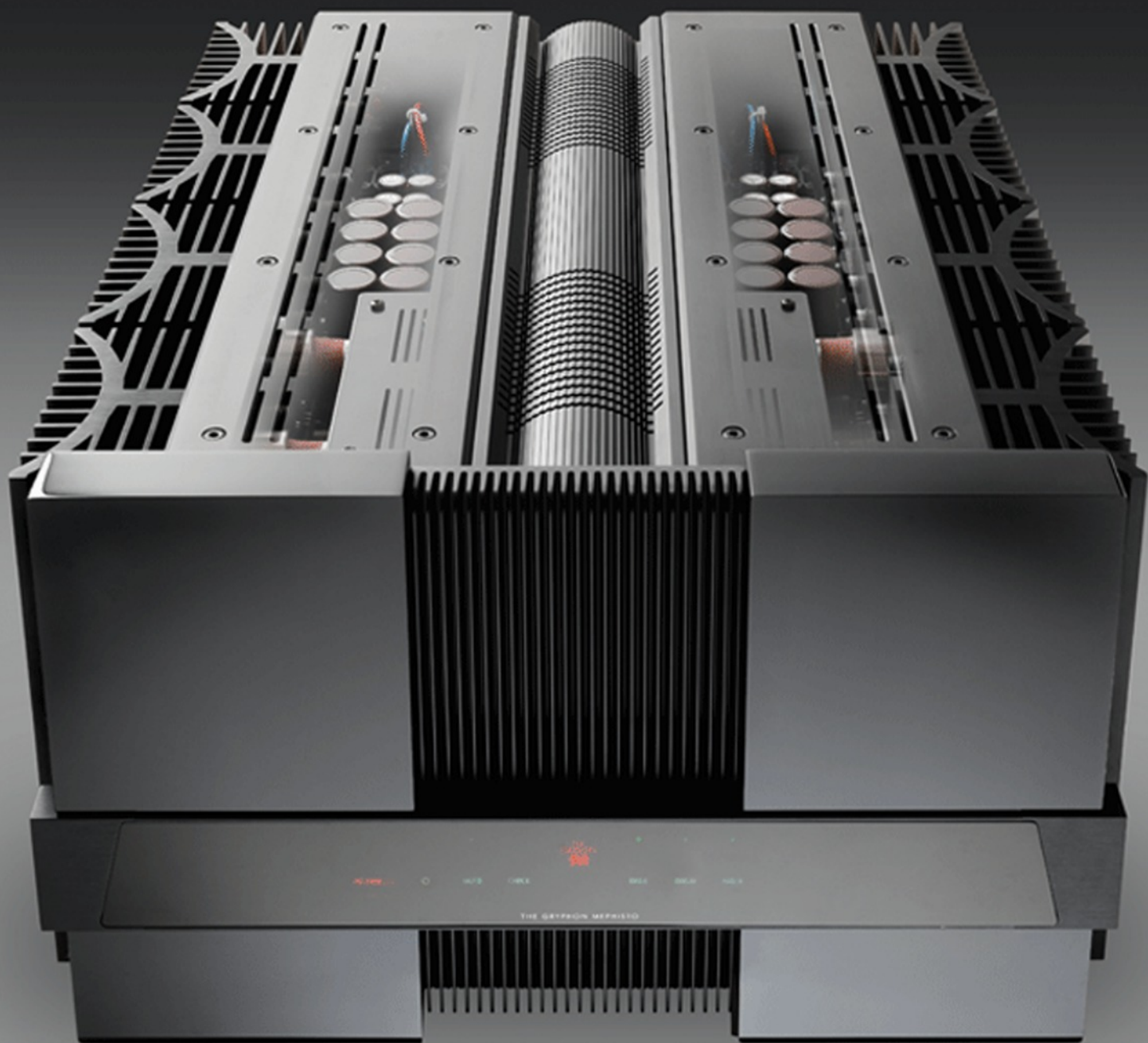
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Final Audio Heaven II and Heaven IV In Ear Monitors

Harry Smith, Hifi Pig's "Teen Correspondent" looks at two IEMs from Final, the Heaven II and Heaven IV.

Final audio is a Japanese company that make unique looking earphones and headphones. I was given the Heaven II and Heaven IV to review that are both in-ears. The Heaven II are the cheaper option retailing at £69 look identical to the more expensive option apart from the slightly more limited colour choices. The Heaven IV is the more expensive option retailing at £139.

So what are the key differences between these 2 in-earphones?



Price: £69

They have great presence and have rich lows and mids.

Heaven II

Starting with the Heaven II it's a very well priced product. I love its unique "futuristic" design and it has got a nice weight to it. Its stainless steel construction gives it a very solid feel. The earphone comes with a number of silicone ear buds to accommodate all shapes and sizes of ear I tried all of the different ear buds and found that the smallest ones were the most comfortable and gave the best sound. I never felt any strain on my ears even after many hours of listening.

The cable is flat which means that it doesn't get tangled up in your pocket. The build quality is second to none and there were no faults or flaws in the construction.

The Heaven II, being the cheaper option, should not sound as good as the Heaven IV. That being said they still sound impressive. They have great presence and have rich lows and mids.

I felt however they were a bit lacking in the top-end. They sounded best with bass heavy dance music tracks.

The track that brought out the best of these earphones for me was "One more day" by Example. The baseline and piano sounded rich and punchy and the vocals were not overshadowed by the bass thankfully. There was also great noise isolation from out-

side sounds and let me hear the music even in loud public spaces.

All in all, these earphones are a good and I would personally use them as my daily in ear monitor. They might be a bit bass heavy for some but I like that and for the low price of £69, you can't really complain.

Heaven IV



Price: £199

The Heaven IV improves on what the Heaven II lacks. First of all they come with a very nice stainless steel carrying case. The sound brings the bass and mids from the Heaven II but greatly improves on the top end and adds a lot more depth to the music. The combination of the rich bass and sparkling top end produces an almost perfect sound for me. The stand out track with these was definitely "Right Here" by Rudimental. The vocals were a lot more prominent than with the Heaven II and the bass and mids sounded even better. The guitar riffs sounded really vivid. I also felt that the bass response was a lot more efficient on the Heaven IV. After listening to the Heaven IV I would find it diffi-

I think it is as they are one of the best sounding in-earphones I have heard in a long time and even outperform some more expensive headphones.

cult to go back to the Heaven II, but is the jump up in sound performance worth double the price of the Heaven II?

I think it is as they are one of the best sounding in-earphones I have heard in a long time and even outperform some more expensive headphones.

Harry Smith

Final Audio Heaven II:

Price as tested: £69

Sound – 7/10

Comfort – 9/10

Fit and finish – 9/10

Value – 8/10

Overall – 8.25/10

Final Audio Heaven IV:

Price as tested £139

Sound – 8.5/10

Comfort – 9/10

Fit and finish – 9/10

Value – 7.5/10

Overall – 8.5/10

I would recommend the Heaven II to someone on a tight budget but I would suggest they save up a bit more and buy the highly recommended Heaven IV as they are a huge improvement and are almost everything that I look for in an in-ear-phone; Even if the Heaven II is better value for money.

I highly rate both of these earphones!

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Sennheiser HD-800

Sennheiser is a name that has been synonymous with headphones for decades, here we take a look at their range-topping HD-800s.



Price: £999

Reviews

Sennheiser are one of the first names that come to mind when speaking about headphones and so it would be remiss of us not to have taken a listen to at least one of their offerings in what is “Headphone Month” here at Hifi Pig and where better for us to start than at the top of their range and the £999 HD800s.

They arrive in a large flitop box lined with a silky fabric that as a whole screams big brand marketing savvy – understated and corporate. There’s a glossy instruction manual and attached the headphones 3m plus cable terminated with a quarter inch jack which is “specially tuned, symmetrical, impedance matching with low capacitance”. The cables can be replaced with aftermarket examples should you feel the urge, but the supplied cable does seem to be well manufactured with a twisted configuration. For home users this is a proper length which in the main should do away with the need for the use of extension cables – a positive, if small, detail from my perspective.

Straight from the box the HD800s look very different from other designs we have in for review. First of all they are very modern looking with their silver and black colours giving an industrial looking design – some will like it whilst others will see it as being a bit over the top. However, thinking about it this is a design where form follows function as these are basically loudspeakers for the ears – the drivers are the biggest used in headphones to date say Sennheiser.



They are a physically large headphone, not as big as the Audeze cans we have in at the moment, but they’re not the kind of thing you could wear on a bus without standing out somewhat, not that you’re likely to do this with the HD800s without attracting unwanted attention of fellow passengers, as they do

However, this increased bass extension is certainly not at the expense of the other frequencies and guitar and hats are bright and sparkly with a natural sound to them.

leak music into their surroundings – much as you would expect from a large pair of open back drivers. The headband is nicely padded and coupled with the Sennheisers’ relative lightweight (they are just 330g) is comfortable on the top of the head – perhaps not quite as comfortable as the HifiMan HE560s. Positioning of the cans on the headband is very simple and a case of moving them up and down with your hands whilst on your head – certainly a better solution than the HifiMans’. The cans themselves are massive and comfortably cover the whole ear with a thin, but very comfy padding around them covered in micro-fabric to protect your head – they’re also deep so the driver is sitting a good way from your ear. The cans are slightly sprung so that when you place them

on your head they clamp inwards ever so slightly to ensure there's a tight seal between the padding and your head. This is effective and not over tight, but this does mean that if you shake your head about with any force they do move about a little – not sure I'd be comfortable running in these...but then that's not what they're made for!

The HD800s have an impedance of 300Ohms and were driven very loud and very easily by the Coffman Labs headphone amp on the GA1 pre, with me having to turn the volume down from the previous 'phones I had been using. The little HiSound portable media player certainly had no problem driving the Sennheisers to very loud volumes and I imagine you'd be fine running these easily from an iPod or whatever player you choose. However, they are large, come with no carrying case and so how practical it is to use these 'phones whilst travelling is open to debate...as it is with most of the non-IEMs we have at our disposal.



The Sound

As mentioned, listening was done using our normal preamplifier and we used our normal DAC fed with FLACs from the computer using our reference player with JPlay.

Whilst the perceived soundstage thrown with the HD800s isn't as wide as with the Final Pandora Hope VIs there is still a good feeling that the music is in its own space and with a good out-of-the-head feel. Doug MacLeod's bluesy "Rosa Lee" displays them to have a very good feel to the bass with it being deep, tight and controlled – which you'd possibly expect from the large drivers used in the Sennheisers. However, this increased bass extension is certainly not at the expense of the other frequencies and guitar

The padding between the body of the cans and your head is minimal, but, given that the HD800s don't clamp to your head aggressively, they are very comfortable to wear.

and hats are bright and sparkly with a natural sound to them. Some may prefer the upper frequencies to be rolled off a little, but then I enjoy the Grado 325i headphones which some perceive as being overly bright. The vocal is accurate and correct in the mix without being over emphasised and this leads to a very pleasing and overall easy to listen to sound that is nicely balanced. There's good separation to the instruments too which adds to the detailed accuracy of the sound.

Hardfloor's "Once Again Back", as many readers will be aware, is one of the tracks we regularly use to checkout a loudspeaker performance in the bass department and with the HD800s I was certainly not disappointed. There's a good hint of the feeling you get when listening to the growling synth-bass performed through a proper pair of loudspeakers, with the associated low level 303 bass being very pleasing also. There's speed and there is punch to the sound which I like a lot and whilst the Final Pandora Hope IVs lacked a little in the lower bass registers you sacrifice a little of the 3D presentation they give with the HD800s – horses for courses then. I found searching on the tablet for a lot of techno and dance music and I think if you listen to a lot of this kind of music the HD800s will be an excellent choice.

The outstanding In Duologue "Blue Skies" album on Snip Records is recorded in a small chapel and there's a good sense of the space's sound particularly on the vocal track. Again there is a sense of a nicely balanced sound with the HD800s with the female

Reviews

vocal being slightly to the fore and playing nicely against the contrabass. The whispered, normally barely audible, background vocal sound at the start of the opening track is clear and it's nice to hear this. Contrabass is tight and percussive with good slap and it has the feel that it goes lower than most of the other headphones we have in for test.

Pink Fairies' "Kings of Oblivion" album can sound quite bright to these ears (or my CD copy does), so I wanted to see if the HD800s exaggerated this at all. It's still a record that's slightly exaggerated at the top-end a little I think, but I don't believe the Sennheisers are over emphasising this and what I got from listening to this album on these cans was heaps of detail in the mix and a "live" feel to the music – which is about right I'd say. The vocal track is agreeably reproduced and again I found it to be slightly forward. Bass was nice and bouncy too which I enjoyed and added to a feeling of the HD800s being rhythmic and foot-tappingly exciting.

Contrabass is tight and percussive with good slap and it has the feel that it goes lower than most of the other headphones we have in for test.

Comfort

As previously mentioned, the HD800s from Sennheiser fit over the whole ear which I like a great deal and I think you'd have to be particularly well proportioned in the lughole department to have any issues with them. There's also a good deal of space between the drivers and the ears which means that there's no fear of any part of your ear rubbing on the driver, or its protection.

The padding between the body of the cans and your head is minimal, but, given that the HD800s don't clamp to your head aggressively, they are very comfortable to wear.

They are a light headphone and easy to wear over long periods of time without feeling any discomfort. However, the headband can become "evident" after

long periods of time and in this area I preferred the HifiMan HD 560s.



Conclusion

The Sennheiser HD800s are clearly a very good headphone that will please people who enjoy a monitor type sound. Some may find the upper frequencies to be a little much, but, like with the Grado 325is, I perceive this as accuracy rather than anything to criticise... you pay your money, you take your choice.

They don't have the "luxurious/audiophile" sound of the Final Pandora Hope VI, but I think this is to the Sennheisers' credit actually and they do have an overall better balance to their sound than the Finals, with bass being especially more pleasing and strong. Soundstage is pretty good and there's a reasonably good out-of-the-head experience but this is not the best we've heard. For extended listening they are non-fatiguing and a pleasure to listen to.

They are an easy headphone to drive and have no issues with being played by portable music players, despite them not being particularly portable themselves because of their size and lack of case.

From the perspective of comfort these are great and the large cans fit over the ear completely making them easy to wear for extended periods. My only niggle comfort-wise is the headband can become "evident" (if not uncomfortable) after long periods of wear.

On the negative side they are big and I'd have liked to have seen a carry case included in the price to facilitate being able to pop them in a bag when away on business. Looks will also divide opinion.

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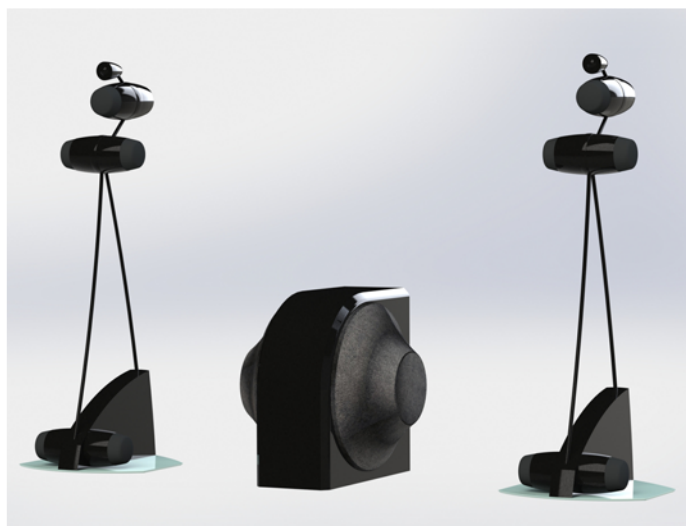
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This technology eradicates the boomy effect and the low frequency ringing, by simulating a box of infinite volume, but also to meet the dynamic range by simulating a box of infinite mass, as the four drivers cancel each others mechanical reactions on the box.

The result is an ultracompact and powerful subwoofer able to reach 20Hz at -1dB that we logically baptised : 20.1

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Looking for retailers
in Europe and
North America

Reviews

At £999 these aren't cheap headphones but they do sound very good, are comfortable and they should last you a lifetime if looked after.

