

HIGH FIDELITY

RC's guide to the gear that will get the best out of your records. By Paul Rigby



PHONES A FRIEND

STAX SRS 2050 **£500**

Owning a pair of headphones is a bit like owning your own toothbrush. It's such an intensely personal thing. Headphones sit on your head, so comfort is a primary issue. Also, you may not think twice about paying £500 for a pair of speakers but, strap them to your head, and £500, all of a sudden, seems a little bit scary. Also, style tends to be very important when owning headphones.

Stax's SRS 2050s certainly look different. Put a pair on and be amazed how much you look like a Cyberman from *Dr Who*. Yet, there's a certain retro chic about these earphones, as Stax has it. Having two slabs pressed against your ears, that appellation makes a lot of sense.

It's not just the style that stands out with the Stax 'phones, it's how they produce sound. Most headphones use a cone of some sort. Not the Stax 'phones. They're electrostatic, producing music by what is, in effect, layers of cling-film, stretched to vibrate. This, in effect, means that you should be able to extract fine levels of mid-range and treble detail but it doesn't bode well for bass.

But before we go into detail on our sound tests, what about that price? Firstly, for a pair of HiFi class headphones, the 2050s are not that expensive. Not when you can buy a top-of-the-range Stax model for £2,500. In addition, you also get a headphone amplifier. Is that important? You can bet your ear drums it is. When you see a basic integrated amp with a built-in headphone socket be aware that what the company has stuffed into that chassis is a basic – often very basic – bit of kit. Because it's cheap, the sound quality of the signal it produces will not be particularly wonderful.

Hence, investing in a separate headphone amp is a good idea. Headphone amps, on their own, can be bought for several hundred pounds so, for Stax to supply one as part of the bundle and, hence, you know that the amp is sonically matched with the earphones and that each is fully compatible with each other, then that £500 begins to have an air of a bargain about it.

Sound quality of the SRS 2050s can be summed up thus: Superb upper mids and treble, ok bass. But that would be too easy and not provide the whole story. Playing the remastered Beatles' *Revolver* CD, Taxman offers no rich, deep bass, but upper bass is plentiful and Paul McCartney's driving mid-track bass work is relayed well. Upper mids/treble are both detailed and eloquent with no harshness evident. Instrumental separation is excellent, broadening the soundstage and adding interest to the track.

Vinyl benefited even more. In fact, the Stax 'phones are very vinyl-friendly. Spinning Neil Young's *Mideast Vacation*, via *Life* (Geffen), midrange and treble output are not designed to impress, with startling, short-term feats. Instead, they offer exacting transcriptions with confidence and calm, nailing each detail with patience that makes long-term listening a real pleasure.

While the SRS 2050s have lower bass problems, they can still rock with the best of them, exhibiting excellent musicality while adding grace and polish to the upper frequencies. www.symmetry-systems.co.uk 01727 865488



THAMES LINK

VAN DEN HUL THE THAMES HYBRID **£125 (1m)** and **£160 (1.5m)**

We looked at a set of quite brilliant Avid interconnect cables last month with a startling price of £760 per metre. The Van Den Hul's £125 seems a bargain by comparison. The company has aimed the cable for connection from the turntable to a pre-amp, so that's where the tests took place.

Okay, a straight Avid/Thames comparison is a little unfair but I was impressed how good a fight The Thames cable made of it. The intense, incisive Avid mid-range detail was diminished but there's still heaps of detail on offer from The Thames, presented in a clear and sparkling fashion, while bass is commendably clear and punchy. I would have expected this cable to be priced at two or three times the level it currently is – definitely worth a demo at your local dealer. www.henleydesigns.co.uk 01235 511166

GIZMO of the month



CD Retro Carry Case **£10.99**

Do you remember the old-style carry cases that you could pick up in the 70s to store your 7" singles? They had a handle on the top with a flap-lid cover secured by a small catch on the side. Well, now Covers 33 allow us all to step back in time with a similar series of cases created especially to store a series of CDs. They are quite small with an internal space measuring 15cm x 15cm x 15cm, holding, oddly enough, 15 CDs in a full jewel case or 75 CDs if you utilise the compact poly-wallets. The inside of each case is clear of any dividers, to maximise the space. The series arrives in a multitude of colours: Red, dark green, brown, lime green and grey. covers33.co.uk 01422 822679