

Canned Heat

Looking to buy a new set of headphones? Paul Rigby looks for the hottest value cans amongst seven sub-£1,000 designs...

Headphones are a breed apart from all other hi-fi separates, because they're such *personal* items. After all, you don't have to wear loudspeakers, or strap CD players to your head! Because you can wear headphones for hours on end, physical comfort plays a big part in their suitability. Also, because they're less affected by room acoustics, music via 'cans' always sounds intrinsically different to loudspeakers, making personal taste even more of an issue.

Whilst we all know that headphones are ideal for late night listening, so as to not to disturb the family and neighbours, they can potentially offer better sound than even top monitor loudspeakers. So some people actually choose them for audiophile reasons, rather than solely for those of convenience. But the best results depend on a suitable headphone amplifier, so we decided to deploy two excellent but very different examples of the breed in the shape of ANT Audio's Amber 3T (solid-state) and the tube buffered Musical Fidelity X-Can v8P for our review. We found some phones worked dramatically better with one headphone amp than with the other.

So, given the right amplification, the scene was set for us to try a wide range of models, diverse in size, technology and price. All these were set against the humble Sennheiser PX100, which is a brilliant £30 reference open backed portable design which many readers will know and love. Read on to see how the contenders did...

THE CONTENDERS

Beyerdynamic RSX 700	£160
AKG K701 Ref	£220
Sennheiser HD650	£270
Stax SRS 2050	£500
Audio Technica Sovereign W1000	£560
Denon AH-D7000	£900
Grado GS1000	£1,000

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Avid Acutus/SME IV turntable
Benz Glider cartridge
Naim CD5 CD player
Aesthetix Calypso preamplifier
Atacama Equinox XLPro SE support
Sennheiser PX100 headphones
ANT Amber 3T headphone amplifier
Musical Fidelity X-Can V8P headphone amplifier





STAX SRS 2050

£500

Surely the strangest set of headphones in this group, this open back entry level model from Stax is actually a set of 'electrostatic ear-speakers', as the company calls them, and an energiser box. Effectively then, no headphone amp is needed; these work straight from a line output. As such, the package represents tremendous value for money.

They're rather *odd* to use. It feels like you're wearing two paperbacks on your head, albeit lightish ones that only weigh 300g. But considering their bulk, it is amazing just how comfortable they are. They have a very light touch; unlike the Sennheisers they don't lock your head in a vice. Still, the PVC cushion pad covers can get a little sweaty after long-term use, which is a pity. Build isn't bad, but you wouldn't want to abuse them like you could the Sennheiser HD 650s, and the best you can say about their styling is that it's quirkily retro...

SOUND QUALITY

The superficial character of the SRS 2050s can be summed up thus; they

have superlative upper midband and treble but iffy bass. But that would be too easy and not provide the whole story. Playing The Beatles' 'Taxman', for example, and I found little in the way of rich, deep bass, but it was certainly fair to say that upper bass was plentiful and Paul McCartney's wonderful mid-track work was relayed well. Upper midband and treble are both detailed and eloquent with no harshness evident. Instrumental separation is excellent, broadening the soundstage and adding interest to the track.

'Numbers' from Kraftwerk lost the driving lower bass of the HD 650s but what the SRS 2050s did offer over and above the Sennheisers, was a crisper midrange and finer treble with a notable distinction that, in itself, produced its own energy, power and musicality. Every facet of the music in this area was examined and portrayed with intricate exactness. Tiny vibrations, completely missing from the Beyerdynamics and AKGs added a sense of flair to the SRS 2050's portrayal of the music. As

such, it became altogether more vibrant. Less hi-fi sounding than the HD 650s they may be, the Japanese Staxes still added something that the German Sennheisers couldn't.

Vinyl benefited even more. In fact, the Stax 'phones are very vinyl-friendly. You can almost imagine the phones wrapping an analogue arm around your favourite LP, dragging it down the pub for a few drinks, getting roaring drunk, admitting it loves the LP and vice versa - but only in a manly fashion - and then the pair waking up the neighbours with their midnight singing! Neil Young's midrange and treble output are not designed to impress with startling, short-term, feats. Instead, they offered exacting transcriptions with confidence and calm, nailing each detail with patience that makes long term listening a real pleasure. While the SRS 2050s have (lack of) lower bass issues, they can still rock with the best of them, exhibiting excellent musicality while adding grace and polish to the upper frequencies. A headphone for all music types and most listeners, these were a revelation at the price.