Stuart Smith

Sound – 8.75

Comfort – 8.25

Fit and finish – 8.25

Value – 8

Overall – 8.31

Recommended for serious headphone listeners who want plenty of detail, coupled with good quality bass reproduction and a lifelike interpretation.

And now Linette's thoughts on the Sennheiser HD 800 headphones



Well August seems to have turned into Christmas at Hifi Pig towers with headphones, headphone amps and in ear monitors arriving in droves.

Next on my review schedule were the open backed Sennheisers which retail at about £1000.

These arrived very nicely packaged in a black presentation case and on unboxing them, my first impres-

...the overall feel and impression of the soundstage was really big and open, like listening in a concert hall.

sion was that they were big...but really light. Having previously tested the Audeze and Final Pandora headphones, these seemed exceptionally light, according to Sennheiser they weigh in at just 330g. They look big because they fit around the ear, rather than on it at all, which I have to say, coupled with the lightness, makes for a very comfortable fit. They seem to curve around the head, hugging it but not in a stifling embrace.

The only problem that I had with the fit was I couldn't keep my glasses on as the earcups pushed them into my head.

The easily adjustable headband is also well padded adding to the comfortable fit. They are also supplied with a good quality, long cable that has robust connectors and is apparently reinforced with Kevlar. I found the design pleasing, and I felt a bit Cyborg-like while wearing them but in my opinion, they did look a bit 'plasticky'. I guess this is the payoff though for them being so light for their size.

I started things off with Primal Scream's 'Screamadelica' album. 'Movin' on up' is an uplifting track with gospel backing vocals, piano, organ and rocky guitar riffs. Everything sounded in its place and I would say the overall feel and impression of the soundstage was really big and open, like listening in a concert hall.

On 'Loaded' the bass was deep and defined but the mids and tops were there as well, the 'country' twang of the guitar sounded great.

'Damaged' sounded beautiful, the vocals were sweet but gravelly with a perfect balance between piano and guitar and the background organ ...but it was starting to get to the real bass test time.

I always itch to hear Hardfloor's 'Once again back' on new bits of kit. With the HD800s the sub bass was tight and defined.....all the detail that I wanted

to hear was there and they presented the swoopy swirly top and mid range perfectly.

Slowing things down a bit, I put on John Martyn's 'Solid Air', a track that I hear a lot at hifi shows ...for good reason, it shows off a system that is 'right' really well. This sounded smooth and honed on the HD800's with the vocal and instruments all beautifully placed...it sounded very accurate to me.

Back to Gil Scott Heron and 'Ghetto Style' which I have used in all my recent headphone reviews. This album did sound very good, again with the sense of accuracy and definition but I did find I was having to turn things up louder than when using the Audeze headphones.

I tend to prefer my headphones with closed backs because if I am either out and about or listening at home I like to keep my music to myself and not force those around me to listen to it too.

I perhaps did not feel as 'lost in music' as I did with the Audeze LCD-XC which I again put down to the Sennheiser HD800s being open backed so they

didn't give me the isolation that I prefer when listening on headphones, I also found that in a noisy environment I was cranking the volume higher on the headphone amp to drown out exterior noise interference.

All in all, they came across as very accurate and comfortable headphones (minus the glasses conflict) but they didn't excite me as much as some of the other headphones I have used, they seemed to me to be a little too clinical for my taste, everything perfectly done, but just missing the 'wow' factor.... For some people this will be exactly what they are looking for.

Sound – 7.75/10

Comfort – 8/10

Fit and finish – 7.75/10

Value – 7.25/10

Overall – 7.69/10

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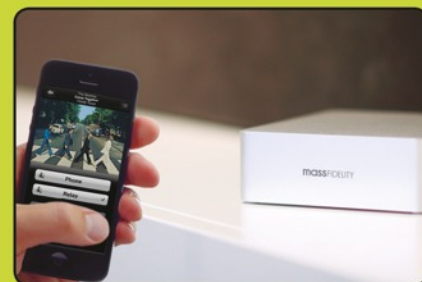
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Final Pandora VI Headphones



Price:
£550



Linette and Stuart Smith take the opportunity to take a listen to the Japanese Pandora Hope VI headphones that have a novel driver implementation.

Reviews

I first had a brief listen to the Japanese made Pandora Hope VI headphones at Munich earlier this year and thought they sounded pretty nice in far from ideal surroundings, so was pleased to be offered a review pair to try at home.

The £550 Hope VIs arrive in a hexagonal box which opens at the top to reveal the headphones surrounded by black faux-fur which lines the box and is a pretty nice touch which adds to that “Christmas morning” effect. Inside the box you’ve got the very basic instruction pamphlet, the removable 1.5m cable and the headphones themselves.

Pulling the headphones out the top of the box the first thing that strikes is that these are a pretty heavy headphone, coming in at around 480g. The second is that they look pretty classy with their silver and black finish (stainless steel and ABS resin). Popping them on your head they’re immediately comfortable with a well padded headband and position nicely over the whole of the ear – smaller over ears can sometimes be a problem for this reviewer. The ear-pads (and headband) are covered with faux leather and well padded. Positioning is by way of a simple slider mechanism and the cans themselves pivot nicely so you get a comfortable fit automatically – they also rotate slightly, but more of this later.



The cable is well made and has two minijacks that plug into each of the cans on the headphones and one that pops into the amp’s socket. Now these are pretty heavy headphones and I can’t see me wanting to walk about the town (or heaven forbid exercising) with them and I do most of my listening on headphones at home, so would have preferred to have seen a quarter inch jack on the end of these. On the positive side of things the fact that the cable is “independent” will allow, for those so inclined, to experiment with after-market cables. I also realise that

They are a hybrid design that uses a balanced armature along with a 50mm dynamic driver and this is where the slight rotation of the cans comes in ...

many use headphones when traveling on business and in hotel rooms using computers and portable audio players and so this mini-jack does actually make sense in the real world.

From a design perspective the Pandora Hope VI headphones are an interesting concept. They are a hybrid design that uses a balanced armature along with a 50mm dynamic driver and this is where the slight rotation of the cans comes in – you can position the balanced armature so you get the sound that suits your ears best. Personally I preferred them turned full forward, but it was interesting to experiment.

They are 8 Ohm closed design with a sensitivity of 105db and as such an easy headphone to drive.

Sound

Listening was predominantly done using Flacs from the computer using JRiver and JPlay via the VAD valve DAC and the headphone amp on the Coffman GA1 preamplifier we use daily.

Popping on the excellent “Coz” album from David Crosby you’re immediately aware of there being a nice wide soundstage with decent a three dimensional feel to give a good to very good “out of the head”

experience that is sometimes really lacking when using some headphones. Clarity of the sound is very good, with piano, guitar and vocals shining out from the mix. The sound is tight and accurate with Crosby's distinctly toned voice being instantly recognisable. Individual little percussion sounds are very evident and overall you get a great insight into the mix with slight effects on the guitar being easy to hear.

Overall the sound is really rather pleasing and very easy to listen to with this kind of laidback music and it's very difficult not to reach for the tablet and pick more of this from the virtual shelf.

The beginning few bars of David Bowie's "Ziggy Stardust" are crisp and precise and when the vocal comes in it's a real delight to listen to. Bass is tight and, whilst not as deep as some other headphones, it presents itself well. There's a tendency these days to over exaggerate the lower frequencies with cheaper (and some more expensive) headphones to appeal to the younger generations of listeners desire to conform to the "beats" sound. The Pandora Hope VI will certainly appeal to the more mature (in experience rather than years) listener who appreciates a balanced sound over and above the boom and tizz offered up elsewhere. "Smoke on the Water" from Deep Purple's "Made in Japan" record has a great electric bass sound that is a bit of a highlight of the record for me and here, despite it being a little light overall, it's well toned giving a good impression of the effect

Do you miss the very lowest bass registers?...well no, not really you don't. Personally I'd rather have the tight and well toned bass the Pandoras give up rather than an overblown, dominating and, in the final analysis, artificial sounding bass "the youth" seem to crave. Here you have speed, control and tautness that is a delight to listen to...really musical and enjoyable!

The Pandora Hope VI from Final are a superior product both from a finish and sound quality perspective.

Sonically they perform very well with all genres of music, offering up a clear and cohesive sound that's a real pleasure to listen to.



used.

Square Pusher's "Ufabulum" album is clever drum and bass at its very best with complex sounds coming and going in the mix and with the Hope VI you feel that there's an accuracy to the sound. The snappy snare hits cut through the intricate mix and there's that out-the-head sensation to the soundstage again.

On the funky disco of Salsoul Orchestra's "Street Sense" record and particularly listening to "Burning Spear" the infectiousness of the groove comes through brilliantly and the horns, when they begin, cut through the mix just as they should. Bass kick has that tightness again as does the electric bass guitar which, given the overall balance of the Pandoras, sounds right in this context.

Moving onto a bit of jazz in the form of Herbie Hancock's "Cantaloupe Island" the sense of the recording space is apparent and Freddie Hubbard's cornet soars to the fore. There's an overall "liveness" to the music and Tony Williams light touches on cymbals and hats glimmer through the other instruments. With the Pandora Hope VI there's a sense of separation of the instruments in space that allows you to listen critically should you want to, but the overall feeling is one of a cohesive and enjoyable listen.

Reviews

Plugging the headphones into the little Studio portable player from HiSound they prove to be really easy to drive and you can crank them up to outrageous volumes should you wish. If I was popping off for the weekend on business I'd be more than happy with the sound of this combo.

Comfort

These fit nicely over the ear enclosing it and ensuring good sound isolation from the outside world, but the faux leather earpads can become a little "sweaty" on warm evenings when you're wearing them for extended periods – I would have liked to see a fabric alternative in the box. *There is also a tendency (with my ear shape) for the hard plastic mesh inside the can to rub slightly on the antihelix (I had to look that up), part of the ear – this could be simply cured by having deeper cushions on the earpads, though I've experienced this with other headphones and so, as I suggest, it could just be my ear shape. They fit quite loosely on the head and if you do move your head about over enthusiastically they do move about. All that said they were pretty comfortable on the whole and I managed to spend a good few hours at a time wearing them.

Final Audio have nailed it with these headphones; they come in a hexagonal black box, with silver embossed logos, like something you would get jewellery or expensive perfume in.

Conclusions

The Pandora Hope VI from Final are a superior product both from a finish and sound quality perspective.

Sonically they perform very well with all genres of music, offering up a clear and cohesive sound that's a real pleasure to listen to. There's a sense that they have a balance and sophistication to them that clearly puts them in the audiophile bracket. Bass is tight and tuneful (though not massively low), mids and tops are clean and precise. Soundstage is one of their real-

ly strong points and they really do that out-of-the-head thing really well with instruments clearly separated and in their own space.

Comfort-wise I found them to be fairly comfortable with the caveats mentioned. Given their loose fit I don't see them being suitable for the very active, but great for the commute to work or for when away on business.

At their price-point they are not in any way a budget or impulse buy and whilst I do think they punch somewhat above their weight sonically, I'd suggest you see if you can get a pair to try on before you buy, or take advantage of current distance selling regulations, to see if they fit your ear-shape properly.

Stuart Smith

Sound – 8.25

Comfort – 6.75

Fit and finish – 8.5

Value – 8

Overall – 7.88

Recommended for those looking for a well made an "audiophile" sounding headphone that punches above its weight and has a fabulous soundstage.



And now Linette's thoughts on the Final Pandora Hope VI headphones.

I have said it before and I will say it again, the whole process of buying a new bit of hifi and then bringing it home to unbox should be a bit of an event. A cracking product carefully packaged and boxed will make more of an impression than something just slung into a plain box with a bit of bubble-wrap.

Final Audio have nailed it with these headphones; they come in a hexagonal black box, with silver embossed logos, like something you would get jewellery or expensive perfume in. The inside of the box is lined with a thick, black (fake) fur and acts as a headphone stand which the 'phones nestle into, very nice.

Taking them out of the box I was impressed with the stylish, minimal design and the build quality. They have a quietly retro feel to them with polished black ABS plastic that has a matte finish and stainless steel. The headband is broad and well padded and the earcups slide easily up and down to adjust the fit. The detachable cable clips in, in a satisfyingly solid fashion.

Again they seemed really bassy, but controlled and tight with everything else present in the top and mid that I was looking for from this track.

One thing I would say, these are not really grippy headphones and I don't think they are designed for anything much more active than sitting and listening to music. They are not for running about in (which is fine by me!)

They also sat comfortably on my head while wearing glasses, if I'm sat using my computer whilst wearing headphones, this is pretty important to me.

Although the earpads were pretty thick and comfortable I did have a bit of an issue with some parts of the driver or driver housing that were not covered by the pads and were slightly uncomfortable on my ears.

The Final website states that the Pandora Hope VI feature 'a hybrid design that merges balanced armature with a 50mm diameter dynamic driver unit coupled with BAM (Balancing Air Movement) mechanism' and that they have 'achieved an extraordinarily vast sound stage'

Have they? Well it sounds pretty good to me! 'Papua New Guinea' from Future Sound of London soared through my ears with plenty of detail in the mid and top and a huge punch of bass.

The soundstage did sound wide and deep...maybe Final have something here.

Not quite on the same level as the Audeze LCD –

XC but the Pandora Hope VI are a third of the price at around £550 UK retail.

The Hardfloor 'Once again back' test was next....this tune really does get played on every piece of review equipment that comes in. Again they seemed really bassy, but controlled and tight with everything else present in the top and mid that I was looking for from this track.

Wanting to listen to some of the same tracks in each headphone review I put on Gil Scott Heron's 'Ghetto Style' again. It was engaging to listen to with a well defined soundstage and the bass/mid/top mix sounded right to me.

I would have happily sat and listened to the whole album but things were starting to get quite uncomfortable in the ear department.

I was pretty disappointed, the Final Pandora Hope VI sound very good...but they are just not the headphone for me. Comfort is really important to me with a pair of headphones.

*I found them quite uncomfortable after wearing for a while, I think the way that the driver and housing is designed makes the part not covered by the pads stick out too close to the ear, I imagine this could be overcome by increasing the earpad thickness to take the driver a little further back away from the ear. However, headphones are not a one size fits all and I would definitely suggest trying them to see how they feel on your own ears...just because they didn't work for me doesn't mean they won't for you.

Linette Smith

Sound – 8/10

Comfort – 5/10

Fit and finish – 8/10

Value – 7/10

Overall – 7/10

A great sounding, beautiful looking set of headphones, just not a recommended from me because of the comfort issues, which other people may not have a problem with.

**Robin from KS Distribution, who are the UK importer of Final Audio products, contacted Hifi Pig to tell us that "larger earpads are available if someone doesn't like the original earpads – these were produced specially for those who find the original pads uncomfortable. The larger pads were produced for western markets and one of the guys at KS who experienced some discomfort said they resolved the issue completely".*

HifiMan HE-560 Headphones

Linette and Stuart Smith listen to another planar magnetic design, this time it's the HifiMan HE-560 headphones



**Price:
£650**

The £650 HE-560 from HifiMan open-backed, planar magnetic headphones arrive in a smart looking wooden box with a metal nameplate taking up the slide-out lid's top surface. Inside you are presented by a very nicely cut out foam insert that protects the headphones during transit, the owners manual and the detachable cables. This is a good start – first impressions count for a lot with lots of people and it's good to see another headphone manufacturer realising this.

Taking the HE-560s from their packaging it's immediately apparent that these are a relatively light weight design and they come in at 375g which is more than 100g lighter than the Final Pandora Hope VI headphones we reviewed recently but slightly heavier than the Sennheiser HD800s. I'd certainly be happy to use these whilst moving about or doing mild exercise. They look pretty cool with a wooden banding around the outer circumference of each of the cans and this looks pretty classy.



The cans are nice and big and fit over the whole of the ear (or most of it in my case) pretty comfortably – they aren't as big as the Sennheisers but should be good for most folk. The headband is simple band of plastic material and not actually part of the metal "headband" making it very comfortable indeed and it can be adjusted by sliding little black plastic blocks located on each side of the headband. This adjustment is a bit fiddly, but once it's set you're done unless you share your headphones with your family. They fit pretty firmly to your head too so you can move about quite freely which is a good thing! The actual earpads themselves are made of what looks like faux leather with the surface that touches your head being a smoothish velour fabric. The earpads are thicker at the back of the ear than they are at the front which positions them correctly over your

After a suitable running in period the sound does change pretty dramatically and very much for the better.

ears.

The cables are a decent 2m length and terminate at one end with a good quality Neutrik quarter inch jack and on the other with faffy little things that screw onto the bottom of each of the cans' – I personally didn't like these at all, but again, once they're in... they're in. Cable enthusiasts on the other hand will be pleased with the non-captive design so they can play with cables from other manufacturers.

Overall I really like the sleek design of these and the finish looks to be pretty good, though I wouldn't like to be altering the headband overly often due to the nature of the mechanism.

As a departure from previous Hifi Man models the drivers have their magnet at only one side of the driver's membrane which is good for weight and means there's nothing between the driver membrane and your ear, but it does mean that they are pretty inefficient at 90dB and have an impedance of 35 Ohms. The output from the Coffman pre didn't really drive the HifiMan HE560s and I'd suggest that a dedicated amp with a more healthy output is the order of the day. Fortunately I own a reference of a prototype solid state design from Epiphany Acoustics that pumps out a healthy 2W should you need that much. Plugging into the Studio portable player from HiSound means having to crank the volume a fair bit, but I'd suggest you'd be better off with a decent quality portable headphone amplifier.

The Sound

Reviews

First listen straight from the box weren't very impressive at all with the HE-560s sounding a little brash and yet closed in...but then to be fair the user guide does suggest 150 hours of breaking them in so there they sat for a few days playing along to themselves, which made me realise just how little these open backed designs bleed sound into their surroundings. I'd be cautious on public transport, but I reckon you'd get away with it if you sat at the back of the bus and kept yourself to yourself.

There's a quality to the sound of the HifiMan HE560s that really draws you in and makes you sit up and listen.

After a suitable running in period the sound does change pretty dramatically and very much for the better. I'd been listening to the "Kings of Oblivion" from Pink Fairies on the Sennheiser HD800s and noticed that the bass on the HifiMan headphones seemed to be a little tighter and more akin to a real bass guitar and if anything I'd say they were even better in this department which is surprising as I liked the bass on the Sennheisers a lot! A very brief introduction but very positive none the less.

Natalie Merchants eponymous album is a bit of favourite with me at the moment and I just love the opening track "Ladybird". Here her vocal is really quite beautifully rendered. It's silky smooth and projects from the background instrumentation as nicely as I've heard it on headphones. Bass is punchy, tight and dynamic. I don't think the HifiMans go as low as the Sennheisers but there is a quality to it that is really pleasing to listen to and which appeals to me. There seems to be a slightly warm presentation overall, but there's equally tons of detail with these headphones. The soundstage is difficult for me to express in words – it's not as wide or deep as the Sennheiser HD800 or the Final Pandora Hope VIs, but there does seem to be a better forward to back sensation if that makes sense.

On to some electronic music, which I actually really enjoy on a good set of headphones, and VCMG's "SSSS". To enjoy this kind of music I think you need headphones that do speed and dynamics really well and the HE560s don't disappoint. Whilst they don't go mega low (or as low as the Sennheiser HD800s) they do that start and stop thing on the bass that is essential for me and there is bags and bags of information in the higher frequencies making this album in particular come alive with all the little synthesised bleeps and twitters in the mix.

Nolwenn Leroy's "Brettone" album emphasise the nice balance these headphones have, but also highlight the fact that you need to drive them pretty hard to get the very best from them. There's snap and impact from the drums and the traditional Breton instruments, which tend to be pretty highly pitched, cut through the mix without being over emphasised and taking over. Given their speed you are presented an accurate and realistic impression of the overall mix with no overhang of sounds and with each instrument having its place on the stage. Leroy's version of "Greensleeves" is naturally a simple rendition and the HE560s perform this tune really beautifully with the simple instrumentation layered in the mix to accentuate her voice. She is singing in a language that is not her own (she's Breton/French) and it is quite easy to pick out slight American inflections in her voice.



Comfort

Over the top of the head the HifiMan HE560s are the most comfortable we have in for review and this is down to the simple headband arrangement – in this respect you are hardly aware you are wearing them at all.

The cans themselves are pretty large but don't cover the whole of my lugs and this can become evident, if

not actually uncomfortable, after long sessions with them.

They clamp quite tightly to your head which I reckon would make them useable when doing light exercise, but the velour covering to the earpads did get pretty warm and a little itchy after long periods of use – perhaps an alternative could be included in the future.

Conclusion

There's a quality to the sound of the HifiMan HE560s that really draws you in and makes you sit up and listen. They are balanced and detailed in the top end and, whilst the bass doesn't go as low as some others in for review (notably the Sennheiser HD800s), I do think there's a punchy quality to the bass that is in balance with the rest of the frequency range they convey and it's really quite endearing. That upper frequency detail isn't at all over done and many will actually prefer this quality of the HifiMans over the Sennheisers.

Mids and vocals are really nicely done and overall there is a hint of warmth to the HE560s which many who listen to headphones for extended periods will enjoy a great deal.

The out-of-the-head experience isn't as defined as the Final Hope VI and there is a feeling of them being slightly closed in left to right, whilst on the flip-side there's a feeling of front to back space.

Although I feel the soundstage is quite narrow the instruments in the mix do have position and a degree of space around them.

Overall the sound the HE560s make is really rather special and they play a wide variety of genres without issue and they don't demand anything from the listener.

I personally found them a little uncomfortable on the ears after a long session and they do need a decent headphone amp to get the very best out of them. That said, they are light, relatively portable and the box they come in is of a size you can pop in large hand luggage when traveling. I do worry that the little clips for adjusting the headband will not be robust enough over time if used a lot.

At £650 the HifiMan HE560s come in at £100 more than the Pandoras and I believe this is justifiable as they do offer, for my tastes, a more coherent and less "audiophile" sound. At almost £350 less than Sennheisers and £849 less than the Audeze LCD – XC they are a serious contender that will surely get a lot

of attention from headphone enthusiasts and serious listeners looking for a more cost effective alternative.

Stuart Smith

Sound – 8.5

Comfort – 8.0

Fit and finish – 8.0

Value – 8.5

Overall – 8.25

Recommended for those looking for a lightweight headphone with a high quality, detailed sound throughout the frequency range and at a price-point that is attractive to those not wanting to spend mega-bucks.



And now Linette Smith takes a listen to the Hifi-Man HE-560 headphones

I was expecting good things when the Hifiman headphones arrived in their very stylish and sturdy box. Well constructed wooden box with a slide off lid that comes with an aluminium panel on the front...very stylish indeed and the headphones are perfectly protected in transit.

Taking them out of the box was a bit déjà vu.....these headphones seemed to have a touch of the Audeze to them looks wise, was I getting a cheaper interpretation from China? I hoped not!

The first thing that strikes me is the weight; these are actually a pretty light set of 'phones at 375g. Despite the lightness they feel well built and durable with a definite solidity to them, these are no cheeky rip off, they are a well made set of headphones.

I really like the suspended head band. Slipping them on they feel very, very comfortable, with just the soft band on my head I can only actually feel the earcups,

Reviews

sure, the metal frame of the headband does make me look a bit like a cyber man....but I like the design.

Wow! This is great, the bass is much deeper and all the little nuances in the rhythm are clean and detailed with nothing lost from the mid and top.

The earcups themselves fit my ears perfectly and feel supremely comfortable. Not as big as the Audeze and not as heavy so they don't need as much padding. They are definitely cocooning and even though these are open backed I get the isolation from the outside world that I look for in a pair of headphones. They even work well with my glasses, no conflict at all.....I have to say I am pretty impressed by Hifiman so far!

I'm really excited to actually hear these so I put on Blondie's 'Parallel Lines'. 'Hanging on the telephone' is rocky and lively and slips nicely into 'One way or another' with Debbie Harry growling seductively in my ears. The soundstage is big and I get all the detail that I want to hear....drums sounding particularly good, everything is tight and well balanced and I am drawn

in to listen more....actually I forget that I'm supposed to be writing a review and just enjoy listening!

I switch back to Primal Scream's 'Screamadelica' which I last listened to with the Sennheisers that I reviewed a few days ago.

Wow! This is great, the bass is much deeper and all the little nuances in the rhythm are clean and detailed with nothing lost from the mid and top.

I'm getting the 'lost in music' feeling that marks out a great pair of headphones for me....a lot of fun!

I am very impressed that Hifiman have got such a great balance with the HE-560s.

Comfort, lightness and a great sound and all for around £650not a cheap pair of headphones by any stretch....but they are coming across as very good value for money.



It's Hardfloor test time again so on goes 'Once again back'. Driving basslines with lots of sub.....what's not to love? Tight and detailed.....perfect, the Hifiman 'cans pass with flying colours, I think someone will have to prise them from my head when it's time to send them back, I am hooked!

I was impressed right from opening the box, but if you buy these headphones they will spend a lot more time on your head than in the box! Thoroughly enjoyable.

Linette Smith

Sound – 8.75/10

Comfort – 9.25/10

Fit and finish – 8/10

Value – 9/10

Overall – 8.75 /10

Excellent sounding, comfortable headphones that give much more expensive headphones a run for their money. Definitely recommended.

Stax SR-407 Headphones

Hifi Pig's most recent recruit, Janine Elliot, takes a listen to these iconic headphones and required energiser from Stax.

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Price: £1695

Reviews

Talk about headphones, and there is one name that always springs to mind. When I was a teenage hi-fi fanatic I always wanted to own a Stax. I remember then the company were adamant that they should actually be called 'Ear Speakers', and I could see why with the Lambda. These monsters of the day looked more like speakers tied to the head with a vice rather than headphones. Whilst the original conventionally shaped Stax was in 1960 it wasn't until 1979 that the Lambda – if you like, the original baby of the SR-407 – was born. Indeed, many of the original exterior parts, such as headband, driver yokes, earpads, and outer casing still play a part in the current 207, 307, 407 and 507 incarnations. Only the Jecklin Float offered an alternative electrostatic design, but that particular offering was prone to fall off your head if you leaned forward. Koss, Sennheiser and PWB did produce electret and electrostatics, but that's for another day. These ear speakers couldn't be plugged directly into your standard headphone socket but rather had to be connected to a special electrostatic generator, known as an 'Energiser', in the case of the Stax using a 6 pin, and later 5 pin, connector. The energiser was itself connected to the line output of your pre-amp. Quite unique in design, the high voltage Lambda transducers were angled inwards, rather than being parallel to the ears like most cans. This gave it a distinctive soundstage, as if the instruments were in front of your head, rather than cramped inside between your ears. This made listening to music all that much more realistic and less tiring than most others, particularly when listening to centralised vocals. Coupled with the electrostatic diaphragms, it made for a quick and extended frequency response. Many years later I bought my first pair, and have never looked back. Having been brought up on Quad ESL57 and 63's these cans could do everything that those speakers could, only much louder.



Perhaps the original Lambda was a little bit more comfortable, but with its large design fitting around my ears I was still able to listen for extended time.

Looking more like something from the Second-World War with its distinctive rectangular brown plastic scaffolding to keep weight down and faux leather ear-cups, the 2011 Stax SR-407 usually gets mated up with the two 6FQ7 valve SRM-006ts energiser to make up the SRS-4170 system. Interestingly, both parts can be bought separate though they are useless unless mated together, and when bought as a pair aren't any cheaper, either! With a specification to die for (frequency response 7-41,000 Hz) and the prospect of a fully balanced audio path from the XLR output of my Krell CD all the way to my ears via the custom-made double axis 4-gang volume controller I knew this was going to be special. After a long run-in to get some flexibility in the tight 1.35 micron plastic membranes, I began to listen. By the way, the human hair is at least 40 times thicker! Compared with the original Lambda, the 2011 model has many changes to the inside, making for a much better bass end, though the slightly more expensive SR-507 (which is black, with real leather) gives a much more confident lower end than this model, and is £250 more as a consequence. With that extra bass this psychologically makes you feel the top end is inferior, which of course it isn't. Perhaps the original Lambda was a little bit more comfortable, but with

its large design fitting around my ears I was still able to listen for extended time.

Listening to the Dadawa 'Sister Drum' it was evident that my ears would probably hurt before the electrostatic membrane did. The thud of the bass drums was very quick and precise and the wide dynamic range made my Krell KPS20i, renowned for its excellent bass production, sound better than I ever thought it would. Everything was there, crystal clear. Listening to my own album 'Get Over It', I could hear elements of my recording that had not been apparent when I made it; things like slight level changes or changes in perspective mid-verse. This led me to Dire Straits 'Love Over Gold', an old favourite that I know has a few bad edits in it that many headphones and speaker systems will miss out. The opening track 'Telegraph Road' has a terrible sound stage shift of Knopfler singing at 3'38". The SR-407 precision was still very musical, however, and that finding this spot on the music was a doddle. These were musically clinical, if you hear what I mean.

As well as the extended horizontal sound stage, with their large curved rectangular diameter fitting over the ears these ear speakers had a massive vertical soundboard as well. The sound was all around my ears, not just a centralised pin-point. This made it much more realistic to listen to. Their size was particularly evident playing J.S. Bach organ tracks which made this sound like St Pauls, rather than the local village church organ. Conversely quiet decays of instruments were allowed to do so in their own time, not being quickened by the limitation of a conventional heavy cone driver. This was precision stuff. My ears felt like I was listening again back in my twenties. I wish. The soundstage of The David Rees-Williams Trio 'Classically Minded' had always confused me with its width and multi-pianoforte 'layering', which sounding quite claustrophobic and confusing. The Stax made it far easier to discern the different piano melodic lines, which don't sound correctly placed as if you were listening in the audience, making me wish I'd actually done the mix myself. It just didn't sound natural; a fault of the 2001 album, and not the Stax. Nothing could get past this kit! Also, as is often in a lot of recordings, the drum kit had a "large" fingerprint, but not as wide as had the diaphragms not been angled to my ears, as they are on the Stax. The valve energiser gave a precise velvety sound to the badly mic'd piano that was quite compelling. I just didn't want to stop listening.

Time to switch over to vinyl. To test the power and bass I listened to the last two tracks of the new re-master of Pink Floyd 'The Division Bell'. There was no end to the musicality, with precise cymbal highs and a bass just went lower and lower. Finally I put on Patricia Barber 'Live in France'. I felt like I was in the audience, and I listened tirelessly to all four sides of the disc. I was in love with these cans, I mean, Ear Speakers. The sound was transparent and focused. It was 'so easy', that the only problems were the slightly incorrect bias on my Rega arm distorting the vocal to the left channel a tad. Easily rectified whilst 580 volts between my ears.

If I have to criticise this product it is the slightly plasticky feel, though this keeps down the weight, and weight of the ribbon cable if left dangling. With the prospect of balanced all the way through, two XLR inputs rather than just one in the Energiser would for me be preferable. Small price to pay. Combined with the energiser this outfit costs five pounds short of £1700, and for me is the starting point for serious listening in the Stax family. Cheaper outfits including the SR-207 or SR-307 ear speakers lack much of what is possible. The SRS 3170 combo, for example,



comprises the SR-307 with a less able transistor energiser. The price of the SR-407 on its own is £495, but useless without an appropriate energiser. But, at little more than the cost of a very decent pair of headphones and headphone amp, this weird contraption is to my ears easily the winning combination.

Janine Elliot

Sound Quality – 9.2/10

Value for Money – 9/10

Build Quality – 8.2/10

Overall – 8.8/10

Stax SR-009 Headphones

At £3495 the Stax SR-009 headphones are intended for the committed headphone listener. Janine Elliot takes a listen...