VERDICT

Unique design gives these headphones special properties that all the others here lack; exceptionally musically insightful.

STAX SRS 2050 £500

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FOR

- superlative midrange
- delicate treble
- value for money

AGAINST

- light lower bass
- odd styling
- sweaty earpads!

I found this group of headphones most interesting to review, thanks in no small part to the wide variety of design philosophies apparent. Also, because this group test spanned an assortment of price points, it was intriguing to see where each manufacturer's priorities fell. One decided that convenience was paramount by the use of wireless transmission, another espoused technological innovation via electrostatic transducers, while others sported clever materials use with exotic wooden ear cups.



Sennheiser HD 650 - best value.



Stax SR2050 - most interesting package.

Listening to headphones is such a personal experience that a pre-purchase demonstration is critical. When listening to a loudspeaker, amplifier or turntable, the shape of your listening room, which can drastically change the sound, is usually already taken into account before a piece of hi-fi equipment is bought. But such concerns are not present when buying a set of headphones. Rather, your purchasing priorities should be skewed towards the shape of your head rather than that of your house. A bad fit can impact on your opinion of any headphone, no-matter how good they sound *per se*. So do make sure

that you plop your prospective purchase on your head before you flash that credit card!

Footing the winners list is the Beyerdynamic RSX 700. The wireless concept is a good one but I did find problems in its implementation here, and felt that the technology sometimes got in the way of enjoying the music when it should have had precisely the opposite effect. That said, the concept will still be of great use to anyone who wishes to listen to their system in a measure of privacy whilst moving around the house, or where their room is such that no conventional headphone leads are long enough. The Beyers sounded decent enough, but you wouldn't buy them if sonics were your priority all the same.

Next came the AKG K701 headphones.

I loved the design and felt that the AKGs were the first headphones of the test to take the sound up into an audiophile arena. Yes, their transparency not only revealed source harshness but accentuated a slightly strident tendency. However, they felt happier and sounded far more relaxed with analogue sources and smoother amplification, becoming nicely listenable.

As for the Denon AH-D7000 and the Audio Technica W1000 headphones? I felt it only fair that they both occupy joint fourth position - like opposing brothers held together by their differences. The Audio Technicas dominated the upper frequencies while the Denons took control of the lower areas. Some might raise an eyebrow that both the Sennheiser HD 650 and the Stax headphones have been placed above these quality products. However, in making my conclusion I felt that balance was the most important aspect for any headphone user. To do everything well was, I felt, far more important than doing one thing brilliantly. There is no doubt that both the Denons and Audio Technicas are supreme in some respects. However, critically, they are most definitely niche products compared to the far more universal appeal of the following...

Sennheiser's HD 650 headphones performed extremely well, with tremendous overall sound capabilities and no real weakness for a product in this price point. Well balanced with a driving bass and detailed midrange

and treble, many users will buy these headphones and then never feel the need to upgrade, as they're that good. The only downside is that vice-like grip they have, not only in the bass but around your face. Those with large 'noggins' may need to look to something altogether looser fitting, such as the second place product...

Stax's SRS 2050 is a special design, from a company that's been making electrostatic 'earspeakers' for several decades. Once they'd decided that this is the sound for them, Stax users rarely go back. They do have limitations, not least the lack of deep bass, but the overall balance elsewhere, the conspicuously

"listening to headphones is such a personal experience that a pre-purchase dem is critical..."

superior upper midrange and treble performance, won the day. The subtlety of these earspeakers needs to be heard to be believed.

Given the price, maybe you won't be surprised to find the Grado GS1000i headphones come out top. Basically, they did everything well and, as much as I looked for criticisms and weaknesses, I failed to find *any* so I promptly gave up and spent the rest of the test having a peach of a time listening to the music. They're almost as delicate as the Staxes, just as powerful as the Sennheisers, and cleanly etched as the Audio Technicas and as full bodied as the Denons, and put it all together so successfully. You could even say they have a slight whiff of the AKG's styling too! They're a magnificent set of high end headphones that are, surprisingly enough, worth every penny.



Grado GS1000i - best all rounder.