The SR-009 is the flagship of the extensive range which starts with the £275 in-ear SR-02. Whilst I personally prefer the gold finish of the cheaper SR-007, the conventional shaped aluminium SR-009 is of improved build quality. This ear speaker was pure class. Lambs wool, and a comfort that makes the plasticky, rattley, rickety, cheap finish of the SR-407 feel more like something from another manufacturer. The SR-009 differs specifically from the £1500 cheaper SR-007 in that the drivers are angled, as in the Lambda based' 207/307/407/507 fraternity. Believe me, this extra £1500 is worth every penny in order to gain a more realistic soundstage in front of, rather than inside, the listener! Similarly the SRM-007t II Kimik is the very top of their range, though I personally think the additional two valves duplicating the output circuitry somewhat veils the sound quality. I believe in keeping things simple.

For those unaccustomed to Stax ear speakers, the sound is generated between two "parallel-arranged fixed electrodes" – the electrostatic transducer – between which is suspended a low-mass, high-polymer film that is less than 2µm thick. This is basically a push-pull driver system. When the fluctuating voltage of the audio signal is applied to the electrodes the

diaphragm is pulled and pushed. With frequency response from 5 to 42,000Hz and a maximum sound pressure level of 118dB, this needs a premium source fed into it to even start to appreciate its sound quality.

Whilst the product has gone through the most extensive research and building, commemorating 50 years of its electrostatic ear speakers (excluding electret models), the sales brochure is a lot more confusing. I mean, tell me what all this is about;

"It will exactly be as a result of "work" each predecessor piled up, if a race, a company, and an individual have "pride". And it clearly depends on the way of life we live now to inherit it and to bear "enhancement" and "evolution".

Just saying a lot of pride and craftsmanship has been put into what is our most iconic and best ever ear speaker would have been good enough for me. Luckily the posh-card manual inside the wooden-box-adorned SR-009 was a lot more specific. At the outset I have to say that this product is nothing short of 'out of this planet'. The head pad is extremely comfortable and, unlike the SR-407, has a lockable slider mechanism for different size heads that actually stays put when you've set it. Comfort matches my favourite Audio-Technica ATH-W1000X, but that is where the comparison ends.

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



So to the tests. First of all I listened to both Stax models through the cheaper SRM 006tS energiser, with Krell KPS20i CD and Townshend Rock 7/Merlin, Rega/Ortofon Kontrapunkt, Manley Steelhead vinyl. After this I used the Kimik energiser.

Playing Eva Cassidy 'Fields of Gold' was mind blowingly open. The cheaper energiser had a thinner, brighter sound and made the difference between the SR-407 and 009 greater than when both were fed through the Kimik. The sound in both ear speakers was highly accurate, with the guitars sounding as bright as the title in the song, Golden. The SR-009 had far more space between instruments and the singer; I mean in front of me, not just middle, left and right. Listening to a live version of Dire Straits' Private Investigation there was a wider ambiance and I felt I was in the audience. The SR-407 were claustrophobic in comparison, even though compared with most other gear out there the SR-407 is streets above. I would be scarred for life (if you're my age and know the words, you'll realise the play on words here....) if I had never listened to these marvels. This was not confidential information. Enough.



Bird song repetition between the first and second violins in The Four Seasons was much more open and crisper, and therefore easier to listen to in the SR-009. There was more in front of the listener. The Battle from The Gladiator was far cleaner on SR-009; open, precise, easy to listen to, but more than anything, musical. The sudden loud 'rages' don't sound as muddled or as heavy, even though there is more bass, as they do on the SR-407. Yes, more bass apparent on the SR-407 than the SR-009! The thing is, because the sound is more muddled on the SR-407 you think there is actually more of it! Believe me, the SR-009 is not lacking in anything. The sound is further forward from the ears. A sudden edit at

5'17" mid-phrase has an increase in level that the SR-407 can't pick out. Indeed, it is more noticeable through the SRM-006tS than on the Kimik. Indeed, if I were to make a really radical statement here; I actually prefer the £1000 cheaper SRM-006tS! Interesting then, perhaps, that Stax themselves are presently designing a new energiser to replace/be an alternative to the SRM-007t Kimik.

Vocal "ums" in Jennifer Warnes "Bird on a Wire" (Cypress Records 258418) were much clearer identified in space. The whole soundstage appears much less cluttered. Donald Fagan "I G Y" from the album 'The Nightfy' (Warner Bros 923696-2) made me wonder how much I had been missing for 32 years. The clarity, in a rather clinical track, was as if my ears had just been syringed. I didn't realise CDs could be this good; power, channel identification, frequency response. And in the 32ft pedalboard of the organ of Nicolas de Grigny – Recit de Tierce en Taille (Dorian DOR 90134) couldn't be any clearer, or deeper. Nothing could get past these, not even the real canons firing off in Tchaikovsky 1812 overture (Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Telarc CS 80041).

In contrast Deep Blue Sky from John Lee Hooker was so laid back with velvety warmth and musicality that I wondered if life could get any better.

So, to conclude, the SR-009 are the best sounding ear speakers, cans, headphones, or whatever you or Stax want to call them, that I have had the pleasure of listening to. They, combined with the Kimik, were well worth the combined £5,790 if you wanted the very best in sound quality. If you were to spend money on a comparable loud-speaker based system, expect to spend £30,000 plus. If cost were an issue, then I have shown that the SRM-006tS, at £1,000 less, is more than a match for these cans, and I actually did prefer them in much of my listening tests. The SR-009 and energiser do need significant run-in to get to their best, but even at their worst were as exciting as UK importer Nigel Crump, Symmetry, sounded every time he talked to me about them. He has every reason to be very proud.

Janine Elliot

Sound Quality – 9.5/10

Value for Money – 8.5/10

Build Quality – 9/10

Overall – 9/10



Xtension 9 SuperPack

The Xtension 9 SuperPack from Pro-Ject Audio Systems represents one of the finest high-end turntable packages available today. Drawing inspiration from Pro-Ject's first ever 'money-no-option' turntable, the Xtension 12, this streamlined version boasts advanced technologies and phenomenal value for money.

The high-gloss plinth (available in Red or White) is an MDF construction filled with metal granulate, making it high-mass and non-resonant just like the platter, which is made from a special alloy lined with Thermo-Plastic Elastomers and topped with recycled vinyl records. The whole turntable is magnetically decoupled from a rack by three specially designed feet.

The Xtension 9 SuperPack's motor efficiency is improved by the built-in speed control module, and the whole package is finished off by the stunning 9CC Evolution Tonearm and pre-fitted Ortofon Quintet Black.

Available in the UK for **£2,200** (UK SRP)

Focal Spirit One Headphones

French manufacturer Focal are perhaps best known for their loudspeakers but perhaps they're onto something with this 179 EUR pair of headphones, say Harry and Linette Smith



Reviews

French manufacturer **Focal** aren't the first name that comes to mind when you think about headphones but perhaps they should be given Harry and Linette's teens think of buying their first "quality" headphone, they often look at a brand that is quite infamous with most audiophiles, Beats by Dre.

So why do people buy Beats?

Well first of all they look good, there are plenty of colour choices and they have loads of BASS!!!!

Apart from this however the build quality is poor and the sound suffers from the bass overload. You can barely hear the highs or mids.

But this isn't a review of Beats so I'll tell you why I'm talking about them ...

Many Hi-fi companies have failed in trying to knock beats of its pedestal by bringing great sound and build quality to the "on the go" headphone market. But is that about to change?

Focal are a big French name in the Hi-Fi business and are world renowned for their speakers. The Spirit One S is Focal's big leap in to the head-fi world and an upgrade from the previous Spirit One Headphone. I briefly listened to the Spirit One at the High End Munich show earlier this year. Both headphones are designed for "On the go" usage.



Focal have combined high quality plastic and brushed metal in the design that give it a great weight and feel.

Starting with build quality. The Spirit One S feels solid and there were no faults with the example that I was given. Focal have combined high quality plastic and brushed metal in the design that give it a great weight and feel. The cable provided is thick and doesn't get tangled up in your pocket. You can also detach it completely from the headphone which helps for carrying it around your neck. There are also in-line controls that can be used on most mobile devices for pausing the music, skipping tracks and answering calls. There is also a very nice hard carrying case that comes with them.

The Headphones are also very comfortable, there is plenty of foam padding on the ear cups and headband. They feel a bit tight at first but they adjust to your head size after around an hour. I had them around my neck or on my ears for most of the day and never felt any strain on my head or ears. I love the over-ear design that provides plenty of noise isolation from outside noises.

Personally, I think they look very stylish and stand out from most headphones. I think however that they could benefit from a better choice of colours.

When it comes to sound, the Spirit One S wipes the floor with any pair of beats. The bass is warm and there is plenty of it without losing too much out on the highs and mids. The sound is very balanced maybe leaning in favour of the bass a little. The sound on the whole is dynamic and caters for most genres of music.

The stand out song with these headphones was 'La La La' by Naughty Boy. The heavy bass line really

complimented the high notes of Sam Smith's voice. A lot of headphones struggle with this song as there is such a huge contrast between the bass of the instruments and the high pitch voice but the Spirit One S handled it perfectly.

They actually performed very well with more or less anything I could throw them. A great all rounder!

Harry Smith

Build quality – 8/10

Comfort – 9/10

Sound – 8/10

Value – 9/10

Total – 8.5/10

Price when tested: 179 euros

Focal have created a great headphone for use in home and out and have designed something that (with the right marketing of course) could steal the Teen market from its competitors. A Beats killer indeed!



And now Linette takes a listen and gives her opinion.

Right from the start there is the big 'whump' of bass that I expect to hear from this album, but it sounds controlled and tight ...

Having been lucky enough to visit the Focal factory and offices in Ste Etienne, France earlier this year, I know how much work goes into their R&D. They also 'filter down' the technology developed for the higher end products into the cheaper ones, so that you know when you see the Focal logo, you are getting a quality item.

That certainly goes for the Focal Spirit One S headphones. Properly packaged, they come with some nice accessories like a rigid carry case and a soft bag, along with a cable with a remote on it that will work with your ipod or phone....if you are that way inclined. There is also a full sized jack adapter and an adapter to use on aeroplanes.

The 'phones themselves are very stylish looking in tones of dark grey, black and brushed aluminium with a pop of red inside the earcups.

They have a modern, slick look to them and I imagine they would draw admiring glances from the younger generation....there is good but discreet use of the Focal logos and branding.

They fit very comfortably on and around the ears, with a good grip so that you would feel safe walking or doing exercise whilst wearing them, but they are not so tight as to be uncomfortable. There is the sense of isolation from the outside world that I like to have with a set of headphones.

They are also very light for what feels a very solid and well made set of headphones at just 280g.

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They adjust easily and feel 'right' on the head; overall I am very impressed with them straight out of the box. After wearing for quite a while, I can tell that I have them on...but they are not uncomfortable at all.

I want to kick off listening with something bassy, on goes car Cox's 'Phuture 2000'. Right from the start there is the big 'whump' of bass that I expect to hear from this album, but it sounds controlled and tight rather than woolly and though these come across as bass heavy there is still plenty of top and mid to prevent the bass from becoming too much. I'm getting all the little breakbeat snaps and jumps in a nicely defined manner.

The soundstage is not as big and open as with some of the other headphones that we have reviewed, but it is pretty damn good, especially when you take into consideration that these cost around 179€.

Feeling 'at one with da yoof' I stick on Deadmau5 and 'Albumtitlegoeshere'

This sounds great on the Focals, driving, bassy and energetic...particularly one of my favourite tracks 'Professional Griefers'....a banger if ever I heard one.

Not just a wall of noise though, great detail too.

Before I try something a bit calmer I have to put on 'Once again back' by Hardfloor. It sounds tight and fast with plenty of growling sub bass.... Not quite as 'out of the head' as some of the headphones I have reviewed recently, but some of those were up to 10 times the price of the Focals.

I switch to 'Beautiful Freak' by Eels and the track 'Susan's house' sounds excellent, guitars and vocals come across well. These are not just a set of 'phones for fans of electronica, they sound great with more rocky music too as is further proven when listening to 'Rags to Rags' with its grungy guitars and vocals.

For the sake of comparison Gil Scott Herons 'Lady Day and John Coltrane' goes back on again. Once again it is obvious that the presentation is better with some of the other headphones I have listened to...however the difference is not as big as you would think from the difference in price, overall I am very, very impressed with how the Focal Spirit One S perform for the money.

The whole Beats by Dre phenomenon has opened up a new market for headphones, now, rather than just using a cheap pair of earbuds, loads of teens want 'proper' headphones...and Beats filled that market-place.



Hopefully if we can get today's teens using something much more well built and better sounding they will develop a much more educated ear and not just immediately go for that little 'b' logo.....we need some good headphones to fill the gap in the market at a price that kids can aspire to.

With their Spirit range, Focal seem poised to do just that, perhaps a few more colours would be a good thing, but I think the more discerning will be more concerned about the build and sound quality of these headphones than whether they come in a rainbow of colours.

Not only for the kids though, these are affordable, comfortable, portable and stylish and have benefited from the Focal legacy of great design and sound....I reckon if you buy them for your teenager this Christmas you will end up pinching them back again!

Linette Smith

Sound – 8/10

Comfort – 7.75/10

Fit and finish – 8.75/10

Value – 9.5/10

Overall – 8.5/10

Great all-rounders, with a build quality that I would expect from much more expensive headphones, a lot of headphone for your money! Heartily recommended.

HifiMan RE-400 In Ear Headphones

Teen correspondent Harry Smith give his thoughts on the HifiMan RE-400 £79 In Ear Headphones

Teen correspondent Harry Smith continues Hifi Pig's « Headphone Month » with his thoughts on the HifiMan RE-400 In Ear Headphones

Hifiman are a Japanese company that make headphones, earphones, media players ... Ranging from the affordable to the not so affordable. The RE-400s are a very small form factor in-ear that packs a punch for their small design and affordable price. (£79)

In the box you get the earphones (obviously), a carrying case and plenty of earpieces that can fit all shapes and sizes of ear including ones made out of memory foam that are the most comfortable for me. I think it's great that Hifiman took the trouble to including so many extras for customisation.

The earphones themselves are very well built and feel solid, although the aluminium on the back is prone to scratching. The cable is braided which you don't see much on budget earphones.

When listening to the RE-400s you often forget that you have something in your ears. The memory foam does a great job of filling your ears so no sound can escape. Hands down, the most comfortable earphone I have ever used. The highs and mids are crisp and are very well balanced. Personally I feel that the bass could be a bit lacking but these are tuned to an audiophile's ear and not a teen bass nut. The RE-400s sound best with acoustic pianos and guitars. Female and high male vocals sounded sublime. Whatever you listen to they do a great job at layering the music and make it feel like a live band.

I don't often take the time to listen to classical music but it actually sounded very good. Not that I would listen to it again, but violins had an amazing resonance.

The stand out track for me was "Within" from Daft Punks newest album. I could hear everything 20-56-13742-ea4a7f7e3bbaae79ca8fa81e8b1c01a6individually



whether it be the drums, the piano, the organ or the trademark Daft punk vocoder voice. All the individual sounds combined into a huge orchestra. I felt that I was listening to the music in a huge concert hall. The earphones performed just as well with the entire album.

When listening to more bass heavy genres like dub-step it sounds different to what I'm used to. You hear more of the top end and it changes the whole character of the music.

All in all, there is not much to say about the Hifiman RE-400 as they do barely anything wrong and so many things right. Its comfortable, sounds very good and has solid build quality. You can't do much better for its price. I recommend these to any audiophile who wants great music on the go and on a budget. £79 well spent !

Build quality-8/10

Sound quality-8/10

Comfort-9.5/10

Value-8/10

Overall – 8.38

GOJI Tinchy Stryder On Cloud 9

At Hifi Pig we're keen not only to bring you reviews of the high-end, expensive products but also like to point out the odd bargain that is out there. Here Janine Elliot continues Hifi Pig's « Headphone Month » with a review of a £60 set of headphones available from the high street.



In use whilst walking the noisy streets of London, I could actually get more out of the music than my expensive inner-ear phones.

The thought of me walking into the local electronics store and spending £250 on the latest designer headphones with unrealistic bass-heavy response would only appear in my worst nightmare. Just as I love the idea of owning the latest designer sports footwear, I only buy something that fits well, whatever its colour or name engraved. So with audio, sound comes before the brand.

I take my non-designer hat off to Dr Dre for managing to sell unrealistic sounding, but highly enjoyable and good looking headphones. But £260 for an over-ear white, red or black iPod attachment is as cost effective as me putting on my central heating and opening all the windows. So, reluctantly I decided to try out a number of headphones designed for the young iPod trendy. Names included Sony, JVC, Sculcandy, Beats by Dr Dre, etc.

For the purposes of this review I'll just say they were all bland, boring, too trebly, too bass heavy, uncomfortable or too expensive. None of them made me enjoy listening to music on the move and, with some,

the bass just made me ill. Except for one. Ironically, this designer named, brilliantly packaged, well accessorised (non-tangle cord, carrying pouch), comfortable, pleasant to listen to and good looking little number is actually made exclusively in Hemel Hempstead for Currys/PC World. Well, made in China, actually.

Coming in white, black and, if you're lucky, in red, this foldable over the ear Goji Tinchy Stryder is amazingly good value and £200 cheaper than some Dr Dre's, yet it's handling of bass without distortion, and crispier top end is without equal. In use whilst walking the noisy streets of London, I could actually get more out of the music than my expensive inner-ear phones. The closed back covers the ear with enough energy to stop most of the traffic getting in, yet not too much to make them uncomfortable for long periods of time. Only in really hot conditions did I find the faux-leather construction a bit sweaty. I

disabled the EQ settings on my iPod, as the increase in bass and top end equated to the “R&B” or “Rock” settings that I could have selected. It should be maintained flat, or on “Electronic” setting at the very most.



Made by ‘Goji’, they are designed in collaboration with Tinchy Stryder, the stage name for 1986 Ghanaian-born Kwasi Danquah III. As well as founder of the headphone and phone accessories label, he is a musician, investor, and even oversees his own clothing range. The MOBO award-winner now has three hit albums under his belt and his CV is longer than the small print on my bank account.



This was an amazingly musical headphone for the price. The droning lower bass D at the start of The Division Bell, Pink Floyd, was there, clearly defined, but not so prominent as I perhaps had expected. The gentle cymbals and bass drum at 4’27” were just right; not OTT. Only in the next track did I feel any saturation, and at high level I could feel the wind blow like the 18” drivers of my subwoofer. Some people like this, especially the young Vauxhall Nova

drivers outside my house at midnight. But I didn’t need any extra equipment for my ears to get the same effect, and this was much more musical. However, switching over to Slee Voyager (also under test this month) through my open back Sennheiser HP650s, the soundstage widened enormously and the cymbal rim shots had a completely new lease of life. The bass was still there, just cleaner, quicker, painless. In the normal world, when you set up your subwoofer, it should be just loud enough not to be individually noticed. Low bass in the £60 and £70 (for white or black, respectively) GOJIs were noticeably loud at low frequencies, and hence worked better on popular music or watching an action movie, rather than classical music, where the positions of instruments was less easy to define as were they on my much more expensive cans. However, the dynamic range, particularly in the lower end, was magnificent.

It goes against all 25 years of my BBC sound engineer background. But this product is actually pretty amazing for the price.

I don’t normally speak so fervently about products like this. It goes against all 25 years of my BBC sound engineer background. But this product is actually pretty amazing for the price. Having it only available to the DSG empire (the largest electrical retailer in the UK) also based in Hemel Hempstead), keeps that price down. Whilst I won’t want to listen like this for too many hours, it’s a bit like coming away from the dentist after fillings. You just so want to tuck in to sweets, but know you just daren’t do it.

Janine Elliot

Sound Quality – 7.3/10

Value for Money – 9/10

Build Quality – 8.5/10

Overall – 8.3/10

Lehmann Traveller Headphone Amp

Tame teen Harry Smith and somewhat more elderly Stuart take a listen to the £400 Lehmann Audio Traveller Headphone Amplifier as part of Hifi Pig's « Headphone Month »

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Let's say you have bought yourself a new music player and a nice pair of headphones for on the go but you feel there is something... missing. Most people overlook the need for an amp on the go as most are impractical and oversized. With the Lehmann Audio Traveller, the size and practicality are a huge improvement from other "portable" amps. The Traveller can also be used as a preamp for speakers but I just tried it with a media player and a range of earphones and headphones.

The build quality is great and there are only 2 screws showing on the back. It feels solid and I love the brushed metal chassis that obviously helps with cooling. The front is made out of black soft touch plastic. It's a nice contrast from the cold metal (the metal did get warm after a few hours of use but it never got hot) The amp has 2 inputs and 2 outputs though 3,5mm headphone jack. In the box, you also get a very nice cable to connect to your media player.

Battery life is not a problem with the Traveller and it will last around 20 hours of audio playback.

The Traveller uses lithium ion batteries (the same that you would find in your smart-phone) and it will probably outlive your phone on battery life. If you do run out of battery you can use the micro USB port to charge it.

The mids had a great richness and the highs where bright and crisp. The whole sound stage was improved thanks to the Traveller.

When you use it for the first time you can hear an instant difference with all headphones.

It performed very well even with power hungry headphones. I think it performed best with my own pair of NAD Viso hp 50s. The bass was deep and responsive. The mids had a great richness and the highs where bright and crisp. The whole sound stage was improved thanks to the Traveller.

This amp can also help you hide the fact that you are using a cheap music player. I put a £100+ music player against a HTC Desire phone, playing the same audio file and playing though the amp. I couldn't hear any noticeable difference ... However when I removed the Traveller from the equation the smart-phone fell far behind the sound quality of the music player.

The stand out track using the Traveller was "Can't stop" by the Red hot chilly peppers. The iconic guitar rhythm of this song sounded much less monotone than without Traveller. The bass line was not over-powered either. I could hear every instrument. Just as

the artist intended.

It performed best with rock songs but that is not to say that it did not perform admirably with most other genres of music.

With very bass heavy tracks it can fall behind what I am used to but I do love a lot of bass and I don't think this will bother most audiophiles.

So is the Lehmann Audio Traveller worth the £400 price tag? If you are looking to upgrade your headphone set up and also want an amp so versatile it is a good price. A bit on the expensive side for a teen though. Despite this the Lehmann Traveller amplifier is a must buy for your portable Hi-Fi as it brings the expensive sound of a full size Hi-Fi to you on the go.

Harry Smith

Sound quality-8/10

Build quality-9/10

Value for money-7/10

Overall-8/10



And now the decidedly not a teen Stuart will take a listen....

As the name suggests the Lehmann Audio Traveller is a headphone amplifier intended for use whilst out and about. I first came across this amp in its prototype version at the 2013 Munich High-End show where details were scant, but interest from the public and competitors to Lehmann High. Now available the Traveller costs £400 and available widely.

I like the idea of great quality audio on the go and always have my little player with me when away on business, but despite the decent output of the player I

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often feel I'm missing out a little – enter the portable headphone amplifier.

In the box you've got the diminutive (80mm x 90mm x 25mm and 196g) but very nicely finished Traveller itself, a very well written operating manual, a USB cable for connecting to the computer and charging the Traveller and a short, well made minijack to minijack cable to connect your player to the box. The Traveller feels sturdy and decidedly solid and purposeful.

Around the back you've got an input for the USB cable, a mini jack input and a mini jack output. Up front you've got another minijack input and output, a trio of LEDs which indicate the status of the amp/battery and a pair of little buttons to turn the volume up and down and control other functions such as balance which I thought was a nice and thoughtful touch.

The inclusion of inputs and outputs on both the front and back is a nifty little touch and one that shows that there's a good deal of thought gone into the Traveller. This feature means you can use whichever is the most convenient or use the amp to power two pairs of headphones from one portable player which is another useful touch. For those using active speakers you can put the Traveller between your source and the speakers and it will work as a preamplifier.

Using the Traveller is pretty intuitive and the controls are responsive. The Traveller has a battery run time of a claimed 20 hours (volume dependent) and charges from empty in six hours. Another clever little feature is that the volume will return to its last setting when tuned off and on again, with the caveat that there must be charge in the battery.

Again, there's that driving percussiveness, but listen more closely and the Traveller seems to be allowing you to delve deeper into the mix with little details you didn't notice before coming to the fore.

The Sound

I listened to the Traveller using a wide range of headphones we have in for review, both in-ears and conventional headphones, and it drove every pair I threw at it to volumes suitable for those with a deaf wish. Most of the review process was done using the Audioze LCD XC cans.

Immediately on plugging the little headphone amp in there is a perceived improvement in the sound than with the standalone player; Bass has a more authoritative punch with basslines seeming much easier to follow. There is a clearer definition between individual instruments in the mix, with an apparent increase in the amount of detail present. Clearly the amplifier can only amplify the signal with which it is fed, but you do get the feeling that there is more going on in the mix with the Traveller inline.

This is a very good start and I found myself flicking through loads of tracks and many different genres.



Hawkwind's Astounding Sounds has the mix split into its component pieces with everything being easy to pick out and identify. This is a complex record in parts that can sound very busy and sometimes comes across as a blurred jumble, but the Traveller seems to improve separation of instruments. This effect is apparent most in the interplay between bass guitar and drums giving the music drive and rhythm.

Comeme's compilation album Gasoline is a hard hitting, electronic album which needs to be driven to get the very best from it and with the Traveller inline you certainly get that feeling that you are listening as it should be heard. Again, there's that driving percussiveness, but listen more closely and the Traveller seems to be allowing you to delve deeper into the mix with little details you didn't notice before coming to the fore.



Reading what I've just written back to myself you'd be forgiven for thinking that the Traveller just emphasises the bass frequencies, but that's certainly not the case with all the little nuances on the hats on Nebel Dance from the same compilation coming through really well. On female vocals the Traveller just seems to give you more of an insight into the singers particular inflections and tone.

At this point I thought I'd try out the Traveller using the headphone out on the laptop and again I was re-

One of the features I particularly loved was the ability to attach two pairs of cans

warded with a big improvement in perceived drive and quality of the sound and I think this will be of interest to many business travellers who don't particularly want to invest in a potentially expensive media player but always have their laptop to hand. I'd be quite happy with this arrangement and would be happy to leave the DAP at home.

Conclusion

The Traveller is impressively well built and solid feeling with a good set of features that should appeal to both headphone aficionados on the go and for less dedicated listeners who none the less want a great sound whilst away from their main source of music. One of the features I particularly loved was the ability to attach two pairs of cans at once and also the unit returning to the last volume you had it set at after turning it off and on again. Its compact size and flexible inputs/outputs make it a perfectly portable and usable product.

Sound-wise the Traveller performs very well and is a clear step up from some of the less expensive portable headphone amps I've tried, with an ability to give the perception of there being much more going on in the music. The Traveller's strong points are the drive it gives to music and the detail of a recording it manages to bring out.

Stuart Smith

Sound Quality – 8.8/10

Value for Money – 8/10

Build Quality – 9/10

WIN the LEHMANN TRAVELLER and other headfi goodies in next month's Hifi Pig Magazine.

Epiphany Acoustics EHP-02Di Headphone Amplifier & USB DAC

Dan Worth continues « Headphone Month » at Hifi Pig with the a review of the £179.99

Epiphany Acoustics EHP-02Di Headphone Amplifier & USB DAC

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



So, a little while back now I got myself an Epiphany EHP-02 portable headphone amplifier. The unit was very handy being of a portable design with it's built in rechargeable battery which lasted across many days of decent length listening sessions. I subsequently recommended the

unit to a few friends who still cherish them to this day.

A month ago during the build up to this months Headfi Special at Hifi Pig, Epiphany contacted us to let us know about their latest model of headphone amplifier with built in Dac the EHP-02Di. So natu-

rally after enjoying the standalone portable amp I was happy to have a look at the 02Di.

Epiphany Acoustics have not just had a eureka moment deciding to add a DAC to their already award winning headamp, they have in fact as many will be aware already have a DAC/amp in the product line up namely the EPH-02D. User feedback to Epiphany was extremely positive in the performance stakes but many people found as I did with the portable device that having the power input jack socket on the front of the unit was an eyesore and also a little uneasy in use, most of us have our power sockets trailing off of the rear of a unit or desk.

Epiphany has addressed this issue by moving the socket to the rear now. Another user friendly want/upgrade to the existing 02D is a pair of stereo phono jacks on the rear. What's clever about these sockets is they act as an input for an analogue signal to the headphone amplifier or when the USB DAC is utilised from a computer (which is plug n play and doesn't require drivers) automatically switches to an output to any normal system as a usable standalone DAC with integrated headphone amplifier. The two devices can be used simultaneously.

Power to the DAC is via the USB host computer and filtered on board. The data is controlled by the on-board crystal oscillator to improve performance. The DAC is based on the TE7022L UAC1 engine and ES9023 24 bit DAC chip. It supports 16 bit and 24 bit at sample rates of 44.1kHz, 48kHz and 96kHz.



Vocals were extremely pleasing sitting a little bit forward of flat, allowing them to be projected and vibrant in nature.

The Setup and Sound

After leaving the EHP-02Di on 24 hours a day for week through my AKG K702's fed via USB from the DAC to ensure good burn in time as I was fairly busy so wanted to make sure it had some good hours on it I was ready to rock and roll.

As well as having the AKG's running from the dac/amp I also made use of the analogue outputs running a set of Harman Karson Soundsticks which sat on the desk. This would give me an idea of the DAC's performance against the analogue connection straight from the Mac to the Soundsticks.

As a Headphone Amp

First impressions were very nice top end detail, vibrant mids and a good bouncy bass when listening to Spotify's Top 100 list which consists very extensively of the world top pop music. A good mixture of dance, rock and vocal work adorned the list and was a great way to see how the EHP-02Di would fair without being overly specific.

Vocals were extremely pleasing sitting a little bit forward of flat, allowing them to be projected and vibrant in nature. The top end is very neatly handled, remaining controlled with wailing females and intricate when listening to synthesised dance music. The treble doesn't slope severely, cutting off high frequency extremes, they do seem to keep going on and on. As far as bass is concerned I would say its a bit bouncy, a little tight and fast. The lower end could be said to have a more neutral tonality, it's not dry or weighty nor is it coloured. The cleanliness in this

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area depicts details well and those of you out there who are not bass heads will appreciate the extra detail here.

Flicking over from Spotify to Amarra increased performance and rendition of a higher quality bit depth and better recording.

The EHP-02Di shows better delicacies in the mix when fed with quality recordings, midband presentation is a little more fluid with better undertones. Top end is a tiny bit more refined and bass remains clean and explicit.

The EHP-02Di shows better delicacies in the mix when fed with quality recordings, midband presentation is a little more fluid with better undertones. Top end is a tiny bit more refined and bass remains clean and explicit.

Singling out the DAC

I use the Harman Kardons very often when sat at the desk, whether it's to use them for music, tV or Film. They are normally plugged into the headphone output of the Mac Mini. The wonderfully versatile feature of added RCA's on the 02Di allowed for me – the user to be able to have the Soundsticks always plugged in to what was originally just a headphone amp/dac in the first incarnation of the product the EHP-02D.

Improvements were decisively apparent and immediately noticeable. The Mac itself is fairly modded, has the fan removed, runs three linear power supplies, is solid state and has OS tweaks. These improvements made a difference at the time to the Soundsticks (and the main system) but utilising the dac from the Epiphany was a larger step up in performance.

I've had many high end active and passive speakers in the alcove where the desk is but the Soundsticks are of a size that just compliments the space so well.



The EHP-02Di didn't change the presentation totally, it does seem to be extremely neutral, what it does offer tho is a far better detail retrieval, a stronger presence of bass characterisation and a vocal which stands out and doesn't get so lost in the mix.

The headphone amplifier itself can be as mentioned ran from the RCA sockets on the rear. Using the device in this manner is just like using the standalone portable EHP-02 which Hifi Pig has already reviewed if you wish to check it out.

Conclusion

With a compact and attractive design the Epiphany Acoustics EHP-02Di is a terrific desktop unit which can be implemented as the main hub for a computer. Whether it's music, games or films through a set of powered speakers or a set of headphones for the same for more intimate listening the EHP-02Di won't fail to impress.

Dan Worth

Build Quality – 7.5/10

Sound Quality – 8/10

Value For Money – 8.5/10

Overall – 8/10

Price at time of review – £179.99

Recommended for – it's ability to run headphones and speakers simultaneously and having a terrific sound to pound performance which is neutral, detailed and involving.

Graham Slee Voyager Headphone Amplifier

Headphones are of course used whilst on the move and so Janine Elliot takes a listen to the £190 Graham Slee Voyager headphone amplifier.



Headphones are of course used whilst on the move and so Janine Elliot takes a listen to the £190 Graham Slee Voyager headphone amplifier.

Graham Slee is renowned for putting big ideas in small packages. His large collection of low-to-mid priced phono stages and headphone amplifiers began

in 1998 and has received rave reviews in Europe and the States. Graham is always keen to advertise his products as 'Made in Britain', and his ability to get the best from the components he uses is truly inspiring. As a happy owner of the Solo headphone amp, I hoped that his battery operated Voyager would also

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offer an equally precise and extended audio-stage into my choice of cans.

There are, of course, a wide range of Walwart-fed headphone amplifiers around, largely introduced to extend the feeble output levels of the iPod fraternity, particularly when paired with inefficient high impedance 300ohm professional headphones such as Sennheiser HD650's. I regularly used these cans as a reference point in my last years at the BBC, but when connected to my iPod these needed to be fed at full volume to get anything approaching a nominal level of sound. By adding an extra 'oomph' via an external amplifier a reasonable 320kbps of mp3 could actually sound quite musical. But, I kept asking myself, what is the point in playing compressed audio in the home? Much as I loved my Solo, it was only ever used in the house when I was too lazy to present its parent compact disk into my main Krell CD player. No, what I needed was a portable unit I could carry around with me when I wasn't in the confines of my sofa.

In the last few years numerous portable battery operated headphone amps have appeared as we get on with our busy lives. We need our music in the streets, on the bus, train or tube, and as a teacher am often finding it playing merrily away during lessons in my students ears, until of course I confiscate it. To get that greater sound output for inefficient cans, more and more companies such as FiiO are coming out with really good looking kits and supplying proprietary Apple 30 pin – to – 3.5mm connectors which allow you to mitigate the degrading EQ section of the amplifiers via the headphone socket.



The Graham Slee Voyager is another addition to the family of portable headphone amps. What makes this unit different from many is the use of discrete com-

It was solid but not forceful, precise but not clinical.

ponents hand soldered by, as Slee puts it; “time served engineers” from premium through-hole Nichicon capacitors, to the two highly reputable op-amps from Analog Devices. Unlike most headphone amps gracing the pages of Amazon, this product oozes quality when viewed from the inside; high quality Jalco 3.5mm jacks for input and headphone output, Alps switches, and a miniature Alps “velvet” potentiometer similar to the Alps AC27/30 that is often found on expensive amplifiers, complete the work. Even a little red LED warns you when the Voyager is switched on during the conservative 50 hours battery life. As well as on/off switch there is provision for the unit to be powered by USB or mains. A contour switch (more on that later) completes the mechanics.

Quality also exudes in the audio. A velvety, almost valve-like quality of sound immediately becomes apparent, and improves the longer I listen. All tops and bottoms are there; the Sennheiser demonstrates just how good its bass end is when listening to Mars, The Planets, Karajan (Decca 417 709-2). It's not so much the double bass or kettle drums, but more the sounds of the lorries driving past the cellos outside of the Sofiensaal concert hall in Vienna, before it got burnt down in 2001. I could sense the windows, brick walls and the raised wooden flooring. Even where the microphones were placed, and when the conductor turned the page.

Top ends are very precise and not tiresome with extended listening. Indeed, that is what makes this unit

so much better than many I have listened to. Only the tight headband of the HP650 forced me to change to my comfortable closed-back Audio-Technica ATH-W1000 Sovereign's. The latter are unusually mid-band heavy, but the Voyager didn't make this painful at all. Indeed, the midband opened up with a clarity I had not heard from the iPod alone. This was getting fun. To check this further I played The Dave Brubeck Quartet at Carnegie Hall recording, a recording fully of mid frequency weightiness. Even the close-mic'd cymbals sounded pleasant and not out of place. Of course, I could turn on the contour switch which adds further bass and treble weight (just like those 'Loudness' controls in ancient hi-fi amplifiers), but I didn't want my £600 cans to sound like Beats by Dr Dre. That said, it wasn't at all bad when I had a go; ideal for low level listening, or when competing with traffic noise, or making a crass recording or bad headphone sound more exciting. This unit did it with aplomb and without the added distortion that a loudness control can often bring. The soundstage was powerful and it wasn't chaotic despite all that was going on in 'Repentance' (Dream Theatre; 'Systematic Chaos'). The distorted bass guitar and syncopated rhythm sounded quite natural as had the 11/4 and 5/4 time in Brubeck earlier. This was quite some kit.



It was solid but not forceful, precise but not clinical. I mentioned earlier about the exuding quality inside the box. Unfortunately that is where it ends. The outside lets it down a tad, giving it the impression of being more of a Maplin kit; made of plastic and at 12.5 x 6.7 x 2.8 cm, whilst it matches an iPod girth it is quite deep in order to house the 9v PP3 battery, and even deeper when you sit the iPod on the top. However, an off-the-shelf box is inevitable in a

...this product certainly warrants my take on the famous statement “Never mind the width, feel the quality”.

budget non mass-produced product such as this, and the unit is actually very well constructed and protects the circuitry inside. A specifically designed case including a thinner lithium-ion battery would increase the cost substantially. A metal stamp on one side labelled with all the connections and company logo do give it a professional feel. It's ironic that the Slee Solo headphone amp in its metal box is so revered in China, yet the bucket loads of Chinese-made portable headphone amps deluging Amazon at lower cost look so much better than the Voyager. BUT, and I stress but, they do not sound anything as musical or inspiring. Yes, there are better portable headphone amps around, but at £190 you get more than your money's worth with the Voyager, and if you're happy to put up with its distinctive looks, then this product certainly warrants my take on the famous statement “Never mind the width, feel the quality”.

Janine Elliot

Sound Quality – 8.7/10

Value for Money – 8.2/10

Build Quality – 8/10

Overall – 8.4/10

Janine Elliot's review of the AudioValve Verto and RKV Mk 3 headphone amplifiers costing £690 and £3262 respectively.

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



I was rather surprised when the Verto squeezed through the front door, particularly as this product itself is only the size of a very large wallwart power supply. Luckily, my surprise turned to excitement when I dived down to the bottom of the massive box between the foam to find the RKV Mk3, a heavy eight-valve headphone amplifier behemoth accompanying this unit. During my few weeks with these products I had many more surprises, lots of excitement, and a lot of questions to ask.

The Verto is a small black 110 x 105 x 165mm box with two Neutrik 6.3mm & XLR Combi sockets for XLR or dynamic and planar headphones, a three position silver knob to select the correct impedance, and a permanent short lead ending in a 6.3mm jack which is then connected to one of the two headphone sockets of the RKV (or to the headphone socket of your integrated amp). That is all quite normal. As well as a pair of loudspeaker connections what is slightly unusual is the Teflon 6-pin socket to power 300V and 580v 6 pin and 5 pin Stax electrostatic ear

speakers. As a passive unit, and costing a reasonable £690, this unit uses transformers in step up mode with an array of capacitors to store up enough power to drive the electrostatics. Because the input wattage is very low (around 400mW) this can take several minutes. This technique is nothing new. Passive energisers like the Verto have been around before. Indeed, I remember with affection the late 1970's PWB electrostatic headphones that took their power from the speaker terminals of your power amplifier. That was Peter Belt at his very best, before he and his wife got into somewhat questionable audio tweaks like sound-changing furniture polish and silver paper.

The Verto was originally designed for the RKV mark 1 and 2. Those two models only have the unique OTL output (Output Transformerless), a bit like my old EarMax headphones, so the switch for 8 and 32 ohm headphones on the Verto was quite useful. The RKV iii has provision for a wide range of low impedance cans as well, which therefore means a bit of duplication of features if both are used together. Since the Verto can be switched to 8 ohm you can connect loudspeakers to those speaker terminals, though with the Mark 3 RKV, with its own speaker outputs, there was no point in using this facility.

Whilst the VKR was a beautiful looking product the Verto was in comparison a Friday afternoon job, being made of two halves joined together, and those joins were easily evident and spoilt my first impression of product build (see photo). The first two clicks on the silver knob on the front select 8 and 32 ohm impedance for the conventional headphones with the third position, OTL, for a Stax ear speaker. Unfortunately my Verto wasn't going to play music for me. The 6.3mm jacks only worked on the left leg and whilst I sat waiting endlessly for the LED on the front of the box to light up to tell me there was enough voltage to work the Stax, it was never going

You could sense the importance of showing the machinery that made it all 'work', and in this case included 8 valves towering from a bright red PCB, the terrain for a city of individually soldered components.

to shine. It reminded me of university days looking endlessly at my knickers revolving at 200mph in the campus washing machines. I really needed to connect a DAC with enough oomph to get this thing playing games, I mean music. I then connected the speaker jacks in reverse mode to my 250W Krell leviathan to see if that would drive the Stax but after 10 minutes there was no light and all I got was a very low level and no bass. Selecting conventional headphones did give me both legs working this time, but there was some hum, suggesting earthing damage on its trip across the English Channel. My role was as a reviewer, and not as fault finder, so I continued my review looking at the RKV mk3 as a conventional headphone amplifier. Such a shame, as I know this unit can sound so good.

AudioValve, not to be confused with Valve Audio, is a small German brand who has been making some quite iconic and mid-priced valve based audio since 1982. Like many an audio CEO, boss Helmut Becker was a musician, himself a guitarist and music enthusiast who began building amplifiers 40 years ago when he was 15. Indeed, his father was the owner of a small electronics business, and even as a 12 year old, Becker would often be seen tinkering with tube televisions in his father's shop; taking them apart and getting to grips with the way they worked. Interest-



Reviews

ingly, his career has not just been devoted to audio, as it has also included numerous medical patents, including to fundamentally revolutionising analysis techniques for the detection of blood coagulation



times.

Taking my first look at the RKV mark 3 was certain to increase my own blood pressure. The model in this test was the third incarnation of the RKV, the original dating back to 1982. Just like the predecessors this larger 10kg 400 x 340 x 150mm monster was a sea of blackened steel and plastic (also available in silver or limited ivory editions), with large front and top Plexiglass windows that proudly revealed everything inside. You could sense the importance of showing the machinery that made it all ‘work’, and in this case included 8 valves towering from a bright red PCB, the terrain for a city of individually soldered components. It looked magnificent and needed to be seen! The components were all top class with a Pikatron transformer, OPA134 op amps, and a fully automatic biasing servo controller circuitry, which he has in all his amplifiers to regulate the valves. And the valves themselves, number PCL805, he designed himself. The previous incarnation had four of them.



Having listened to and owned a sizeable collection of headphone amplifiers, the £3262 RKV is one of the most expensive. The instruction manual was very detailed, though the German to English translation was amusing in places; particularly the way it went from highly proficient and poetic nuances to phrases usually seen in the Chinese to English translations of cheap Amazon purchases. Apparently “the care tensions are won from a strong, free of litter, Torodial-transformator”. Whether you are a big or small company the instruction manual is a core part of the package, and as such, detail should go into this vital component.

The top acrylic plate is machined with an array of ventilation slots for the tubes. The rest of the chassis is crafted from laser-milled stainless steel, rather than aluminium, as Becker says it ‘sounds’ better. The large red PCB and components are of the highest quality and hand soldered liberally and sensibly, and with affection.

On the front panel there are two combi headphone sockets, just as on the Verto, and below these is the Mode switch. This switch selects either high-impedance headphones (> 100 Ohms), or in the second position allows you to select from five low impedance (8, 16, 32, 64, 128 ohm) settings in the next knob. Why a single 6-position knob wasn’t used, I didn’t get a chance to ask.

With the last of the three rotary switches, you could select the source you want to listen to. The manual suggests that there were 45 RCA inputs at your disposal, but my limited algebraic knowledge brought that figure down to 5, or maybe 7. Let me explain; there are 5 RCA sockets (the fifth being a very simple, but useable “old school design” MM phono-stage input), and inputs 1 and 2 were paralleled with two XLR balanced inputs. There is a pair of speaker terminals, should you wish to drive the respectable 5.8W output into efficient drivers, though for my 4 ohm B&W 804s the output level was insufficient to drive them. Indeed, the sound quality was nothing to write home about. Completing the socketry is a pair of male XLR sockets to connect to a power amplifier. This piece of equipment was festooned with possibilities, and could easily be placed at the centre of a respectable hi-fi set up. Perhaps Mr Becker was trying to do too much in the reasonably priced £3262 presentation.

So to the tests. I wanted to ensure that, despite the imposition of Verto testing, this product was given

an opportunity to shine. Not only did I listen to CD and vinyl sources, but I also included mp3 and FLAC.

One of the drawbacks of listening on headphones is that because of the closeness of the source to our ears we only hear an exaggerated sound stage, because none of what is in the left gets to the right, and vice versa, unlike with our ears when we are listening to live sources or loudspeakers. Angled ear speakers, such as Stax Lambda electrostatics, go part the way into making the experience less stressful, but this AudioValve unit has the provision to allow some of each channel's information to reach the other channel, and which can narrow the soundstage, making it more realistic and, in their words, "less mental stress". However, unlike those wonderful ambisonic recordings I listened to back in the 1970's, there is no time delay, as there would be in reality. Indeed, it caused me a bit of mental stress trying to work out where exactly this facility was on the AudioValve. Again, an unclear instruction manual.

Now, you might be starting to think that all I do is criticise. I'd like to think that actually I just make sensible observations, and, once I started to listen to the sound, I wasn't that bothered about my qualms anymore. Once I was constrained between the earpads of my Sennheiser's, Audio-Technica's and Grado's, all I wanted to do was experience more and more of my vast archive of music. I found that with impedance adjustment my Audio-Technica's sounded better than I had managed on any other headphone amp, though the Sennheiser HD650 was a bit too bass heavy. I listened to my Holst Planet Suite, Karajan (Decca 417 709-2), just as I had with the £190 Graham Slee Voyager test. There was much more weight in this offering, and the sound was more forward. It was more far more authoritative, largely due to the larger available output stage, and I had to be careful to set the impedance correctly and not turn the volume up too much. I felt at times the enormous powerhouse led to a little confusion in some of the music, compared to other amplifiers, and especially electrostatics. For that reason I then turned to a composer 8 hours away across the pond and a work composed 15 years later, Ferde Grofe and his Grand Canyon Suite (Naxos 8.559007). Both are programmatic works; this one is about donkeys wandering across the Arizona desert. It is a powerfully creative drama, something I fell in love with at the age of 10, when my imagination could whisk me across the Atlantic in an instant. This CD would be a great exam-

The instruments all came to life; the woodwinds sounding like birds and the trumpets like crickets.

ple to test the depth and power of soundstage and separation of instruments, particularly with a varied collection of distant brass instruments, glockenspiel, celesta, coconuts, wind machine and thunder maker. The instruments all came to life; the woodwinds sounding like birds and the trumpets like crickets. This was as real as it could get. There was richness in all the harmony, and at times it could sound a tad carried away in this powerful recording. The third movement has a lovely solo violin part, which, particularly through HD650's, seemed to wander from left to right depending on whether there were low or high notes. Maybe it was a windy day in Arizona. The intense instrumentation in the fifth movement during the storm scene was, for most of the time, only a storm in a tea cup for this player.

I then turned to an equally complex hotchpotch, Martyn Bennett's Grit, though this 'busy' album was a handled a lot more panache than in many headphone amplifiers. Pat Metheny Group The Way Up was as sweet as treacle; perfectly executed, with warm but musically precise cymbals, and again everything is up front, a very full sound, but just so right. Tube hiss was virtually non-existent (100dB S/N ratio) and, with a bandwidth from 10 – 150,000Hz, no instrument would be spared. This was more than fun, and took listening on headphones to a completely new level. This was no side salad; this was thick stew and dumplings. It was able, as its creator suggested, to render unparalleled "harmonic richness". This machine was no slouch. It had the energy of the Scottish Independence YES voters. This was more than just an acoustic statement, more than just a headphone amplifier, and it was beautiful, too. My only worry was that it was perhaps though trying too hard to be everything to everyone.

Janine Elliot

Sound quality 8.55/10

Value for money 8.4/10

Build and design quality (RKViii) 8.5/10

Overall 8.5

Tisbury Audio CA-1 Reference Headphone Amplifier

Stuart and Harry Smith's thoughts on the little Tisbury CA-1 Headphone Amplifier that is made in the UK and costs £349



Tisbury Audio are a small company based in the UK that currently makes just two products, the Mini Passive Preamplifier that we took a listen to and enjoyed a few months ago and the product on test here, the CA-1 Headphone Amplifier. On the Tisbury Audio website the company make a point of stressing that the majority of the parts that make up the CA-1 are sourced from British manufacturers. The price of the unit is £349 including free international shipping and a three year warranty which all seems to be very reasonable indeed.

Out of the box the first thing that strikes you is how light the CA-1 is and this is in no small way down to

the fact that a wallwart power supply is used. The second thing you notice is that it's actually quite an attractive beast with its solid American black walnut side cheeks and bottom "plate" which compliment the 3mm aluminium enclosure pretty nicely. OK, this isn't going to win any international awards for its aesthetics but it's simple, functional and good looking. Size-wise the CA-1 is 204 x 170 x 74 mm so it's pretty compact and bijou.

Round the back you get a couple of good quality RCAs for inputting your source, in this case our reference Valve Audio Devices DAC 10 fed via USB from a dedicated laptop running JPlayer and JRiver

and playing FLAC files, there's an on off toggle switch and the socket for the power supply to plug into. Flip it round to have a look at the front panel and this too keeps things to a functional minimum. There's a proper quarter inch jack Neutrik socket, an Alps Blue Velvet pot, a toggle switch for the high and low gain output modes (6 dB (2x) and 16 dB (6.3x) gain) and an LED to show you it's plugged in and functioning. Build quality looks to be simple and of a good quality. The CA-1 has a nifty little muting circuit onboard which essentially disconnects your precious headphones if the AC power supply is interrupted or switched off.

For the purposes of this review the main cans used were the 20 Ohms [Audeze LCD-XC](#) headphones we have in for review and have listened to extensively but we'll also be trying it out with some other cans.

Sound

Tisbury claim the noise floor is very low with the CA-1 and it is, there's no distinguishable noise whatsoever as far as I can tell on the low output or high output at normal listening levels and with no music playing you have to turn the volume pot all the way to the top to get any noise at all. With regards volume it goes plenty loud enough with the Audeze' and I wouldn't think anyone but the most hard of hearing, or those with a deaf wish would need to crank this up to anywhere near the max –Tisbury give a figure of 3.4V and 725mW at 16ohms and 8.3V/115mW at 600ohms. With the more demanding HifiMan HE 560s you need to crank the volume pot a bit but again all is well and likewise with the Sennheiser HE 800s and their IE 800s.



Immediately on plugging in the 'phones and putting on the tunes it's pretty clear that this is a good sounding little box with good transparency that allows you

Immediately on plugging in the 'phones and putting on the tunes it's pretty clear that this is a good sounding little box with good transparency that allows you to get on with listening to the tunes

to get on with listening to the tunes. Eels' Novacaine For The Soul shows there to be a really nice sleek sound in the upper frequencies and vocals. The strings are lush, full and luxuriant. In the lower end there's bass there but I'm not sure it has the required heft to it that I enjoy with this kind of tune. Likewise on the Body Count track Bowels Of The Devil I just feel there's something missing, as if the amp is being a little on the polite side.

However, popping on the wonderful Kathryn Williams' Crown Electric album you are rewarded with absolutely gorgeous vocals and a great lush feel to the strings (again) that defies the moderate asking price of this little unit. I'm reminded here of my old 300B PSE amp (no bad thing) and it comes as a bit of a surprise as it's clear that what we have here with the CA-1 is a refined and sophisticated sound that will immediately appeal to those that listen to "audiophile" type music or enjoy a more well-mannered sound.

Reviewing kit can be a soul destroying pass-time at times as you need to concentrate and listen in a critical way, but with the little CA-1 I genuinely found myself just listening to Williams' record the whole way through and loving every minute. Bass isn't the deepest I've heard but it's ok for this kind of music.

Reviews

Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson's *Winter In America* is one of my go to records to get an idea of what's happening with relation to getting a feel for the recording space and with the CA-1 in place it's a pretty good effort. Not as good as the best I've heard, or as good as my own reference, but very acceptable for the asking price. The soundstage is not as wide as I would have liked but again, at this price it's very acceptable. Vocals appear to be slightly pushed to the fore but the tops are smooth and slightly rounded out.

For those looking for a relaxed but accurate presentation without bells and whistles then this is a very good choice for the money.

Chie Ayado's version of the Beatles *Don't Let Me Down* from her *Good Life* record again plays to the strengths of the little Tisbury unit. The piano is natural sounding and there is a good insight into the performer's very distinctive voice. And this is what I mean about this unit appealing to those that like to listen to audiophile music; push it too far with music that demands a more dynamic sound and it loses out to the competition a little – here I'm thinking of the likes of Deep Purple's *Made In Japan* version of *Smoke On The Water* which although sounding OK didn't inspire me and get me rocking as it should.

Conclusion

The Tisbury CA-1 is a fine sounding little headphone amplifier that does have some limitations when presented with rock and more complex bass heavy music. Some will enjoy this some won't.

For those looking for a relaxed but accurate presentation without bells and whistles then this is a very good choice for the money.

Jazz fans will love it and with female vocals it's a lovely little unit with an audiophile sound that will surely appeal to a good number of people.

It drove all the headphones I used with it admirably and with good control over most of the frequency range and does have a slight valve feel to it- think 300B midrange.

Overall the Tisbury is a unit that deserves to do well and given its price point I'm sure it will.

Stuart Smith

Build Quality – 8/10

Sound Quality – 8/10

Value For Money – 8.5/10

Overall – 8.17/10

Price at time of review – £349

Recommended for those looking for a smooth, audiophile sounding headphone amplifier that gets on with the job at a good price.



And now it's over to our tame teenager in residence Harry to give his perspective on the Tisbury CA-1

Tisbury Audio is a relatively new company that only makes 2 products at the moment (the CA-1 and a passive preamplifier).

I was given the Headphone Amp, the Challenge Amp 1 to review that retails for just under £350. For my review I used it with a Schiit Modi DAC and various pairs of headphones.

The amp looks great and stands out from the crowd with its bold design.

Most importantly this amp is handmade in the UK. It's great to see that Made in England stamp on a relatively low priced product.

The brushed metal chassis is enclosed with wood which gives it a “retro” look. It is very tactile with the contrasting use of materials. It's also not too “in your face” and can sit proudly on any desk or Hi-Fi rack.

Most importantly this amp is handmade in the UK. It's great to see that Made in England stamp on a relatively low priced product.

The layout is very simple: one knob to increase or decrease the volume, a switch to change between high and low gain and an ON/OFF switch on the back. Couldn't be more simple!

Not only is the design fantastic, the build quality is also exceptional. It feels solid but also surprisingly lightweight (thanks to the external power supply.) To be fair this is the level of build quality that I expect from a Made in England product, though sadly this is not always the case.

To test the sound I tried to listen to as many music genres as I could (dance music, folk, rock, jazz, dub-step, and hip hop.) Obviously avoiding classical music (which I can't listen to for more than 2 minutes...)

This amp is very “true to the music” and can easily show the flaws in a cheaper pair of headphones. Thankfully Tisbury offer a 30 day free trial so you have the time to find what sounds best with it before you actually buy it.

I personally thought it sounded best with my own pair of NAD viso hp50s which I also feel are very “true to the music”.

The sound is tailored towards strong female vocals and punchy guitar riffs. It also brought dance music beats to life.

However I thought the track that sounded the best with the CA-1 was ‘Loose yourself to dance’ by Daft punk, the signature Nile Rodgers guitar rhythm has never sounded so good. I could actually pinpoint where all the instruments were in my head which is very impressive.

The sound stage is very wide and provides plenty of bass. The mid and the top end are very bright and colourful. It brings a lot of life to the music and is versatile enough to be enjoyed by lovers of all kinds of music.

I didn't experience any background noise and no irritating buzz that you can find with a lot of amps.

There is no “pop!” when turning the amp on and off that I have found with other amps, both of which are great plus points in my view.

All round the looks and sound combine to an almost perfect headphone amp for the price (£349 is a lot of money but considering the quality that you are getting it is valid).

This amp is very “true to the music” and can easily show the flaws in a cheaper pair of headphones.

A definite recommendation for anyone wanting to enter the Head-Fi world, on a smaller budget.

Harry Smith

Sound- 9/10

Value- 8/10

Build quality- 10/10

Overall- 9/10

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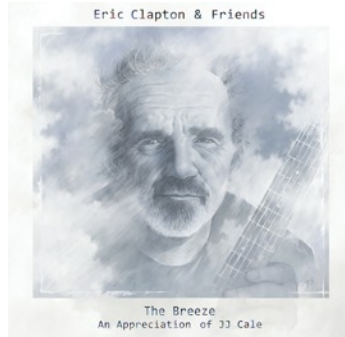
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ALL REVIEWS

Eric Clapton And Friends - Breeze, An Appreciation of JJ Cale

Bushbranch/Surfdog

American singer songwriter JJ Cale died in July 2013 and has been described as one of the most important figures in rock history. This record, released earlier this year, celebrates Cale's career and here is downloaded from HIGHRESAUDIO. It's a bit of who's who in laidback/bluesy rock with contributors including Tom Petty, Mark Knopfler, John Mayer, Willie Nelson, Don White and many more.



Musically it is true to the spirit of Cale's laidback style (and Clapton's for that matter) ...

The title track comes from Cale's 1972 track "Call Me The Breeze" (covered by many including Lynyrd Skynyrd) and is a great opener to the record's 16 tunes.

Musically it is true to the spirit of Cale's laidback style (and Clapton's for that matter) and whilst barely breaking a sweat it's none the worse for it. Clapton name checked Cale a good deal and it's clear there was a huge influence there which shines out on Breeze. Knopfler's vocal and unmistakable guitar style on Someday is a treat as is Willie Nelson's country tinged rendition of Songbird. Don White and Clapton's rendition of I'll Be There is country tinged blues perfection and Petty's is so cool it's practically frozen!

As you'd expect the production and musicianship on Breeze is exemplary and it's hard not to be drawn into the music's cool and relaxed stylings whether you are familiar with Cale's repertoire or not. If you're a fan of Cale or Clapton (or simply enjoy this kind of relaxed blues music) Breeze is a bit of a must have and I've been playing it to death since it arrived.

Hawkwind With Brian Blessed - Sonic Attack

Cherry Red

OK, I don't usually do reviews of singles but hey, Hawkwind are probably my favourite band of all time and I just couldn't resist telling you all about this absolutely fabulous collaboration of the kings of space rock and "kingly thesbian" Brian Blessed.



You may be subject to fits of hysterical shouting ...SHOUTING!!!! I SAID SHOUTING!!!!

Sonic Attack is a mainstay of the band's repertoire and certainly a favourite of mine. This version is out as a single on the 1st September, I've only heard the radio edit so far, and with any luck and a following wind it may even have a bit of an impact on the charts...we can but hope.

The Blessed/Hawkwind collaboration has all the usual sonic histrionics in the background which Hawkfans will recognise and Blessed's rendition of the Sonic Attack vocal is hammed up to the max...and is fab. Surely a must have if you're a fan and accessible enough (sort of) to have appeal to a new audience.

You may be subject to fits of hysterical shouting ...SHOUTING!!!! I SAID SHOUTING!!!!

Various Artists - Total 14

Kompakt

Regular readers will be well aware of my love of the Kompakt label and it's pretty rare that I don't absolutely love everything that gets released on the Berlin imprint.



Album Reviews

Here we have number 14 in the popular compilation series Total.

There's 25 tunes here over two CDs (also available on a double 12" album) and they range from the somewhat banging to the more atmospheric tunes which has been a staple of the series. There's a good selection of tunes from the last couple of years on Kompakt as well as a good selection of tunes exclusive to this compilation.

However, there's a lot more to this album than the individual tunes and artists that make it up.

Of course this is techno (in its broadest terms) but it's an instantly accessible record with some poppier moments.

The opening track Dauwd's Lydia sets the scene with a diving drum track and dreamy, ethereal synth lines over the top that take you higher and higher as the tune progresses. Coma's Atlantis hints at 80s synth pop whilst Gui Boratto featuring Coma and Hell's Take Control is everything I expected from Goldfrapp but never really got. And then there's Thomas Fehlmann's tune Eye that has a tribal feel to it which whilst been a little more leftfield than the previously mentioned tunes doesn't fail to please. Sebastien Bouchet's Broken Heart is a stomper of a tune made to loose it in the early hours of a dark club and then Partial Arts Taifa has echoes of early bleeps and bass tunes..or even Hardfloor.

However, there's a lot more to this album than the individual tunes and artists that make it up. There's a variety of different styles on Total 14, but they work together to bring a cohesiveness that just sounds great.

A record full of tunes equally at home on the dance-floor of one of Berlin's impossible to get in to uber-clubs as it is turned up loud and listened to at home. There's a chilled vibe to most of the tunes that ooze quality and as such this record is highly recommended! All thriller and then some floorfillers! Out now.

Various Artists - Gasoline Comeme

Gasoline, on the excellent Comeme is the labels very first compilation and by crikey it's a good one...very much my kind of music. For those that don't know Comeme it's a label that has been making all the right noises for me for a year or so now with its pared down, acidic-tribal-techno grooves.



This is body music at its very best and for lovers of pretty much any kind of dance music Gasoline is a must for their collection.

Gasoline brings together music from the inner circle of the Comeme collective and throws a few more guests into the mix for good measure. This means that as well as the likes of Christian S, Ana Helder, Alejandro Paz, Carisma and Djs Preja there's also Voxels from Portugal, Zombies in Miami from Mexico, Auntie Flo from Glasgow, Rous from Argentina, Vaskular from Chile and Bryan Kessler from Cologne.

This is body music at its very best and for lovers of pretty much any kind of dance music Gasoline is a must for their collection.

There's a dubby feel to Auntie Flo's Jas with its slow yet relentless groove and a rave siren on that sounds like its on ketamine, electro vibes from Christian S and Bryan Kessler's Nebel Dance, straight up four to the floor and pounding bass in the form of Ana Helder's Gasoline and then Vaskular's Black Jesus takes things down again (a little) with lush pads and strings... and yet still there's that kick, a slightly jazzy feel and repetitive sample that is reminiscent of acid house.

Djs Pareja and Alejandro Paz continue that acid feel with the relentless bassline and snappy percussive snares with the track Cogeme;;;and yet even here

there's a lead synth "bleep" thrown in to take your head in a different direction to your body.

Zombies in Miami's El Rito takes the BPMs down a tad but continues with the unremitting bass drum kick, weird noises and machine drum percussion, at times having a feel of Blue Monday...but only a bit, it's much weirder than that!

Rous's A Bailar reminds me of early Antler Subway (remember that label?) whilst Voxels' K-Hauz has a distinctive Latin feel to it.

Gasoline ends with a bit of a jack type track from Djs Pareja called Si Senor and it sums up the album really nicely... brooding, dark and mental.

I think these people may be on medication of some sort!!!

Les Baxter - Original Quiet Village éI/Cherry Red

él (via Cherry Red) are an interesting label that are putting out some pretty out there and unusual recordings.

One flick through the titles of the tracks on Les Baxter's Original Quiet Village album will give you a good indication that this is exotica as colourful as it comes; Shanghai Rickshaw, Deep Night and Gardens of the Moon are just random selection.

...he's widely regarded as the most innovative, enduring and influential artist associated with the exotica genre...

For the benefit of those that haven't heard Les Baxter's work before he's widely regarded as the most innovative, enduring and influential artist associated with the exotica genre and bridges the gap between the post-war exotica of the late 50s and early 60s and classical exoticism of the likes of Debussy and Ravel.



In his lifetime Baxter was frustrated that his music was confined to the B movie ghetto and not taken as seriously as it should have been by Hollywood.

In addition to the album Original Quiet Village this CD, out now, also contains the album The Primitive & The Passionate and selections from Exotique: The Music of Les Baxter.

Musically throughout this collection Baxter maintains the traditional orchestral ensemble but embellishes and builds upon this with percussion and saxophones with the occasional stab of electric organ, dulcimer, kazoo and even Theremin. In many ways it's hard not to associate the tunes herein with the music you'd hear on a Sunday afternoon black and white film because it's just the kind of music you would hear. This is not to suggest it doesn't have a place in your collection though because it's most certainly a departure from the mainstream. The song Simba conjures images of unknown lands with unknown peoples, dangers and pleasures. And this is pretty much the theme throughout this album. There are touches of afro-rhythms in places, Pacific Island choirs and altogether it's a really pleasant listen.

Bob James - H/Sign Of The Times Robin Songs

Bob James is regarded as one of the founding fathers of the smooth Jazz sound and has been heavily sampled in more recent years (NWA, Run DMC, Soul II Soul, Missy Elliot and many more). He began his professional music career at age 8 playing piano for a tap dance class but also plays trumpet, timpani and percussion.



His association with smooth jazz began in 1972 whilst working with Stanley Turpentine and Milt Jackson on the album Cherry and is closely associated with Grover Washington Jr and arranged several of Washington's albums. If you've not heard of James then you may well have heard his music as his tune Angela, from his breakthrough album Touchdown, was used as the theme (he also supplied incidental music) to the US sitcom Taxi which starred Danny Devito

Album Reviews

His first album as the “main man” was 1974s *One* but his most well known recording is one of the albums present on this two album CD on the Robin-songs label, *Sign Of The Times* from 1981. The other album herein is 1980’s *H* and both were originally released on the Jame’s own Tappan Zee label.

Hi is recorded at Mediasound in New York and includes Grover Washington Jr, guitarist Hiram Bullock and Buddy Williams on the drums. The opening track, *Snowbird Fantasy*, has percussion parts played by Airtó Moreira, the Brazilian drummer best known for his work with Miles Davis on *Bitches Brew* – he also guests on the albums closing number *Reunited*.

Sign Of The Times is the better known of the albums as mentioned and was arranged by Rod Temperton (Michael Jackson’s *Off The Wall* and *Thriller*) with vocals provided by Luther Vandross, Patti Austin and Valerie Simpson. You’ll certainly recognise some of these tunes from more recent samples, even if you don’t know the originals.

OK, I will admit that the smooth jazz sound isn’t my go-to choice whilst flicking through the record collection but I do have a good number of Grover Washington Jr albums on vinyl and once in a while it’s nice to take a break from the norm...and why not a bit of jazz of the smooth variety. Despite the somewhat wishy-washy reputation of the genre, there’s some tunes on these two records that really do stand out as being great records.

The better of the two albums is clearly *Sign Of The Times* but hey, who can argue with a two for one deal. If you enjoy the laidback rhythms and relaxed vibes of this kind of music then this is a must. Even if you are a relative stranger to smooth coolness shores then this record has something to offer. I actually really enjoyed it a great deal and there’s clear links to funk, disco and fusion that really appeal to me. Out now!

Spirits Burning & Bridget Wishart - Make Believe it Real Gonzo

This album arrived a good while ago and I was really excited when it did as I was a bit of a fan of the Hippy Slags back in the festival days and as readers will know a huge fan of Hawkwind with who Bridget Wishart performed on *Space Bandits*, *Palace Springs*, *California Brainstorm* and *Take Me To Your Future*.

Look at the line up on *Make Believe It Real* and it reads like a who’s who in space rock: Daevid Allen of Gong (wishing you a speedy recovery!!!), Harvey Bainbridge, Richard Chadwick, Alan Davey, Simon House, Keith The Bass, Nick May, Twink...the list goes on and on and on.



Look at the line up on Make Believe It Real and it reads like a who’s who in space rock:

There are two CDs in this pack and it’s unmistakably most definitely a space rock album, but there are other elements of a more gentle and less obvious nature in there and it’s really a rather excellent album indeed, though on initially hearing it I was a bit sceptical to say the least...most certainly a record that needs a few runs through to really get a grip on.

All the tunes on *Make Believe* are penned by the folk involved other than the Pink Floyd track *Take Up Thy Stethoscope and Walk* and all are original to this record I believe, but I had a moment of déjà vu with one of the verses in *Eternal Energy* which I think is lifted from a Hippy Slags’ tune...Cat’s Mother if I recall.

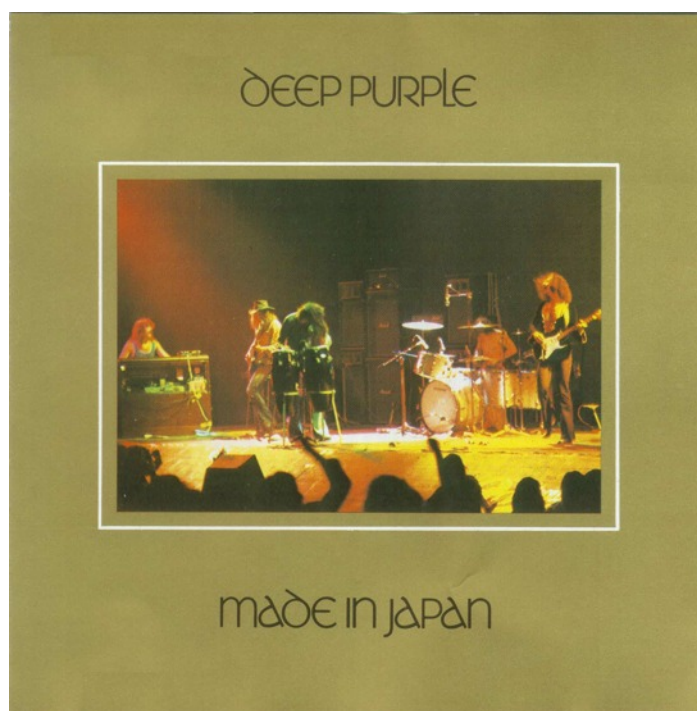
Given the number of folk involved in this album it should sound all over the place but it doesn’t...it’s coherent and really rather beautiful. The final track on the first CD, *Reflections*, is a bit of a masterpiece to my mind and is made up of seven distinct parts and takes a bit of a departure from the space rock formula, adopting a much more progressive and pastoral feel to it and is in the main made up of acoustic instruments...it’s also fourteen minutes long.

Needless to say I was always going to love this record and without letting my personal preferences get in the way I’d suggest that it’s a bit of a must for anyone with a slight interest in space rock and associated genres.

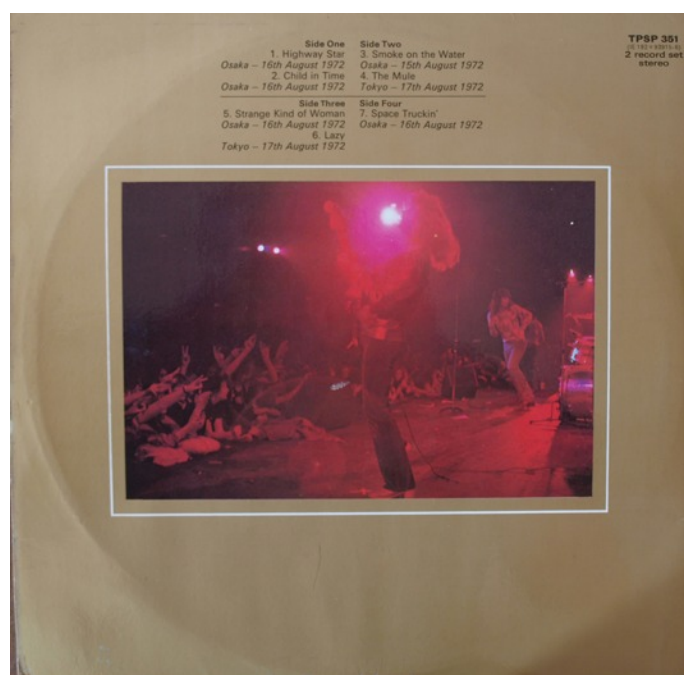
This month John Scott goes back to August 1972 and re-discovers Deep Purple's Japanese tour via the deluxe edition of *Made In Japan*.

Wherever you are in the world right now, you can bet good money that in a pub somewhere not too far away there are a bunch of blokes (and it will only be blokes, believe me) arguing over The Greatest Live Album In The World.

Different pubs attract different clientele. For the prog warlocks at The Keyboard & Cape, the relative merits of Yes' seminal triple live *Yessongs* ("I was there, you know -Great performances but the album is desperately in need of a Steven Wilson remaster") and Hawkwind's mighty *Space Ritual* ("Of course the correct title is The Space Ritual Live in Liverpool and London. I think I must have been there because I can't, like, remember a single thing about it, man") are hotly contested amidst much stroking of beards. Meanwhile, the retro soulboys down at The Beyonce Castle all agree that James Brown's *Live At The Apollo* sets the standard that other live albums aspire to. However many different opinions there may be, the regulars in The Tattooed Arms, where denim is de rigueur and noses are broken (Friday and Saturday nights, no appointment necessary), insist that Deep Purple's *Made In Japan* is the only right answer and, take it from me, you really, really don't want to disagree with the regulars in the Tattooed Arms, particularly on Friday or Saturday nights. By the time Deep Purple had set out on their tour of Japan in 1972 the band had seven albums under their belt, had gone through one line up change and had been nominated in The Guinness Book Of World Records as the loudest band in the world for a gig at the Rainbow Theatre in London at which the sound levels were recorded at 117 dB and three of the audience were allegedly rendered unconscious. The original line up of the band consisted of Jon Lord on keyboards, Ritchie Blackmore on guitar, bassist Nick Simper and vocalist Rod Evans. The band's first three albums *Shades Of Deep Purple*, *The Book Of*



Taliesyn and *Deep Purple* combined Sixties pop and progressive rock with a hint of psychedelia. *The Book Of Taliesyn* featured a ten minute progressive interpretation of Ike and Tina Turner's River Deep, Mountain High although there is no recognisable hint of that tune for the first four and a half minutes, during which it sounds more like a four and a half minute progressive interpretation of Richard Strauss' Also Sprach Zarathustra. The band had achieved commercial success by the time of their third album but Blackmore, Lord and Paice had their sights set on a heavier rock sound and feeling that Simper and Evans would not fit with this, dismissed them from



Classics

the band. Ian Gillan was recruited from a band called Episode Six along with bassist Roger Glover, bringing together what most fans consider to be Deep Purple's classic line up.

Ironically, given their hard rock intensions, their next album was the live *Concerto For Group And Orchestra* which John Lord had devised as a solo project. The album was recorded at The Royal Albert Hall with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of the highly respected conductor Malcolm Arnold. The rest of the band were reportedly less than happy with the album and more determined than ever to pursue a hard rock style which they achieved on their next three albums *In Rock*, *Fireball* and *Machine Head*, recorded and released between 1970 and 1972; *Machine Head* reaching number one in the UK album chart.

Deep Purple were now a worldwide success with the band achieving strong record sales in Japan. A short tour was arranged to capitalise on this and the band's record company, Warner Bros, wanted to record the shows for a subsequent Japan-only release. The band were unenthusiastic about this idea as they felt that a live recording simply wouldn't provide an accurate representation of the dynamic performances they gave at their gigs. The Japan tour consisted of three gigs: two at The Festival Hall, Osaka on 15 and 16 August and one at The Budokan in Tokyo on the 18th. All of the gigs sold out immediately. Deep Purple brought along producer Martin Birch who had worked on their most recent albums. Both Birch and the band had some concerns over the quality of the

recording equipment that had been supplied and this further lessened their interest in the live album. Jon Lord would later remark however that it was perhaps this lack of concern about the recording that would lead to the spontaneity that is so evident on the album. All three gigs were recorded, with the majority of the performances on the album coming from the Osaka gig on the 16th. The band felt that the Budokan performance was the best of the three but unfortunately the recording was of a lesser quality. Nevertheless, *The Mule* and *Lazy* made it to the album. The only track to come from the first Osaka concert was *Smoke On The Water*. On completion, all thoughts of a Japan-only release were immediately shelved and the album went on to sell over a million copies in the USA alone.

The deluxe edition of *Made In Japan* brings together the original mix of the album, along with a new remix and full recordings of all three individual concerts. The original mix still stands up well but the new mix brings a greater clarity, particularly to the drums, which helps to drive the music even harder. One thing that has always puzzled me about the album is that the cover photo shows Blackmore on the right hand side of the stage but the audio has him positioned to the left. Earlier remasterings apparently corrected this but the deluxe edition retains the original configuration on both mixes. The individual concert recordings do however have Blackmore on the right.

Made In Japan opens with *Highway Star* from the *Machine Head* album - four out of *Made In Japan's*



seven tracks come from *Machine Head*. The band settle effortlessly into their stride and the pace (or for that matter, the Paice) never lets up from here on in. Actually, things do slow briefly at the start of the next track, Child In Time, but not for long with Ian Gillan hitting some literally screaming high notes as the song builds to intense solos from Lord and Blackmore. Much as, say, I Want To Hold Your Hand encapsulates everything anyone needs to know about sixties pop, Smoke On The Water does the same for seventies rock. Dun, Dun, Dun; Dun, Dun, Dah-Dun. Is there anyone alive that doesn't know how that goes? Five months before *Made In Japan* was recorded, Japanese soldier Lt Hiroo Onoda was found on a remote Philippines island, unaware that World War II had ended 29 years earlier. I bet even he knew that riff. The next track, The Mule has always struck me as little more than a framework for Ian Paice's drum solo. I'm not a great fan of drum solos, either on record or when actually at gigs but this one is pretty impressive. As well as showing off his drumming skills, Paice is also revealed here as something of a prophet, foretelling Pro Tools mastering and The Loudness Wars when he asks the on-stage monitor engineer: "Can we have everything louder than everything else?" Strange Kind Of Woman features a call-and-response duel between Gillan and Blackmore, each trying to catch each other out by throwing in some curveballs. Next track Lazy starts with Lord seriously abusing his organ (fnarff), throwing in snippets of Louie Louie and The Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band's Intro and Outro before

Is *Made In Japan* The Greatest Live Album In The World? I don't know, but you sure as hell won't be able to think of a better one while you play it.

Blackmore takes over and the band storm through this bluesy rocker. The album closes with the 20-minute Space Truckin' - an opportunity for Lord to shoehorn even more musical quotes into his solos. The performance here includes The Planets Suite and, I suspect, a whole ho(l)st of classical music references that I am not knowledgeable enough to recognise. The versions of Space Truckin' from the other shows suggest that Lord and Blackmore would throw in new quotes on a nightly basis - When The Saints Go Marching In, Gimme Some Lovin' and Rodrigo's Concerto D'Aranjuez make an appearance on those recordings along with the theme from TV cop show Z Cars. The whole band turn in another pile driving performance and when the song finishes, the audience seem to have been pummelled into submission; too dazed to even applaud.

So, a tour de force set of performances from a band at the peak of its powers. I'm conscious that I haven't even mentioned bass player Roger Glover who expertly underpins all the songs without the indulgence of any solo showing off, just as all good bass players should.

Do you need the deluxe version of *Made In Japan*. Well, I think you do. As well as two mixes of the original album and hi res audio versions, there are all the three complete concert recordings. These will never replace the *Made In Japan* album in your affections but they offer a fascinating insight into how the band was keen to play about with the material and are great fun.

Is *Made In Japan* The Greatest Live Album In The World? I don't know, but you sure as hell won't be able to think of a better one while you play it.

